

Failure Isn't Fatal



Christopher News Notes

“To fail is not unworthy, since it implies that one had attempted something.”—Georges Clemenceau

FAILURE IS PART OF THE HUMAN EXPERIENCE. All of us share a capacity to fail. Making mistakes or just “falling short of the mark” is part of what it means to be human.

Although we are created in the image of God, we are unlike Him in that we are not perfect. Our failure to meet God’s standards is what Jesus came to reconcile and forgive. Yet failure is often difficult to deal with.

To cope with failure we need to summon the courage to acknowledge our mistakes, find the humanity to admit them to others, and seek the strength to make amends if that is necessary or possible. When you see in failure a personal challenge, you'll find it is truly a step on the road to personal and spiritual growth.

Every person who has ever succeeded has also experienced failure, according to psychologist Bob Atkison of the Wichita Guidance Center in Kansas. "Failure is always the first step in success," says Atkison. "I have never considered failure to be anything but a guidepost." Failure, he adds, is actually a healthy sign that you are attempting to reach your potential. "If you're not failing pretty regularly, you're working below your capacity—which is failure in and of itself."

Failure isn't fatal because it educates, humbles, liberates, challenges, and motivates. Consider the story of Roger Bannister. At the 1952 Helsinki Olympics, he was Britain's outstanding distance runner, expected to secure a gold medal for his team and his country. But he failed to do so. Bannister's Olympic failure, however, was the spur he needed to become the central figure in a successful and historic quest to run a mile in less than four minutes, a goal that for many years was considered unattainable.

Running on a windy, rainy day some two years after the Olympics, he broke the four-minute barrier by six-tenths of a second and set off a wave of celebration that wasn't matched until spacemen walked on the moon. Recalling the achievement 30 years later, Bannister said that had he won the Olympic gold, he would have retired to pursue his medical studies. "My failure made me look for one more challenge," he said. The four-minute mile was that challenge.

Failure Educates

"Good people are good because they've come to wisdom through failure." —William Saroyan

Freelance writer Carol Amen of California once

Author Robert Louis Stevenson's Definition of Success

"That man is a success who has lived well, laughed often and loved much; who has gained the respect of intelligent men and the love of children; who has filled his niche and accomplished his task; who leaves the world better than he found it, whether by a perfect poem or a rescued soul; who never lacked appreciation of earth's beauty or failed to express it; who looked for the best in others and gave the best he had."

told the stories of Alice and Don, who not only learned through failure but improved the quality of their lives because of it. In both cases, their failures centered on career choices.

Alice, a well-paid accountant, became disillusioned with her work because of its solitary nature. She began to regret her failure to choose a career more suitable to her personality. Finally, she switched to a job as a bank teller. "She took a pay cut, but tremendously enjoys interacting with so many people every day," wrote Amen.

Don, a former aeronautical engineer, was laid off due to industry cutbacks. But he took advantage of the situation to begin a new career as a restaurateur. "I'd never have tried opening a restaurant if I'd never been let go from my job," said Don. "I know a lot of guys who really couldn't deal with the layoffs and began feeling like they were failures. But I found a whole new career."

Failure Liberates

"The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many."

—Mark 10:45

Setting goals and objectives is important in achieving what we want in life. But what happens when we fail to reach those goals? Failure to hit "the high mark" can be a liberating experience, freeing us from the pressure of expectations that may be too high or misdirected in the first place. Failure to reach a goal encourages re-evaluation of that goal, and ultimately, of one's definition of success.

Charles Butler of Detroit was preparing for medical school in 1946 when he realized "medical school

was not my calling. Serving the church and the community was." Butler went on to become pastor of a Detroit Baptist church, and led the struggle for civil rights and community improvements in his city. "I could have been better off financially, but once I reassessed my goals, I never regretted the decision to choose a life of service," said Rev. Butler.

When Others Fail

When someone else fails, the chance to serve is opened up. You can offer support to friends, co-workers, relatives, or neighbors who are experiencing setbacks or failure in their lives. How? Build confidence, offer advice, give encouragement, bolster morale, present solutions, or simply listen.

The great inventor Thomas Edison bolstered the morale of his assistants when they became discouraged after a particular experiment failed repeatedly. He reminded them, "We haven't failed. We have learned something with every attempt." Edison persevered and gave the world the light bulb.

Helping another person rebound from failure can require love, patience, and if you've been harmed, forgiveness. But to do so is to obey the supreme law: "Love your neighbor as yourself." (Mark 12:31)

Failure Challenges

"Failure is only the opportunity to begin again, more intelligently." —Henry Ford

Enduring trials and setbacks builds character because they demand strength – the strength to pick up and try again; the strength to maintain a positive outlook; the strength to believe that each person is special in God's eyes, able to serve others

and make a contribution to society like no one else, despite failures.

In 1956, American runner Dave Sime broke the world record for the 220-yard hurdles at the Melbourne Olympics. But soon, injuries and failures began to plague him. Crushed by his setbacks, Sime retired from sports, went to medical school, and graduated in the top 10 percent of his class. He became a successful ophthalmologist, and called his failures in track, “the best thing that ever happened to me. I’m serving others now.”

Failure Motivates

“The most glorious moments in your life are not the so-called days of success, but rather those days when out of dejection and despair you feel rise in you a challenge to live and the promise of future accomplishments.”

—Flaubert

Falling short of expectations could be used as an excuse to give up. Often, that’s all that seems possible in the face of a big setback. But failure can also be a form of encouragement to go on.

Swimmer Florence Chadwick of Southern California remembers well her first race as a six-year-old. “I finished dead last,” she laughingly recalled. “But finishing last made me want to swim better. So I trained and trained. My motto is to give it all you’ve got or don’t do it.” Chadwick’s strength and endurance, propelled by an early failure, led her to swim the English Channel in 1950 in record time, knocking more than an hour off a standard set 19 years earlier.



“It’s better to light one candle than to curse the darkness.”

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Challenging Failure

“Failures aren’t failures if you learn something from them.”

—Anne Morrow Lindbergh

Experts agree that a sure way to combat failure is to concentrate on ways to rectify a mistake, rather than dwell on the error itself. Linda Gottlieb and Carole Hyatt, co-authors of the book *When Smart People Fail*, believe that the first step in doing so is to bring your failure out into the open, discuss it, and examine what went wrong.

Talking constructively about failure helps us cope with it, they say. Analysis, they add, should involve looking for possible patterns that may have led to failure. They also recommend “developing a support system, such as a friend who’s gone through the same experience, a therapist, or a minister.”

Spiritual Failure

“For our sake He made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.”

—2 Corinthians 5:21

Failure can reach beyond the material life. Spiritual failure is sin, but God’s faithful covenant of forgiveness and patience allows us to overcome that failure as well. Jesus sets the ultimate example of dealing with failure. Forgiveness is the key. His ministry stressed the necessity to forgive others as God forgives us.

Because of His limitless offer of forgiveness, we are encouraged to pick ourselves up spiritually, much like the way we recover from physical, emotional or financial setbacks. The promise of reconciliation with God is always there.

God has called us to fulfill a mission—a mission to serve others in a way that no one else can. Pursuing this mission often involves failures and setbacks. But success is a possibility whenever failure is challenged.

This is an edited version of the classic Christopher News Note, “Failure Isn’t Fatal.”