

## **Encouragement for Life in this World (when We Fail)**

*John 16:25-33*

One of the authors that I have really grown to appreciate over the past several years is a man named Gordon MacDonald. He has become a kind of mentor to me through his writings. He writes about church life. He writes about living well. Anyway, he wrote a book back in 1988, called *Rebuilding Your Broken World*. In that book he records an interaction that he had with a friend of his. He writes this:

My new friend asked a strange question. I've thought about it many times since then. "If Satan were to blow you out of the water," he asked, "how do you think he would do it?"

"I'm not sure I know," I answered. "All sorts of ways, I supposed; but I know there's one way he wouldn't get me."

"What's that?"

"He'd never get me in the area of my personal relationships. That's one place where I have no doubt that I'm as strong as you can get."

He goes on to say:

A few years after that conversation my world broke wide open. A chain of seemingly innocent choices became destructive, and it was my fault. Choice by choice by choice, each easier to make, each becoming gradually darker. And then my world broke - in the very area I had predicted I was safe (p. 53).

In the very area where MacDonald thought he was strong he failed. He had an affair.

I think one of the most dispiriting things we can face is failure in an area in which we think we have the strength and the determination to succeed; to do it right, to obey. This kind of failure of faith can be so crushing. And yet the reality is that we all face this kind of failure at some point in some way in our lives. We make promises to God that we fail to keep. We sin again in an area that we thought we'd conquered. We find ourselves saying and doing things that we thought we'd never say or do. We fail. How do we get up and start moving forward with God again when we fail in this way?

As you know, we've been looking at the Jesus' Farewell Discourse - this interaction that Jesus had with his disciples right before he was arrested. This is a time when the disciples are on the verge of just such an experience. In fact Matthew records that on this night when Jesus is sharing the Farewell Discourse, he tells the disciples that they will fail; that they will all fall away from Him. Remember how they answer? Peter says, "Not me. I'm not going to fail." He says that he will not deny Jesus and that he is ready to

die with him. And all of the disciples say the same thing (Matt. 26:31-35). And yet they fail.

Jesus knows that they will fail. He knows that they will all desert Him. I think that the final words that Jesus speaks in this Farewell Discourse are at least in part offered in light of their coming failure. What he says in these last verse of the Farewell Discourse is encouragement for life in this world for when we fail. I think what he says for sure has application in all of life, but I do think it is encouragement especially for when we fail.

Today we are going to be looking at John 16:25-33. The first truth that Jesus talks about is that:

## **I. We Have Direct Access to a Father Who Loves Us**

Jesus begins by saying:

*<sup>25</sup> "These things I have spoken to you in figurative language; an hour is coming when I will speak no more to you in figurative language, but will tell you plainly of the Father.*

The things that Jesus has talked about in this Farewell Discourse have been communicated in a *figurative language*. It's not that he has been speaking with metaphors and parables, but rather his comments have been veiled to the disciples. What he has said has not been fully clear to them. In large part this was due to the fact that before the crucifixion and resurrection there were things that just would not make sense to them.

But Jesus says that there is an hour that is coming when he would tell them *plainly of the Father*. After his resurrection, Jesus will be able to speak plainly of the Father because they will have understanding that they just could not now. But He does want them to understand now one important truth about the Father. He says:

*<sup>26</sup> "In that day you will ask in My name, and I do not say to you that I will request the Father on your behalf; <sup>27</sup> for the Father Himself loves you, because you have loved Me, and have believed that I came forth from the Father.*

Jesus has talked about praying in his name before in this discourse (14:13-14). The thing that he is highlighting here is the fact that they have direct access to the Father. He wants them to understand that praying in his name doesn't mean submitting a request to Jesus who will then bring it to a reluctant heavenly Father. In fact he says that he will not *request the Father on your behalf*. Why? Because they, on the merits of Christ, will be able to approach the Father directly for *the Father Himself loves* them. The Father loves them based on their relationship with Christ and so there is free access to go boldly to the Father.

If you are a believer in Jesus you have this same direct access to the Father based on the merits of Christ. The Father himself loves you and he wants you to come to him with your requests.

What Jesus teaches here is not just true IF the disciples obey. This truth will always be true for them. Even after they deny that they know Jesus they will have access to a Father who loves them. That will not change. They are on the verge of massive failure and yet their failure of faith will change nothing about the Father's love for them and their access to him.

The same is true for you. Your failure changes nothing about the Father's love for you and your access to him. It never was your merit, your faithfulness, that earned any kind of access to the Father in the first place. We only have this access, in Christ, through his merits.

I think so often when we have a failure of faith we think that we cannot approach God until we put a good track record together again. We think we can't go to him until we are doing better. And so we just stay away for a time. Jesus is declaring this truth of access to a loving heavenly Father to a group of men who are going to fail him in a major way in just a short time. We have this access to the Father because of Christ and his merits not our own. The disciples' failure would not change this and neither does your failure. You have direct access to a Father who loves you because of Christ.

Now, in this comment about our access to the Father, Jesus makes a statement about the disciples believing that he has come from the Father. Jesus will make a comment about this that sets up the second point, which is that:

## **II. We Can Have Courage in this World because of Christ's Victory**

The comment Jesus make is this:

*<sup>28</sup> "I came forth from the Father, and have come into the world; I am leaving the world again, and going to the Father."*

Jesus is essentially summarizing his mission. He came as an ambassador from the Father. He entered the world and took on flesh and lived as a man. And when he says, *I am leaving the world again, and going to the Father* he is referring to his crucifixion and ultimately to his resurrection and his ascension back to the Father's side.

In response:

*<sup>29</sup> His disciples said, "Lo, now You are speaking plainly, and are not using a figure of speech. <sup>30</sup> "Now we know that You know all things, and have no need for anyone to question You; by this we believe that You came from God."*

The disciples give a kind of confession of what they believe about Jesus. They say that they know that Jesus *knows all things*. In other words, they believe that they don't even have to express their questions to Jesus because he knows what is on their minds even before they say it. And then they say, *by this we believe*.

In their confession of belief they sound so rock solid. They sound so ready to face the world. But Jesus' response helps us understand otherwise.

<sup>31</sup> *Jesus answered them, "Do you now believe?"*

Some commentators think there is maybe a bit of exasperation in Jesus' voice. Yes, they sound solid in their beliefs, but Jesus know what is coming. They are not as solid as they think they are. He says:

<sup>32</sup> *"Behold, an hour is coming, and has already come, for you to be scattered, each to his own home, and to leave Me alone; and yet I am not alone, because the Father is with Me.*

In a short time Jesus will be arrested and all of the disciples will flee. They will *be scattered*. They will all leave Jesus alone at the time of his greatest need (Mark 14:50). Not only will they desert Jesus, they will desert each other. Each will go to his own home. Their faith will not be strong enough to stick with Jesus or with one another. But Jesus also makes it clear that though the disciples will desert him, the Father will not. He says, *the Father is with Me*. The Father will be faithful, but the disciples will flee; they will fail.

Jesus knows that this failure is coming. And in this context he speaks encouragement for life in this world for when they fail to the disciples. He says:

<sup>33</sup> *"These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world."*

The most immediate tribulation they will face is the fact that they will all abandon Jesus. Their faith will fail them. But, as well, in the future they will have troubles; they will be hated; they will be persecuted. And, in fact, almost all of them will be killed.

But Jesus says to them, even though all of this is true, *take courage*. The NIV says, "take heart." The word, "courage" can have a couple of different nuances. It can mean to have confidence or a firmness of purpose in the face of danger or testing. It can also mean to be of good cheer.

Jesus commands them to *take courage*. It is a command that is rooted, not in the disciples' own strength of beliefs or who they are, but rather in what Jesus will accomplish. Jesus says, *I have overcome the world*.

I want to consider the phrase, *I have overcome the world*, closely. First, what is the world? Well, the world is that which hates the disciples. We saw back in John 15:19:

*"If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.*

And so in part, the world is the people opposed to God and His followers. John also says this about the world in 1 John 2:15-17:

*15 Do not love the world, nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. 16 For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. 17 And the world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God abides forever.*

And so the world is also a pattern of life that is opposed to God. It is a way of life that is in rebellion against God. And then finally, John tells us this about the world in 1 John 5:19:

*<sup>19</sup> We know that we are of God, and the whole world lies in the power of the evil one.*

The world is the realm in which the devil works his works. The world lies in his power. And so as we think about what the world is, it is no wonder that Jesus would say to the disciples that in the world they would have tribulation. And the reality is that what Jesus says to the disciples about life in the world is true for us as well. We will have tribulations. The world is under the sway of the devil and is hostile to God. This is the context in which we seek to live out our faith.

But Jesus says, *take courage; I have overcome the world*. *Overcome*, in the original Greek language is the word, *nike*. It means victory. In general use a Greek speaker might use this word to refer to someone being victorious in a military conquest.

In the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, when this term is used it almost exclusively refers to victory over hostile powers. God is the victor who has power over his enemies and the enemies of his people. 1 Chronicles 29:11 says:

*<sup>11</sup> "Yours, O LORD, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory . . . .*

In the Old Testament, when Israel was thinking rightly, they understand that victory in battle did not depend upon the strength of their army but upon whether God had delivered the enemy into the hands of the Israelite army (Judges 7).

In the New Testament this word is almost always used in reference to conflict between God or Christ and opposing demonic powers. But through his death and resurrection Christ overcomes. No power in the world can ultimately have the victory (NIDNTT). For instance, 1 Corinthians 15 says:

*<sup>54</sup> But when this perishable will have put on the imperishable, and this mortal will have put on immortality, then will come about the saying that is written, "Death is swallowed up in victory." <sup>55</sup> "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" <sup>56</sup> The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law; <sup>57</sup> but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.*

Not even death, which seems so final has the last word. Because of Christ's resurrection he is the victor over even death. He has overcome. And as children of God we are included in this victory. It is not earned. It is not a reward. It is simply given. God *gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.*

And so, we may face tribulation, troubles, dangers, or even our own failures of faith, but because of Christ's victory, we overcome. Our failures are not the last word.

And so when Jesus says to the disciples, *take courage; I have overcome the world*, he is saying to them that he has won the ultimate victory. He is the victor. The enemy has been defeated. Yes, they will desert Jesus. Yes, their faith will fail them. But their failure is not the final word. Christ's victory is.

The truth that Jesus has overcome the world, is a truth that is encouragement for life in this world. We may face spiritual battle, but we can know Jesus wins. We might be battling sin in our own life, but we can know that Jesus wins. Because of this there is hope for growth and transformation. But as well, that Jesus has overcome is encouragement for when we fail. Our failure is not the final word. The sin of our failure does not win; Christ does. Your sin, your failure, does not separate you from God, because Jesus has overcome that. He has overcome anything that would separate us from God.

Now, I think it is important to state that the fact that Jesus has overcome does not spare us from tribulation or troubles in this life. It doesn't mean life will be easy. Jesus spoke this encouragement to the disciples. He overcame the world for them and yet they faced persecution, they were beaten for their faith and ultimately all but one of them died for their faith. And yet Jesus overcame the world for them.

Remember what Jesus said in the verse:

*<sup>33</sup> "These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world."*

Overcoming is not the absence of tribulation, but it is peace in the midst of tribulation. As you read the book of Acts and see the disciples live out their faith in a world that opposed them and persecuted them it is so clear that they had joy and peace. That's what Jesus' victory allowed them to experience. And that is what it will allow us to experience as well.

Will we fail in this life? Yes we will. Sometimes our failures will be colossal just like the disciples. But in these words from Christ we have encouragement for life in this world when we fail. In our failure we have access to a Father who loves us. And we can be encouraged knowing that our failure is not the final word because Jesus has overcome.

Amen.