



THE
MENTORING
PROJECT

FEAR OF FAILURE: HOW TO FACE FAILURE AND RISE AGAIN WITH GOD'S STRENGTH



COLTON CORTER

FEAR OF FAILURE:
HOW TO FACE
FAILURE AND RISE
AGAIN WITH GOD'S
STRENGTH



COLTON CORTER

FIELD GUIDE

CONTENTS

PART I: FAILING CREATURES, UNFAILING CREATOR	2
PART II: STANDING IN A LONG LINE OF FAILURES	9
PART III: A BIGGER FAILURE THAN YOU THOUGHT	17
PART IV: GOOD NEWS FOR BIG FAILURES.....	23
PART V: FAIL, FIGHT, FAIL, FIGHT	29
CONCLUSION	37

**FACING FAILURE:
RISING AGAIN WITH GOD'S STRENGTH**

1

FAILING
CREATURES,
UNFAILING
CREATOR

Okay, let's get this out of the way: if you're reading this, you're a failure.

Don't worry-I'm a failure too! No one in human history can honestly say they've succeeded in everything they've ever tried (except for one special case-more on him later). I wonder if that's oddly refreshing news for you today. Feel like you're the only one doing the failing around these parts? Not even close. Failure is a common bond shared between people who don't happen to be God. And the more we talk honestly about the fear of failure, the more we realize we're all in the same boat.

Two Kinds of Failure

Before we get too far, we should differentiate between two kinds of failure: creature failure and spiritual failure. Spiritual failure is our failure to do what God says. Most of this guide will discuss that kind of failure.

FIELD GUIDE

But not all failure is the same. Not all failure is our fault—at least not in the same way. Sometimes we fail because we’re sinners; other times we fail because we’re creatures. We were created in the image of God, but that’s not the same thing as being God. Creature failure is when you try and fail—even if you tried hard and did it for the right reasons—because, well, you’re human. Seeing this distinction is one of the first steps in learning from failure instead of being crushed by it.

The distinction between spiritual and creature failure is designed to help you respond appropriately to the failure(s) in your life. You will mess things up; things won’t always go your way. And you will drive yourself absolutely crazy if you try to trace every instance of failure back to a sinful attitude or action. It’s just not that simple. Life in a fallen world is full of reminders that we are not God. Understanding this is also a quiet doorway into how to overcome fear of failure—by realizing some failure comes simply from being human.

Reintroducing God

Speaking of God, let’s talk about him for a minute. If you’re like me, you probably tend to assume God is just a bigger, better version of yourself. Of course, you’d never say it that way. But be honest: are you tempted to treat the difference between you and God like one of quantity, not quality? It’s so easy to act like the universe is the Westminster Dog Show—we consider ourselves the same breed as the Lord, even if we’d admit he should win “best of show.”

FACING FAILURE: RISING AGAIN WITH GOD'S STRENGTH

Friend, that could not be more wrong. God is not like us. He's in a category all his own, simply labelled "God." True, we were made in his image, but at best we're a dull reflection of his manifold glory. There is no one like God. Not you and not me. He's the creator; we're his creatures.

You can attribute some of your failure to being on the "creature" side of the distinction between Creator and creature. God never fails because he's God—to fail would be to cease being who he is, who he's always been. Let's consider some of the reasons we fail and how God, as God, can't relate.

Five Reasons Why We Fail and God Doesn't

First, God is pure act. Okay, I know that sounds a little esoteric, but bear with me for a minute. Few things sting more than unrealized potential. Failure hurts the most when things look most promising at the outset. Unfortunately, our potential cuts both ways. We can always be better; we can always be worse. This gap between what we hope for and what actually happens often fuels the *fear of failure*, making us forget why *failing is important* for our growth.

As weird as it feels to write this, it's true: God has no potential. He can't become because he already is. There's no new initiative he needs to take or a better version of himself to become. Every ounce of God's infinite perfection operates at 100% all the time in every way. He couldn't improve if he tried, and he certainly couldn't get worse. He just is.

FIELD GUIDE

Second, God is holy. I know I said we'd spend this section thinking of creature failure, but you can't talk about God without mentioning his holiness. What is God's holiness? It's his internal commitment to everything right. Ultimately, God's holiness is his commitment to himself and his glory as the most amazing thing in the universe and beyond.

God doesn't love anything more than he loves himself. He is perfectly righteous—he's the very standard of righteousness. He never cuts ethical corners. Everything he does, everything he thinks, everything he adores is right in alignment with his own eternal, radiant, beautiful purity.

Third, God is self-sufficient. If we didn't need, we wouldn't fail. If we had everything we need (or want) within ourselves, we wouldn't need to go outside ourselves for fulfillment. We strive for good things. We strive for bad things. We strive for good things for bad reasons. Our lack moves us to action, which doesn't always net the result we want. This is where *managing failure* becomes important—recognizing that our limitations are built-in, not always moral.

We are dependent creatures. God, on the other hand, is independent. He has everything he needs within himself. He doesn't depend on anything or anyone outside of himself for life (Acts 17:25). There's nothing out there to complete him, nothing else he could strive for and possibly not attain.

Fourth, God knows everything. If we only knew! If we only knew how that investment opportunity was going to turn out when we put the money in. If only we knew that the person we trusted would let us down in the end. Risk is inherent in

FACING FAILURE: RISING AGAIN WITH GOD'S STRENGTH

human decision-making because we don't know all the details, much less the outcomes. For us, there is no such thing as a sure thing. This uncertainty often feeds our *fear of defeat*, making everyday decisions feel heavier than they really are.

God never has to say "if I only knew" because he knows everything already (Isaiah 46:10). Not one single thing in the entire universe—down to the tiniest movement of a molecule—happens without his knowing about it. In fact, nothing happens without him knowing because nothing happens that he didn't plan. No unforeseen complications or circumstances can alter God's "Plan A." Everything works out just as he purposes.

Fifth, God is all-powerful. I guess you could say that, for God, knowledge really is power! We rarely have a clue about what's going on, much less do we have any ability to affect the outcome in any decisive way. All the training, education, experience, or wealth in the world can't guarantee a successful outcome.

What God knows and does go hand-in-hand. He executes all his plans to absolute perfection—no proverbial monkey wrenches can stop him. God always gets it done. All he had to do was speak, and everything you see outside your window was created in an instant (Gen. 1–2). "Try" isn't a word in the divine dictionary. God doesn't try—he only does.

The Utility of an Unrelatable God

God really can't relate to our creaturely limitations. I think that's a good thing—a very good, necessary thing if he's going

FIELD GUIDE

to be of any use to us at all. When we're wrestling with *how to deal with fear of failure*, it actually helps to know there is Someone who never fails and never fears.

Kevin DeYoung flips that logic on its head in an old conference message called "The God Who Is Not Like Us: Why We Need the Doctrine of Divine Immutability." He used the illustration of playing with LEGOs on the floor with his young son. His son gets bent out of shape because he can't follow the construction instructions; pieces are missing—it's a mess! What does his son need at that moment? Does he need a dad who is just as devastated as he is, or a dad who's able to reach down and help pull him out of his failure?

Friend, a more "relatable" God can do nothing for you. If God can fail, who's going to help him when he fails? Moreover, how can God help you when you fall if he can't even help himself? A so-called "god" who needs you and me as much as we need him isn't worthy of the name.

God never fails. His unfailing, covenant-keeping character gives us failing, flaky people, genuine hope. There is someone out there who is able to reach down here to pull us up on solid ground again. This is the foundation for *Success through failure*—not that we succeed because we're flawless, but because God meets us in our weakness and shows us *the importance of failure* in shaping us. We can trust his purposes and promises to us will never fail because he will never fail.

**FACING FAILURE:
RISING AGAIN WITH GOD'S STRENGTH**

Discussion Questions:

1. Are you more tempted to chalk up every “creature failure” as a “spiritual failure” or excuse every “spiritual failure” as a “creature failure”? Why do you think that is?
2. Can you think of any other aspects of God’s character that make it impossible for him to fail?
3. How do you respond when you experience failure that’s not your fault? What about your response do you want to change in light of what you’ve read in this chapter?

FIELD GUIDE

2

STANDING IN A LONG LINE OF FAILURES

In part one, we distinguished between two different types of failure: spiritual failure and creature failure. Creature failure is what happens when we fail because we simply aren't God. Failure isn't always our fault. This helps us understand *the importance of failure* as part of our design, not always our downfall.

A lot of times it is, though. We're going to call the kind of failure that is our fault spiritual failure. Spiritual failure happens when we don't love and obey God over anyone or anything else. You could also call spiritual failure by its other, more popular name: sin.

Spiritual failure occurs on two levels-vertical and horizontal. When we fail spiritually, we fail God first and foremost. Our fundamental problem is that we fail to do our job as those created in God's image. Our failure deserves an eternity's worth of God's holy wrath. This is often where the *fear of failure* turns into the deeper *fear of defeat*, because we sense that our failures matter far more than we first assumed.

FACING FAILURE: RISING AGAIN WITH GOD'S STRENGTH

Our spiritual failure starts with God but usually leads us to fail others, too. We missed the recital because we couldn't put the bottle down after work. Our business partner can't pay their mortgage because we've been building up a little nest egg from company funds. We're too addicted to images of other people on our phones to care for our spouses. We always fail God first, but spiritual failure is rarely content until it hurts someone else, too.

A Long Line of Failures

Failure is nothing new. I want to tell you the origin story of failure so we can learn how spiritual failure entered the world and what it's done ever since it got here. In doing so, we'll see how we stand in a long line of failures. My hope is that tracing the story of failure will help us understand why we fail and the implications that come with it-and even why *failing is important* to our understanding of ourselves and our need for grace.

Adam

In the beginning . . . God. That's how the Bible's story starts. God was just there—always existing and enjoying perfect fellowship as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This infinitely happy God decided to create. He didn't need to. He just wanted to do it to show off his glory, and so he did. Everything that comes into being after Genesis 1:1 was created by him and for him.

Adam and Eve were no exception. In fact, human beings occupied (and continue to occupy) a unique role in God's creation. Out of all the things God made, only Adam and Eve

FIELD GUIDE

were made “in his image” (Gen. 1:27). They were brought into the world possessing a special relationship to God—a relationship that gives us a status and a job. We are God’s image-bearers who are supposed to represent him. Adam was created to be like a son to God and bear a spiritual family resemblance.

What does it mean to imagine God in this way? We image God by telling the truth about him, by loving him the most, and by doing what he says. Adam’s job was to reflect the glory and goodness of his Creator while protecting the Garden and spreading the knowledge of God’s glory across the globe (Gen. 1:28). That was Adam’s job and, since he represents us all, that’s our job as well.

Unfortunately, the story doesn’t end there. Adam sinned against God by listening to the serpent’s lies and eating from the tree God had told him not to eat from. Instead of reflecting God’s glory, Adam decided to try to reflect on his own.

Adam failed. He had a job to do and responsibilities to execute, but he failed. His failure introduces us to the deep human struggle of *managing failure*, because Adam’s fall shows how quickly good intentions can collapse into sin. The effects of Adam’s failure spread everywhere. Through Adam’s sin, physical and spiritual death entered the world, and no one can escape their reach. Adam’s failure not only affects us, but it counts as our failure too. In Adam, we’re born guilty and corrupt. Just like Adam and Eve were kicked out of the Garden, our sins separate us from the One who created us.

FACING FAILURE: RISING AGAIN WITH GOD’S STRENGTH

Noah

Adam and Eve go on to have children, but spiritual failure runs in the family. Everyone who comes after Adam continues to be God’s image but also continues to sin, failing to love the Lord with all their heart, mind, soul, and strength. Humanity’s collective sin makes Moses, the author of the first five books of the Bible, stop and write that “the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (Gen. 6:5).

That’s... comprehensive. This side of the fall, none of us are good people who simply fail from time to time. We’re not sinners because we sin every now and then—we sin because we’re sinners. Spiritually speaking, we fail because we are spiritual failures. Our sinful actions are the fruit that reveals our rotten hearts. This is exactly why learning *how to deal with fear of failure* matters—otherwise failure just becomes another cycle of shame.

God decides to start over in Genesis 6. He sends a flood to wipe every living creature off the face of the earth except for Noah and his family. After the waters receded, God told Noah to be fruitful and multiply in Genesis 9:1—the same job God gave Adam to do.

But this “restart” is almost immediately shown to be a false start. Failure definitely survived the flood, as Noah got drunk and naked in his tent before Genesis 9 ended. It’s another reminder of why failing is important: it exposes the unchanged human heart, even after a fresh beginning.

FIELD GUIDE

Israel

Fast forward several centuries to the nation of Israel. The great and promised nation finds itself in Egyptian slavery. God raised Moses up to deliver his people from Pharaoh's rule and bring them to the land he promised their ancestors.

On the way to the promised land, they had to take a pit stop at Mount Sinai. There, God made his relationship with Israel official: they will be his people and he will be their God (Exod. 19:7–11). Israel takes on the job God gave Adam in the Garden—they are committed to live as God's glory-reflectors to the nations. They're even called God's "son" in Exodus 4:22.

The terms and conditions for living as God's people in the land come to them in the form of the Law, which Moses brought down to them on the tablets of stone. If Israel does their job and obeys, they'll experience blessing. If they fail, they'll face judgement.

Let's just say Israel did more of the latter. They failed to abide by those terms and conditions. I mean, they don't even wait for Moses to get back to them with the tablets before they melted down their jewelry and formed a golden calf to worship (Exod. 32). They had one job, and they committed a fireable offense before their official start date.

That was just a preview of what was to come. Israel could not get out of their own way. God had made a covenant with them, but they never held up their end of the bargain. His presence among them—meant to be a source of joy—turned

FACING FAILURE: RISING AGAIN WITH GOD'S STRENGTH

into a problem. How can a holy God live among a sinful people?

Leaders like Moses and the sacrificial system provided a temporary solution. But year after year, despite sacrifice after sacrifice, Israel kept failing to do what God commissioned them to do—their hearts were too enamored by the “gods” around them to be the ideal community under God they were supposed to model. Yet even in this, the story hints at *Success through failure*, because their shortcomings pointed forward to the One who would never fail.

David

What Israel needed was good leadership. During the time of the Judges, everyone did what was right in their own eyes because there was no king to keep them in check (Judg. 21:25). Israel was excited about the prospect of a king, even though they valued the same things in a prospective leader as the nations around them. They wanted someone imposing, someone who could lead them into battle—someone . . . tall! Surely such a king would guarantee the end of their spiritual failure.

God had another idea: a scruffy little shepherd boy named David. He charges on the scene full of zeal for God's glory and confidence in the Lord to deliver his people, no matter how big the enemy (1 Sam. 17). This “man after God's own heart” looked to have a bright future as God gave him success after success (1 Sam. 13:14). His role as king was to represent Israel's interests. David's success would be their success; his failure would be their failure.

FIELD GUIDE

That makes David's failure all the more heartbreaking. Just like Adam and Israel before him, he failed to do his job. His adulterous relationship with Bathsheba is "example A". He ends up getting her pregnant and has her husband killed to cover it up. David's sin with Bathsheba is a perfect example of spiritual failure beginning vertically and turning into horizontal, relational failure (see Psalm 51 for David's reflection on the incident after he repented). For many of us, David's story also exposes why the fear of failure feels so heavy—we see how quickly sin can unravel a life, a calling, and even a kingdom. Yet his repentance also shows that *failure is the key to success* when it drives us back to God instead of away from Him.

The Old Testament ends on a pretty bleak note. Israel's failure resulted in its removal from the promised land for a time. They make it back eventually, but it's not the same anymore—God's not there. There's still the matter of their sin. And God's wrath. That same question remains as we head into 400 years of divine radio silence between the Old and New Testaments: how can a holy God save unholy people? What's God going to do with failures like Adam, Noah, Israel, David, and us?

Nothing New Under the Sun (Failure Included)

The story of failure is almost literally a "tale as old as time." Adam, Noah, Israel, and David all failed to reflect God's glory. As we'll think about in the next section, we are in the exact same boat as them. But their stories also remind us that *failure is the key to success* when it exposes our inability and magnifies God's faithfulness. And before we move on, stop

**FACING FAILURE:
RISING AGAIN WITH GOD'S STRENGTH**

and marvel at the fact that another story runs parallel to the story of failure—a success story promised all the way back in the Garden that will result in salvation for God's people (Gen. 3:15).

Reflection Questions:

1. Think about the “front burner” sins in your life. How are they caused by your failure to love God the way you should?
2. What does failure's origin story teach us about ourselves and our failures?

3

A BIGGER FAILURE THAN YOU THOUGHT

In the last section, we traced spiritual failure all the way back to the source: Adam's fall in the Garden of Eden. Unfortunately, Adam's failure to image God like he was created to do wasn't just a personal failure-his failure had cosmic effects. For us, those effects are extremely personal, and they shape how we understand what the Bible says about failure today.

Why We Fail

Did you know the Bible explains sin using failure language? Romans 3:23 says, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Sin is, among other things, falling short. Many Bible verses about failure use this same imagery. Scholars say Paul may be borrowing from the world of archery here-God's glory is the bullseye, and our lives are off target. God's standard is perfect, and we, obviously, fall well short. We fail to live up to the mark set by God's holiness.

I was a counselor at a Christian day camp during the summer in college. One of the more entertaining parts of my day was

FACING FAILURE: RISING AGAIN WITH GOD'S STRENGTH

the archery station. To say my campers' efforts at hitting the bullseye were "off target" would be generous. I found out, however, that some kids were missing on purpose. They wanted an excuse to explore the woods, and an errant arrow provided the perfect opportunity.

We Don't Want to Succeed

Here's what I'm trying to say: we don't miss the spiritual mark because we're still learning and need time to improve. In our natural, sinful state, we have bad moral aim-but that's what we want. I guess you could say we're spiritual failures because we want to be-like we're shooting our arrows in the woods on purpose.

Our problem isn't ignorance. Flip back a few pages to Romans 1:21–23, Paul says:

For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles.

Sound familiar? Just like Adam in the Garden, we've exchanged everything for nothing. We traded the job God gave us to try to be our own boss, exchanging him for ourselves and our sin. The reason we fail to meet God's standard is, fundamentally, because we don't care about his standard. We care about our standard. That's why we don't always feel like the spiritual failures we are-we manipulate

FIELD GUIDE

the rules, so we come out looking like winners of games made to serve our ego.

Friend, you won't know what to do with your fear of failure or your failure in the Bible's sense until you're confronted with this hard truth: your heart loves spiritual failure. We aren't victims of darkness—we love the darkness. The light reveals who we were meant to be and who we actually are, and so we run away from it as fast as we can (John 3:19–20).

We Can't Overcome Our Failure

The Bible uses active metaphors to describe our sin, as Paul does in Romans 1 and 3. We do a lot of suppressing, exchanging, and missing the mark. Scripture also uses passive metaphors to describe our sinful condition. The former draws attention to our pursuit of sin and rejection of God; the latter draws attention to our complete inability to do anything else.

No image more profoundly captures our self-imposed plight than death. “And you were dead in the trespasses and sins . . .” (Eph. 2:1). “And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh . . . (Col. 2:13). “For to set the mind on the flesh is death . . . For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot” (Rom. 8:6–7).

Our problem isn't so much that we're failing but that we've failed. The Scriptures on failure don't say we're like someone drowning in the ocean—we've already drowned. And we have no hope in ourselves to do anything about it, even if we wanted to (which, of course, we don't).

FACING FAILURE: RISING AGAIN WITH GOD'S STRENGTH

We're spiritual failures because we're unwilling and unable to be anything else.

The Many Faces of Spiritual Failure

Your failures and my failures stem from the same source: our sinful hearts. However, your failures may look completely different from mine. Going back to Romans, Paul ends the chapter with a list of sins in Romans 1:29–32. Maybe some of them are familiar to you:

They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.

Bible verses about failure, like Romans 1:29–32, show us that failure is not one-size-fits-all. Spiritual failure may show up in your life in the form of addiction and a string of broken relationships. Spiritual failure may present as unbearable self-righteousness or a passive-aggressive mean streak. Both are two sides of the same coin. We may not fail the same way, but we ultimately fail for the same reason: we've exchanged the glory of God for a lie and must live with the consequences.

FIELD GUIDE

God's Right Response to Our Spiritual Failure

What's God's response to our failure to love and obey him? The wages of sin is death (Rom. 6:23). Our failure to worship God calls his worthiness into question and that just won't fly. Someone is going to have to pay dearly.

God's wrath-his righteous anger toward our sin-will feel like an overreaction until we understand the stakes of our failure. All creation bows down to its maker: sun, moon, and stars exist to do what he says. And then there's us. We spit in his face and act like we're the center of the universe. That's the very definition of evil. His anger burns hot against us because he's the best, yet we treat him like a nobody, as if he's second best to us.

The Lord can't let our spiritual failure go unpunished. We deserve eternal life in hell. He's an eternal, infinitely good God, and we deserve an eternal, infinitely horrendous (but just) punishment. If he gave us anything less, he'd be admitting he's not so glorious after all. The verdict over our lives is "guilty" and "condemned"—no amount of good works or religious ritual can do anything to change it.

And this is where the *fear of failure* becomes painfully real: we haven't just failed at a task—we've failed before a holy God, with no ability to fix it on our own. But the beauty of the gospel is that where we fail, *Jesus never fails*.

Accurate Diagnosis, Appropriate Treatment

Why spend all this time unpacking the nature of sin? The cliché is true: the good news only makes sense in light of the bad news. Imagine if we began with "10 Tips and Tricks the

FACING FAILURE: RISING AGAIN WITH GOD'S STRENGTH

Next Time You Fail.” What good would that do if our spiritual failure starts at the very core of our being? Offering life tips to spiritual failures would be like a doctor treating cancer with a Band-Aid. It might cover it up for a while, but you’re still going to die.

You won’t rejoice in the right solution if you don’t understand your problem. I hope by now it’s clear that our failure problem is a sin problem—we don’t do what we should because, apart from Jesus, we can’t and don’t care to either.

But here’s where hope breaks through fear of failure: the One who never fails steps into our story. *Jesus never fails*—not in obedience, not in love, not in fulfilling God’s law, and not in rescuing sinners who collapse at his feet.

Ready for some good news? Perfect, because condemnation and wrath aren’t God’s only response to our spiritual failure—not even close.

Reflection Questions:

1. How does your heart respond to being confronted with your inability and unwillingness to live for God’s glory?
2. Why is it important to understand why you fail to please God? What happens when we don’t?
3. How could you use this chapter to lovingly challenge an unbeliever in your life this week?

FIELD GUIDE

4

GOOD NEWS FOR BIG FAILURES

I started this guide by saying everyone who has ever lived has been a failure except for one person. It's finally time to introduce him. There is one who never failed, who never fell short of God's perfect standard. That person is the Lord Jesus Christ, our Savior, who came to succeed where we've all failed and give us salvation in his name. He is the One we look to whenever the *fear of failure* grips our hearts, because *Jesus never fails*.

The Point of Failure's Story

Okay, I know making you take a trip down the Bible's memory lane was a lot. But I have my reasons. Reason number one is to make you think twice about any attempt to dust yourself off, grit your teeth, and work harder to be a spiritual success in God's eyes. I'll have you know, though, there's a second reason I wanted to reintroduce spiritual failure's origin story: to help you rejoice in the parallel story of God's promises to provide salvation to failures through a perfectly obedient Son. Only when we understand our failures do we feel the weight of grace-and only then do we see why *Jesus never fails* is the anchor for every believer facing the *fear of failure*.

FACING FAILURE: RISING AGAIN WITH GOD'S STRENGTH

Adam and Eve couldn't make it out of the Garden before God let them know he wasn't done with his sinful creatures yet. In Genesis 3:15, God says to the satanic serpent: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel." One of Adam and Eve's sons will come to save the day-succeeding where they failed.

The rest of the Old Testament details the search for this snake-crushing, curse-reversing Son. We know from chapter two that it wasn't Noah, Israel, or David. In fact, Malachi, the last book of the Bible, ends without telling us who it is. All we're left with is a glimmer of hope in a sea of darkness: a son of David, the Messiah, will come and make things right.

The very first verse of the New Testament shouts, "he's here!" Matthew 1:1: "The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham." Jesus is the Son promised back in Genesis 3:15. We get confirmation of this when the Holy Spirit descends on him like a dove during his baptism, telling the universe, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (Matt. 3:17).

Showdown in the Desert

Immediately after comes Jesus' first big test. Matthew 4:1–3 says, "Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. And the tempter came and said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.'"

FIELD GUIDE

Where have we seen this before? What happened the first time Satan tempted a son of God to doubt God's word? You can almost hear that ancient serpent hiss, "Did God really say?" But here, unlike in the Garden of Eden, God's son responds with loving trust in his Father. "But he answered, "It is written, "'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."

Jesus' wilderness temptation should also make us think of Israel's forty years in the desert. Their fear kept them from trusting God's ability to do what he said, so they ended up walking around in the hot sun until the generation that rejected him died. They were tired and hungry too. Israel gave in to temptation, grumbling and complaining about how the Lord had provided for them.

Adam and Israel failed their tests. Jesus passed his. Where we collapse under *the fear of failure*, Jesus stands firm—because *Jesus never fails*. Matthew is intentionally drawing these parallels—the story of our spiritual failure and Jesus' spiritual victory. Jesus was (and is) a stunning spiritual success because he always loved God and his glory most during his perfect human life.

Adam and Israel failed their tests. Jesus passed his. Matthew is intentionally drawing these parallels—the story of our spiritual failure and Jesus' spiritual victory. Jesus was (and is) a stunning spiritual success because he always loved God and his glory most during his perfect human life.

Jesus has always been God. He took on our humanity to live the life of obedience God required of us, but that we've failed

FACING FAILURE: RISING AGAIN WITH GOD'S STRENGTH

to live. The author of Hebrews says Jesus is like us in every way—having a human will, body, mind, and soul—except he had no sin (Heb. 4:13).

Successful to Death

Jesus was obedient to the point of death (Phil. 2:8). When he was in the Garden of Gethsemane, he asked the Father if there was any way he could be spared the cup of divine wrath coming his way (Matt. 26:36–46). There wasn't, which he accepted through drops of blood—not because he had failures of his own to pay for, but because he was about to pay for ours. Jesus' spiritual success led him to a Roman cross for us.

Our failure demanded a price too expensive for us to pay. Jesus paid it all. On the cross, Jesus was condemned in our place. Our sin and guilt were placed on him. He satisfied every drop of God's wrath we deserved. Remember, God couldn't just overlook our disobedience and sin—if he did, he would be denying himself. Instead, he provided a perfect sacrifice to free us from the penalty of our spiritual failure, making him just and the justifier of those who have faith in Jesus. (Rom. 3:25–26).

This is why Christians don't have to be crushed by the *fear of failure*: we rest in the One who carried our failures to the cross, and *Jesus never fails*.

Mission Success

I bet you could have heard a pin drop in the cosmos on the Saturday after Jesus' death. God's ultimate success story lay silent in a tomb. Praise God, he didn't stay there! Jesus rose

FIELD GUIDE

from the grave on the third day, proving his death accomplished everything necessary to bridge the gap between God and man.

Jesus' triumphant resurrection vindicated his claim to the throne of the universe. It was like the check he cashed went through. The Son cried "it is finished" on the cross; the Father said "it is finished indeed" by raising him from the dead. Because of this victory, even the deepest *fear of failure* loses its power—Christ's success is now the foundation for our confidence.

Exchanging Spiritual Failure for Spiritual Success

How do we come to share in Jesus' success? Only through repentance and faith. We must admit we're complete spiritual failures with no hope of being anything different on our own. Our best attempts to get in God's good graces would send us straight to hell. But when we turn away from ourselves and throw ourselves on God's mercy in Christ, we receive eternal life. This is the only way to silence the *fear of failure*: by resting in the One whose success covers every place we fall short.

The root of our spiritual failure and all the consequences that come with it is severed not by striving but by trusting. When we trust in Christ alone, he takes on our spiritual failure as his own, and we receive his perfect obedience as our own. Paul captures this "sweet exchange" in 2 Corinthians 5:21: "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

FACING FAILURE: RISING AGAIN WITH GOD'S STRENGTH

In Christ, the God we've offended doesn't look at us and say "guilty failure" anymore. He looks at us, sees his Son, and says, "righteous child of God." That truth is what frees believers from the paralyzing *fear of failure*-we stand in Christ's righteousness, not our own. Friend, if you haven't repented and believed this good news, don't read another word before you do. You can't overcome your spiritual failure. You can't pay the price of your sin. Jesus can and did, if you'll come to him as Lord, Savior, and highest Treasure.

Reflection Questions:

1. Can you think of other passages in the New Testament that show Jesus' success where we've failed?
2. How does God answer our spiritual failure in the cross? In the resurrection?
3. What's the best part of being rescued from our spiritual failure?

FIELD GUIDE

5

FAIL, FIGHT, FAIL, FIGHT

This is probably the chapter you've been waiting for. We're finally ready to talk about how to deal with failure. Specifically, we're going to think about how our new identity in Jesus and the Spirit's work inside our hearts helps us live a life pleasing to God—not a perfect life, but a pleasing one nonetheless. The gospel is good news, in part, because it promises gradual victory over our spiritual failings in this life. And as we grow, the Spirit also teaches us *how to deal with failure* in a way that weakens the *fear of failure* instead of feeding it.

Now, I use words like “not perfect” and “gradual” above on purpose. Our victory over spiritual failure is assured, but the battle is just getting started. If you expect the Christian life to be one win after another, you're setting yourself up for discouragement and despair. Overcoming spiritual failure is a lifelong process—it's a marathon, not a sprint. Learning to keep walking with God while *dealing with failure* is part of the normal Christian life.

Consider Paul's words in Philippians 3:12: “Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his

FACING FAILURE: RISING AGAIN WITH GOD'S STRENGTH

own.” Even Paul—who wrote more New Testament letters than anyone—hadn’t “arrived” spiritually speaking. He still had work to do in his battle against sin. He still failed and needed God’s help on a daily basis. If the apostle Paul had to learn *coping with failure*, we shouldn’t be surprised that we do too.

The Bible talks about our “flesh.” “Flesh” doesn’t mean our physical bodies but refers to our fallen, sinful nature. Our flesh wants to push us away from righteousness and toward sin. When we believe the gospel, our flesh is mortally wounded but will still do battle against the Spirit within us until the day we die. You will continue to fail as a Christian. The question isn’t whether failure happens—the question is how you respond when it does, and how the gospel frees you from the crippling *fear of failure*.

How a Christian Processes Failure

You’ve done it again. That thing you told yourself (and God) you’d never do again. You didn’t see it coming, but it happened. You’ve fallen in your battle against that sin—whatever that sin is in your life. You failed. Again. What do you do next?

Remember

Step one is to go back to what we learned in the last chapter about the gospel. The good news of Jesus’ perfect life, sacrificial death, and triumphant resurrection, received through repentance and faith, was good news when you first believed, and it’s still good news today, no matter how long you’ve been following Jesus. Remembering the gospel is the

FIELD GUIDE

first step in *how to deal with failure*—it gives you solid ground when your emotions are overwhelmed by the *fear of failure*.

To fight spiritual failure, you'll have to do more than remember your justification—just don't do less! Your ultimate hope can never be in your spiritual success, even after you're converted. Have you ever read the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector in Luke 18:9–14?

He (Jesus) also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: “Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”

The Pharisee was a spiritual failure but didn't know it. He disguised self-righteousness as piety—I thank you that I'm not like that guy. The tax collector, in contrast, knew he was a spiritual failure who could only hope for mercy. Which one went home justified?

FACING FAILURE: RISING AGAIN WITH GOD'S STRENGTH

In the moments when you're face down on the floor-fresh from another failure-remember that your hope isn't in your success but in Jesus' success. His righteousness covers you like a new, clean garment; your old, stinky garments got thrown out a long time ago. Failure, of any kind, doesn't define you anymore. Jesus defines you now. This is how Christians begin *coping with failure*: not by denying it, but by rooting their identity in Christ instead of in their performance.

Confess

Now you have the confidence to approach God and tell him, "I'm sorry." It's not the time for excuses. Repentance begins with acknowledging our guilt; we need to take God's side against our sin. Again, this is why it's so important to understand why we fail spiritually. Ultimately, it's no one's fault but our own. Our hearts still feel the tug toward the darkness, and we have to be honest about that.

Have you ever been scared to admit something to someone because you're afraid of how they'll react? What do you expect when you come to God with your failure-irritation, fury, wrath? Well, here's what you should expect: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). Confess your failures early and often because God is going to meet you with grace upon grace. Confession is one of God's main tools for healing the heart that's exhausted from *dealing with failure*.

Did you notice the second thing John promises will happen when we confess our sin? God promises to cleanse us from

FIELD GUIDE

all unrighteousness. Forgiveness is an incredible gift that we need desperately. We also need-and should want-to grow in our ability to say “no” to sin and “yes” to God. The same grace that justifies and forgives also begins renovating our hearts from the inside out. Repent, turn away from your spiritual failure, receive forgiveness, and resolve to continue battling with sin. This is the long, beautiful rhythm of Christian living: failing, fighting, confessing, growing, and trusting. And through it all, God teaches us *how to deal with failure* without being crushed by the *fear of failure*.

Fight

Our fight against spiritual failure in this life is just that-a fight. We can't cleanse ourselves. Only God's power can make us more into the image of Christ. However, God uses our effort, feeble as it may be sometimes, to grow us in grace. And as we fight, God slowly loosens the grip of the *fear of failure*, especially when that fear shows up in places like our friendships, ministries, or even “*failure at work*” moments that leave us discouraged and unsure of ourselves.

Philippians 2:12–13 says, “Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” Work out your salvation, strive to meet the mark, because God is the one at work in you.

In 2 Thessalonians 1:11–12, Paul captures the same dynamic from a different angle:

FACING FAILURE: RISING AGAIN WITH GOD'S STRENGTH

To this end we always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling and may fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power, so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

We resolve for God. We do works of faith. We strive for spiritual success... but always by his power, trusting that every step of obedience is evidence that he is at work in us, making us more like Jesus. So we take baby steps toward our proud Father—even shaky steps count when your strength is in his grace.

What might those baby steps look like for you this week? It's been said that if you "fail to plan," then you "plan to fail." How are you planning to love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength? For some of you, that may mean breaking off a relationship or throwing your computer out the upstairs window. Positively, it may mean setting yourself up for spiritual success by opening your Bible each morning (maybe even before you check your phone). God uses these "resolves for good" to make us more like Jesus—working supernaturally through the ordinary and practical.

At the end of the day, God gets the credit for our successes and we get the blame for our failures. Our dependence on his grace to do anything right is a testament to his saving power and soul-satisfying goodness. If he can take spiritual failures like us and give us even a modicum of genuine spiritual victory in knowing his Son, he deserves all the praise and glory.

FIELD GUIDE

Rest

Remember, way back in the first chapter, how we distinguished between spiritual failure and creature failure? I don't want to leave you without any encouragement on how to handle failure that just happens. Again, not all failure is cut from the same cloth. Sometimes, whatever you tried to do didn't happen because you aren't God. Other times, your failure is really the result of someone else's failure, spiritual or otherwise.

Know that even your creature failures don't define you. They may not represent a sin requiring repentance, but the gospel should still be your first call when things don't go your way. You'll find the power to get up again when life in a fallen world knocks you down because you've come to understand you aren't defined by your ups and downs-you're defined by Jesus' blood and righteousness. This is true whether the setback was spiritual, emotional, or something as ordinary as a discouraging *failure at work* that made you feel small or incompetent. In every case, God's love holds steady when your plans do not.

Feel the freedom to take wise risks knowing the results won't change God's love for you in the slightest. Besides, you aren't in control of the outcomes anyway, are you? God is. And he knows better than you. That job didn't pan out? Couldn't pull off that new ministry at church? God has a reason, even if the reason is to give you an opportunity to trust and glorify him, even in adverse outcomes.

FACING FAILURE: RISING AGAIN WITH GOD’S STRENGTH

Ultimately, we know God is working all things—our failures included—for our good (Rom. 8:28). Creature failures sting, but they’re overseen by the watchful eye of the one who gave his only Son. Besides, “He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” (Rom. 8:32). Keep that truth in your back pocket for the next time (and there will be a next time), things don’t go how you hoped.

Reflection Questions:

1. Think about a recent spiritual failure. How would this framework have helped you process that failure in a more God-honoring, soul-encouraging way?
2. Do you feel like you can confess your failure to God? Why or why not?
3. Why is it so hard to trust God when we fail in ways that aren’t directly our fault?

FIELD GUIDE



CONCLUSION

Here's what I hope you've learned from this guide—one failure to another.

We're failures. Sometimes failure is our fault; sometimes failure is just what happens to people who aren't God. The story of our failure goes all the way back to the Garden, where Adam sinned and failed to do what God created him to do: worship and obey God above all else. We're in the same boat as Adam. Our spiritual failure stems from our rebellion against God, finding its source in hearts unwilling and unable to live up to God's holy standard. If you've ever wondered *what does the Bible say about failure*, this is it: Scripture shows us that failure is universal, rooted in sin, and beyond our ability to fix on our own.

Thankfully, God has provided a solution to our failure and its consequences. Jesus succeeded where the rest of us have failed—always loving God the way we were supposed to. He died on the cross and rose again to pay the penalty for our sins, offering to exchange his perfect record of obedience for our disobedience when we turn away from our sins and trust in him alone for salvation.

FACING FAILURE: RISING AGAIN WITH GOD'S STRENGTH

Justification is the good news that we've been counted righteous before God, even though we're still failures. Sanctification is the good news that, even though we still fail in various ways, we can grow in our ability to do what God commands by the power of the Holy Spirit. He gives us everything we need to continue getting up when we fail and fall. This is also where *learning from failure* becomes deeply Christian—not a confidence trick or a self-help slogan, but the slow, Spirit-led process of becoming more like Jesus even as we stumble forward.

As we draw this guide to a close, know that your failure has an expiration date. Justification frees us from the penalty of our spiritual failure, sanctification frees us from the power of our spiritual failure, and glorification will finally free us from the presence of our spiritual failure. One day, when either we go to be with the Lord in death or he returns to bring us to the new heavens and new earth he's been preparing for us, our sin will be no more, and we won't be left to the whims of a fallen world. This is the real foundation for *how to overcome fear of failure*: not by trusting your performance, but by trusting the God who has already guaranteed your future.

In 2 Corinthians 3:18, Paul says, "And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another." We're transformed more and more into Christlikeness as we behold the glory of Jesus in the gospel—sanctification comes from seeing more of Jesus!

FIELD GUIDE

Then, in 1 John 3:2, we read this: “Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.” If you belong to Jesus, no matter how much you’ve failed him in this life, you will see him face-to-face, completing your transformation into his image. We deserve God’s eternal wrath, but instead we can anticipate an eternity of happiness around God’s throne—forgiven failures who will never fail again.

Reflection Questions:

1. Can you explain the difference between justification, glorification, and sanctification? How would that help you or a friend deal with spiritual failure?
2. What do you most look forward to enjoying in the new heavens and new earth?
3. How can you prepare for the Last Day now in light of everything you’ve read in this guide?



Colton Corter serves as a Senior Pastoral Assistant at River City Baptist Church in Richmond, Virginia. He is married to Lindsey and together they have five children: John, Conrad, Thomas, Mary Kate, and Julia.

