

Saturday, 30 September 2000

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FAILURE MEANS POSTPONED SUCCESS

If thou faint in the day of adversity, thy strength is small- Prov. 24: 10

*Alozie is a top Nigerian 100 metres hurdler. At the 1999 World Championship in Seville, Spain, she won a silver medal. The year before (1998), she had been ranked the best hurdler in the world. She currently enjoys an IOC (International Olympic Confederation) scholarship, which she was awarded in March 1999. She was looking forward to winning a gold medal at the 2000 Summer Olympics held in Sydney, Australia. To boost her morale, her fiancé, Anugo, accompanied her. Then, tragedy struck. He was hit and killed by a car near the games village. She thought of pulling out of the Games but in her own words, “that’s not who I am. I’ve trained hard to be here and **this is where God wants me to be.**” Her friends and teammates supported her during the trying period. A few days after the sad death of her would-have-been husband, Alozie ran her races and won the silver medal, narrowly missing the gold by a split second. Her silver received a wider world attention and appreciation than the gold medallist got. **Yes, she lost her fiancé and the gold medal but she has given hope and courage to the billions of television viewers around the world.***

In one way or another, we all experience various forms of disappointments and failure everyday. We are in trouble over our marriages and children, finances and careers, studies and growing up. Illnesses in the family are not responding to treatment or prayers. We are looking for a child or a job and all the doors appear shut against us. Bills and foreclosures are in the mailbox. We have tried all we know how and there are no “positive” results. Some of us conclude that there is no hope and commit suicide, like King Saul [1 Sam. 31:4] or Judas Iscariot [Matt. 27:5]. Many others resign themselves to their pathetic situations cursing the day they were born [Job 2:9].

Have we really failed or is it that our success has been postponed? That is the subject of today’s discussion. We shall try to understand the subject, using the story of Naomi, Ruth’s mother-in-law, as our case study. Then, we shall attempt to develop spiritual guidance for dealing with the challenge.

1. What is failure?

Ordinarily, failure means a deficiency or lack. What we lack (or failed to achieve) may be *material* [spouse, children, success at school exams, financial stability, own home, etc] or *non-material* [peace of mind, love, joy, self-confidence, etc.]. It may be *temporary* [such as losing a game or failing an exam] or *permanent* [such as losing a breadwinner or dying in sin].

Usually, human beings set their goals and objectives in terms of their *wants*, not needs. Yet, the gap between those wants and our *means* is forever widening and stressful. Therefore, ***greed is the source of our perception of failure***. That is why the Preacher says, “all the labour of man is for his mouth, yet the appetite is not filled” [Eccl. 6:7]. We are forever pursuing the “Joneses” without knowing who they really are! Yet, God’s promise is to supply our *needs* [Phil. 4:19; Matt. 6:32]!

So, why do we fail? Failure can be *self-inflicted* or *spiritual*. When we refuse or fail to use the talents that God has given us [2 Tim. 1:7], such as the servant who buried his master’s money instead of investing it [Matt. 25:14-29; Prov. 22:29] or when we lack forethought in giving away our birthright as Esau did over a pot of porridge [Gen. 25:29-34], we can only blame ourselves. That is why the sluggard is advised to learn from the ants and be wise [Prov. 6:6]. However, a great deal of human failure is spiritual, and can be all or any of the following circumstances:

- ***disobedience***, such as the Fall of Man in the Garden of Eden, the destruction of the Tower of Babel [Gen. 11:3-8], Jonah’s stormy journey to Tarshish instead of going to Niniveh [Jon. 1:1-17], or Joshua’s defeat in Ai because of Achan’s sin [Josh. 7:3-12]. The failure of the Israelites to enter the Promised Land in time was due to their lack of faith in God’s promises [Num. 13:31-33].
- ***test of faith***, such as Abraham’s 25-year ordeal to have Isaac or Job’s loss of family, property and good health in spite of his being righteous before God. This kind of failure is meant to strengthen us [James 1:2-4; Rom. 5: 3-5].
- ***lack of spiritual strength***, such as the disciples’ inability to heal the demon-possessed son, or Samson’s fall in the hands of women [Judges 16:16-21].

It appears from the foregoing that “unless the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it” [Ps. 127:1]. Let us learn more about failure by studying the story of Naomi in the book of **Ruth**.

2. The story of Naomi

In search of greener pastures, Elimelech left Bethlehem-Judah with his wife, Naomi, and two sons, and moved to the country of Moab, the descendants of Lot, Abraham’s nephew [Gen. 19:37]. They were glad to leave behind the famine-devastated Bethlehem (which ironically means the “house of bread”). For Naomi, *the road to Moab country was to ambition and economic success*. You can imagine how envious her neighbours were to see “lucky” Naomi going abroad to a better world! To even make the envy worse, her dashing sons soon got married to Moabite women (Residence Permit!) and Naomi looked forward to becoming a happy and doting grandmother. Then, disaster struck.

Her husband, Elimelech, and two sons died [Ruth 1:1-5]. She was stuck with two daughters-in-law she could not provide for. All of a sudden, her future became gloomy, to the extent that she felt better off to return to Bethlehem, a hungry place that she had left behind 10 years earlier. In fear, despair and uncertainty, she returned home [Ruth 1:6-15].

She was hardly recognized by those who knew her before [Ruth 1:19]. In response to their poser, “Is this Naomi?” she wept: “Call me not Naomi, call me Mara, for the Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me. I went out *full* and the Lord hath brought me home again *empty*” [Ruth 1:20-21]. Her neighbours’ envy of 10 years ago suddenly turned to one of sympathy.

Naomi did not give up on her circumstances and she trusted in her God [Ruth 1:16]. The following forces that God had set in motion accelerated her recovery:

- (a) Bethlehem had recovered from the famine which prompted Naomi’s departure 10 years earlier [Ruth 1:22].
- (b) She continued to trust in her God [Ruth 2:20]. She found favour with her people who were willing to rehabilitate her and her daughter-in-law, Ruth [Ruth 2:14-23].
- (c) Naomi used her God-given talents to advise Ruth on how to win Boaz’s heart. She actually managed the “courtship” [Ruth 2:20, 22; 3:1-5]!
- (d) Naomi’s patience and perseverance paid off when Ruth married Boaz and bore him a son, Obed, the *grandfather of David!* Listen to what the women said to Naomi on the birth of Obed (*emphasis* added):

“Blessed be the Lord which hath not left thee this day without a kinsman, that his name may be famous in Israel. And he shall be unto thee a restorer of thy life and a nourisher of thy old age: for thy daughter in law, which loveth thee, which is better to thee than seven sons, hath born him.” [Ruth 4:14-15]

It appears that the key to turning failure into success is *an abiding faith in God coupled with taking the appropriate steps of faith*, not *based* on fear but *on power, love and a sound mind* [2 Tim. 1:7]. In deed, they that sow in tears shall reap in joy [Ps. 126:5].

3. Conclusion: How to turn failure into success

What has come out clearly from our discussion is that a *temporary setback becomes a failure if and only if we choose to give up. If you don’t give up and you put God first in finding a solution, your success is being incubated!* Here are a few hints to lead you out of an obvious failure:

- (a) Critically examine your present position and what factor(s) could have brought you there. Don’t shift blame to your “enemies” or others.

Instead, be honest with yourself and accept full responsibility [**Job 42:5-6; Ps. 51:3**].

- (b) Assess your relationship with God. If your analysis shows that you have gone against His will, or that you have disobeyed Him, or that you did not seek His will before you embarked on the failed scheme, ask for His forgiveness and get right with Him [**1 Jn 1:9**]. Then, ask for His guidance from now on and be led by His Spirit [**Rom. 8:14**]. Whatever He asks you to do, no matter how unpleasant it may be to you, *do it* [**Is. 30:21; 2 Kgs 5:10-14**]!
- (c) Set your recovery goals and be single-minded about them [**Jam. 1:8**]. Remember that as a man thinks in his heart, so is he [**Prov. 23:7**]. Watch what you say with your mouth about your situation because “death and life are in the power of the tongue and they that love it shall eat the fruit thereof” [**Prov. 18:21**].
- (d) It is people that God will use to restore you. Therefore, you must forgive your enemies and pray for your friends while you are still in distress. Then, God will put into their hearts to help you out of your own situation [**Job 42:10-12**].
- (e) In everything, give thanks [**1 Thess. 5:18**]. As you thank God and the people He is using to lift you up, your recovery will be accelerated [**Ps. 50: 14-15**].

Be very patient [**Rom. 5:3-5; Jam. 1:2-3**]. God’s answer to your prayer can be “yes, right now” [**2 Chron. 20:13-18**] or “no” [**2 Cor. 12:7-10**] or “wait” [**Ps. 62:5; Acts 1:4**]. While we tend to see the last two (no or wait) as failure, they actually mean, “yes, but not yet!” God will not grant it unless and until we are ready. That is why failure is nothing but “postponed success.”
