

**Sermon for Sunday, December 27, 2009**  
**Clay Smith**

**THE GOSPEL AND FAILURE**  
**I Peter 1:1-9**

It has been a tough year for many of you. Some had a wonderful year; many struggled with financial difficulty, relational difficulty, health crises. When we take stock and remember the year in review, what should our perspective be? How do we process our failures and losses? What do I do when my confidence is shaken because of challenges or failure?

I recently read about Dr. Daniel Boorstin, the Librarian of Congress, who had the distinct honor of revealing to the world a very interesting set of facts. He possessed a box that read: "Contents of the president's pockets on the night of April 14, 1865."

You might know that was the night Abraham Lincoln was assassinated. Lincoln had been re-elected, yet he was a person of scorn or worship, depending on your perspective. He was brutally attacked in the media of the day...much more angry and callous than the media attacks on a president today. Lincoln had been worn down by the war as well as the relentless second guessing of his decisions, the analysis of his failures. How did Lincoln make it?

Boorstin removed the items one by one on TV; there were five items Lincoln carried in his pocket that night. In his pocket were:

A handkerchief, embroidered "A. Lincoln".  
A boy's pen knife.  
A glasses case held together with string.  
A purse containing a \$5 bill--Confederate currency.  
Some old and worn newspaper clippings.

These newspaper clippings were all about Lincoln. One of them reported a speech by a British statesman, John Bright, which says that Abraham Lincoln is "one of the greatest men of all times." We know that now, but in that moment, Lincoln was attacked and criticized from all sides. He was lonely and insecure from the suffering and turmoil of his country ripped to shreds by hatred and a cruel, costly war. A writer put it this way, "There is something touchingly pathetic in the mental picture of this great leader seeking solace and self-assurance from a few old newspaper clippings as he reads them under the flickering flame of a candle all alone in the Oval Office."

Is it really touchingly pathetic? What would you do? Where would you rush for support when attacked? Or when life seems to spin out of control? I mean we all do it, don't we? I know I do. I look to something to give some sort of confidence or assurance in the face of failure and criticism. Lincoln just happened to look to newspaper clippings, well worn and frequently read newspaper clippings, to assure him he's NOT his failure. He is better than all the attacks, the doubts, the failures.

**Where does confidence come from in the face of challenge? We have confidence when we remember God's faithfulness.**

The beauty of the Gospel of Jesus is that it is the only solid place to find real confidence. He calls us to a deeper freedom in that who we are is not what we do. Lincoln's problem, and often ours is to assume

when we fail, we ARE failures. But it isn't true. Our identity is a beloved child of God, redeemed from our failure, past, present and future. Confidence comes from:

### **I. Remembering Effective Love (1-2)**

God has loved us with a love that does not stop with a simple feeling, but is love in action. His love for us is effective. Look with me at verses 1-2.

#### **1 Peter 1:1-2**

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who are elect exiles of the dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, <sup>2</sup>according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood: May grace and peace be multiplied to you.

#### **A. Secure in His Loving Call**

We find security first of all in His loving call. Look at the words Peter uses to describe God's people. They were elect or chosen, in verse 1. And in verse 3, He has caused us to be born again. These words leave us no doubt that the call that makes us God's child comes from Him and Him alone. Our accomplishment or failure is not what is taken into account. In fact, failure is assumed! These are former pagans, from all over Asia Minor, who were idolaters, worshipping all kinds of different gods, and yet, they had been chosen to be God's precious own possession. It is Jesus' work that is taken into account.

It is not a matter of our being smart enough to ask for Jesus, but he takes the initiative to make us his! He has taken we who were his enemies and made us part of his family.

At times this could come across as cold determinism. Well, God is just choosing some to be his children. Who does He think He is? But in reality, it gives us incredible confidence and assurance in the face of challenges! Look again at verse 2. How does he make his choices?

#### **1 Peter 1:2**

...according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood: May grace and peace be multiplied to you.

It is according to His foreknowledge that he made us His. What is that? I have heard foreknowledge explained like this before: God looks down the tunnel of time, and sees who would choose to love him, and based on that knowledge that He can observe, He chooses to make those people His children. The biblical picture and words couldn't be any further from this idea.

First of all, who would be in control and effectively be God if this were true? We would. God would be simply a responder and we are the creators.

But even the words don't mean this. Knowing here isn't some way of saying He realized what color our eyes are, but rather an intimate, intense loving purpose. God's people aren't secure according to some sense of knowledge He may have of us or our good potential, but because of an amazing intimate love He has for us! He has fore loved us.

How can you have confidence and strength to live the Christian life in light of challenge? Because God loves you with an intimate fatherly love! He knows all about us and loves us intimately. Even at our darkest hour, when we feel the most lost, the love of God holds us secure! His love for us is not conditioned on what we do well or not well. He loves us because he chose to love us.

That puts our failure or challenges into a different context, doesn't it? We can afford to be honest about our sin and our need because His love isn't conditioned on our not having needs.

We just came through Christmas and all of us have family members who may say or do inappropriate things, a Crazy Uncle John or Aunt Betty Sue. They may even be especially needy. Sometimes we shy away from relationships with some people because they are difficult to love or even simply be around. We may not engage at a heart level because of what it might cost us. But can you see that God isn't like us in that way at all? He knows our need before we reveal it...and He pursues us in love anyway.

A bigger view of His love and cross enables us to have a bigger view of our sin, own it and not hide or pretend. If He loves you with an everlasting love that can't be shaken because you didn't cause Him to love you in the first place, we don't have to pretend that things we fear will disqualify us from His love.

What in your life do you fear will drive God away? Addiction? The grip of sin? Or is it on the positive side? Being successful will draw Him near? He will never come near because you are successful at work or with some sort of personal standard. He will draw near because of His choice to love you, and to change us in that love.

Shame can put us in a black hole of feeling unloved and unlovable. But Jesus has reached into our pit of shame and shined a light into it, not to make us feel worse, but to demonstrate his utter commitment to love and change us. We are secure because of his loving call.

### **A. Secure in His Loving Methods**

Look again at verse 2:

#### **1 Peter 1:2**

Elect...according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood:

May grace and peace be multiplied to you.

Not only are the circumstances of our life governed by the amazing, knowing love of the Father, but also kept by the Spirit and the Son! He says we are chosen in the sanctification of the Spirit, meaning that the Holy Spirit is actively engaged within us to make us holy. The Spirit dwells with us to change us and give us new purpose and direction.

And he says that he operates within us in a direction, the direction of obedience to the Son, for sprinkling with His blood. Peter is telling us that although all these sufferings, emotions, persecutions, and even our sins are at work within us, the power of the Spirit is also at work to produce obedience within us as well as apply the blood of Christ to our failings.

What more could we ask for? We have the love of the Father overseeing each thing in our lives, the power of the Holy Spirit at work giving us strength to live in obedience since we aren't able to do it on our own, and the blood of Christ to cover us when we fail!

All of our needs are covered over. We are secure because of the amazing effective love of God! Can we have confidence even in dark circumstances? Yes, because God is making a way for us. We have power for holiness because of the sanctification of the Spirit present with us in the midst of temptation.

There is no sin He can't conquer in you. There is no circumstance so entrenched that He can't bring you through it.

Are you facing challenge? Walk in the love of the Father, the blood of the Son and the presence of the Spirit.

## **I. Eternal Hope (3-9)**

Not only do we have confidence by living in light of our effective love, but also according to an eternal hope, the hope of heaven. C.S. Lewis said, "If you read history, you will find out that the Christians who did most for this present world were precisely those who thought most of the next. Aim at heaven, and you get earth thrown in. Aim at earth, and you get neither."

Part of our ability to live in confidence with an ever present reality of failure is by focusing on the hope we have of a better day coming for us.

### **A. Anchor in Heaven**

Are there any Lord of the Rings fans here? You may recall the great siege on the Refuge of Rohan in the second movie, "The Two Towers". As the evil armies came to attack the huge city walls, how did they do it? They had large anchors that were thrown up onto the tops of the city walls. These steel hooks were attached to ropes that the enemy used to pull and leverage ladders full of enemies onto the wall. These anchors secured their way into the city, and gave them leverage to attack.

Peter calls for us to toss our anchor into another city to give us hope and use that anchor to pull ourselves toward it, the City of God, the hope and inheritance we have coming to us. Look with me at verse 3:

#### **1 Peter 1:3-5**

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, <sup>4</sup>to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, <sup>5</sup>who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

Since Jesus was raised from the dead he defeated death and all the things that come along with it. And he has placed us in another family with inheritance.

We all are familiar with the concept of inheritance. We receive it because of our family relationships, and it is promised to us. Sometimes our inheritance may be a business, money, property, or other things, but they are things that come to us simply because of our family relationships. They come to us because of the glory and honor of someone else who decided to leave it for us to have.

This is what Peter speaks of as our inheritance. Jesus has come and defeated sin and death and leaves the fruits, the spoils, of that battle for us as our inheritance. Yet what we will receive is not going to pass away, be spent or get lost in the market. What we look forward to is a life filled with things we can only dream about today, an eternity spent with Him.

He says that our inheritance won by Christ is

- Imperishable: meaning it is not subject to decay. Old age, rot, futility, all these things have nothing to do with our inheritance. It is one that will last eternally without any change or loss of luster! The promise of heaven will never wear out.
- Undefiled: meaning it is not tainted by sin of any type. When we receive this inheritance there will no longer be any pain, mourning or crying as Revelation says. Our lives into eternity will be completely without disease or sickness.

- Unfading: meaning it will never go away or lose its beauty.

An inheritance like this is so contrary to what we receive from an earthly one, one with a beginning and end, when it will no longer do us any good.

Yet the one we receive from Christ is a life spent with him in all perfection in a perfect new heaven and earth kept secure by him! The promise of heaven for all who have faith (verse 5) is as secure as the future of Christ himself. He is our guarantee. It is kept with all the power and full arsenal that God himself has at His disposal!

How does this help me today? No matter what else is going on in your life, no matter the pain, frustration, broken relationships, sin in your life that just won't let go, where do you go for help? When you've failed again at the same thing, where do you go? When you've done the same sin you can't seem to shake. When there's some dynamic in your heart that in yourself you have no hope of ever seeing change. It runs too deep. Your parents had this same sinful pattern as did your siblings, so you get it honestly. So in reality, you have no hope of seeing it change. What then?

Remember the inheritance kept in heaven for you. Your failure does not disqualify you for the inheritance because your success didn't earn it. God keeps is safe for you. It will come to pass for it is His determined purpose for you.

The truth is that each of us faces our failure and is tempted to despair because we forget that we are kept for a future glory, and yet we want it now. Do you ever lose patience with yourself or those around you? I do. At times it is because my hopes are confused with my expectations. We have hope of a future glory...yet we expect perfection in this life - from self and from others. We live as if we are not desperate sinners. We may expect more out of our children than we should expecting perfection or a glory from them now that is to come in the future.

This is certainly no reason to fail to fight sin. But live conscious of the truth that we need the Gospel. Our hope for the future is what gives us strength to face today.

One day we will be free from sickness and will be healthy for all eternity. We will live in harmony and without relational problems with all our loved ones. This sin that I keep battling and won't let go, one day will be conquered and never tempt me again.

We have an anchor in heaven that, if we use it, pulls us toward Jesus. His victory has assured our victory, and everything between now and then is a matter of endurance.

### **A. Anchor in Reality**

Peter doesn't tell us to live pie in the sky lives, however. Failure is painful. It is costly. These church members had suffered, and were being persecuted and were in pain. And hope for the future helps get us through that pain, but the reality of life today still waits for us.

#### **1 Peter 1:6-7**

In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, as was necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, <sup>7</sup>so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

How can we face trials?

In verse 6, Peter tells them that their trials and grief were necessary to result in the praise, glory and honor of Christ. In some way, their suffering was necessary to produce purity and genuine faith in their lives. Mysterious dealing with us in that God uses painful circumstances to prompt our hearts to long for and ask for a deeper engagement with Him. Things we might not normally desire, He foists upon us in the midst of hard seasons of life.

That is in part what it means to view life through the lens of God's faithfulness. Not that we call evil good, or pretend evil and tragedy aren't as bad as they really are. On the contrary, we see a hand that is more powerful to turn evil toward His redemptive purposes.

We have to see our stories through the lens of God's faithfulness and grace. His presence is with us to lead us to the purpose of His making. Do we think of the story of our lives filtered through God's grace or through our own fears and idols?

Not just as individuals but also as a community of faith. Think of the story of Central. We don't hear many talk about it. The tragedy of this place is hard to face: a beloved longtime pastor dying of cancer. Then a season of waiting. A gifted younger pastor taking his own life. Such pain. Another season of waiting. The next pastor forced to resign under a cloud of deception. Again, a season of waiting. Now the church is in a stabilizing time. We tell the story of the tragedy, but what about the dominant refrain of God's faithfulness? This church held together precisely because God never left!

It is that refrain that defines the song. God has been faithful to use the suffering and trial of this people to deepen us and result in the praise and glory of His name.

One church member told me her family was drawn here during this time because of what they saw. They walked into this place that was hurting and said they noticed most of all God at work. People were crying in the hallway, being honest about pain and brokenness and she thought, "We fit here!" This is a place where God is at work! We must look at the story of our lives as defined by the refrain of God's faithfulness!

The path to change in our lives is to see our striving for self-glory as death and the striving for God's glory as life. To get to that place of repudiating self sufficiency and control, God often uses and redeems our suffering! It is affliction and pain that God uses to set our feet onto a new path.

How do we process the challenges of last year and face next year? We do it by taking steps of walking with God. Two steps – First, remembering his faithful love that secures us, and second, the step of the hope of heaven. This walk will carry us into eternity with him.