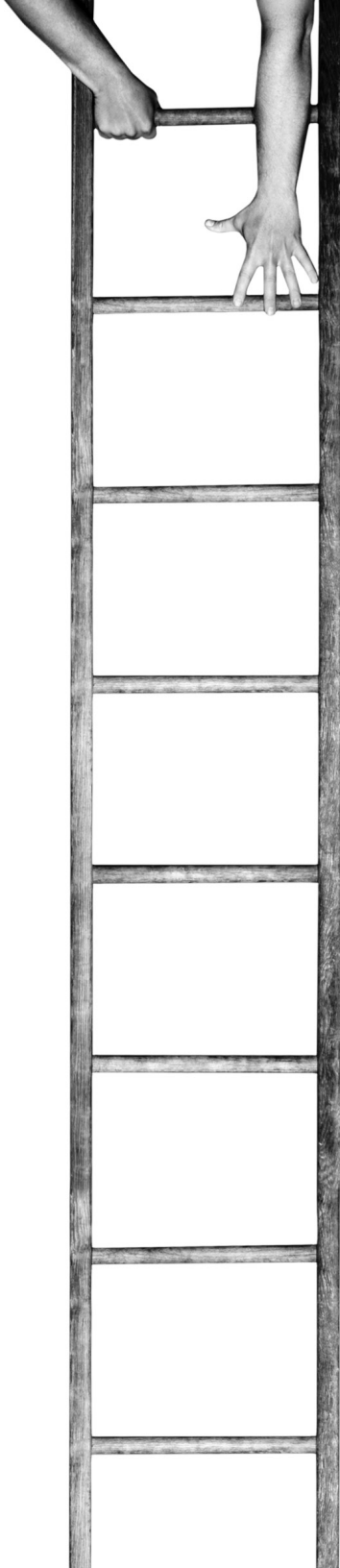


Rescuing Ambition

Dave Harvey

FOREWORD BY C. J. MAHANEY

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Rescuing Ambition

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Ambitious Failure

WHERE IS GOD WHEN OUR DREAMS LEAD TO DEFEATS?

Coming down from the pulpit is always an adventure. Preaching God’s Word can lift a man to heaven; answering questions afterwards usually drops him back to earth.

One Sunday, out of the corner of my eye, I saw Jake. I knew immediately the message had stirred his stew. He stood there waiting—patient, earnest, intense. We shook hands, and he dropped his question on me.

“What do I do when my ambitions set me up to fail?”

Jake isn’t his actual name, but his story’s quite real. Jake graduated from college with a Dickensian sense of *Great Expectations*. He was bright, gifted, and armed with aspirations. First, he wanted to be a highly skilled software developer. That’s reasonable enough. Good job, Jake. But check out these next two.

As an engineer, he wanted to fundamentally change the face of software development—to do for software what Bill Gates did for Microsoft, what Steve Jobs did for Apple, or what George Lucas did for light sabers.

And with the stellar financial profits from that endeavor, Jake ultimately wanted to serve as a pastor-teacher in a local church . . . for free.

So off he went into the land of software development to make his dreams come true. Just two years into his moderately successful job, his ship arrived. An offer for the perfect position, coupled with grand promises of responsibility and leadership, put him on the fast track of dream fulfillment. To top it off, his church asked him to lead a portion of ministry, the beginning of the final piece of his goal-setting trifecta.

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However, not all dreams in Softwaresville come true. Circumstances changed, and the job became a source of stress, even dread. The recruiter who made all those promises was replaced by someone less than convinced of Jake's ability. The new guy basically gave him the boot.

Jake was laid low, with all his torn and tattered goals in hand. A few years earlier, his success had been just a matter of time; he was zealous, confident to the brim. Now he was jobless, goal-less, and hopeless. A self-described failure.

Introducing Failure

Failure. It's an equal opportunity affliction visiting rich and poor alike. Failure defies and levels and confounds even the best laid plans.

Failure is as old as history itself. Just flip through your Bible: Adam and Eve add the wrong fruit to their diet. Babel breaks ground on a skyscraper that fails the ultimate inspection. Abram sells out his wife to save his skin. Samson rejects the good girls and weds a Delilah. God's people demand and get a worldly king, who then tries to kill his replacement. David—the replacement—lusts for Bathsheba. Peter says, "Jesus who?" Paul and Barnabas split.

Like death, taxes, and really bad haircuts, failure finds us all.

I hear you: "What grand news, Dave! As long as we're discussing my inevitable failure, why not just tell me I'm overweight and odoriferous?"

First, I'm not totally sure what *odoriferous* means, so I would never call you that.

Second, if God is truly sovereign, there must be a place for our failure in his plan. From Genesis to Revelation, the Bible declares God's supreme control over events. If he can't work through our screw-ups, he's guilty of false advertising.

Like it or not, the sovereign God is Lord over our failures. In fact, he works through them. Failure isn't simply God's nightstick to whack us into submission. It's an experience where we can discover God's love, his irresistible grace, and the true potency of the gospel.

But to get to those discoveries, we must see failure as the place where some ambitions go to die so other things might come alive.

A Diagnosis of Failure

The clouds of potential failure can often ground ambition before it even gets off the launching pad.

Most people view failure like the flu—avoid it at all costs. We stay away from others who fail, as if we’re afraid we might be infected with failure germs. That’s a bit shortsighted, not to mention insufficiently biblical.

Don’t get me wrong. I’m not trying to pioneer a new paradigm that makes failure a goal worth pursuing. (Johnny wants to go bankrupt; “Go, Johnny, go!”) And I’m certainly not suggesting we overlook our foolish choices that lead to failure. We must always distinguish between the act of failing—which often relates to our sin, weakness, or limitations—and God’s purposes in allowing us to fail.

But since studies prove that 100 percent of human beings fail at some point, it may be time to understand it better.

Failure typically comes from a couple of sources. First, we fail because we’re not God. While God is self-sufficient, we’re dependent. God knows all; we know little. God is wise; we can be foolish. God is all-powerful; we’re weak. So sometimes we fail just because we’re human and unable to exercise perfect judgment or anticipate all contingencies. We make simple (sometimes stupid) mistakes—a poor investment, or relying too much on website information, or thinking we can carry two paint cans up the ladder at the same time. Nobody’s intentionally sinning here, but there’s a big “oops” at the end of the process.

These are the little failures of life, the pebble-in-the-shoe variety that dents the skin but doesn’t stop the walk.

There’s also a darker reason for failure, and we can’t avoid talking about it. Sometimes we fail because of sin—we speak callously, respond angrily, covet secretly, nurture jealousy, lust uncontrollably. We fail at fulfilling God’s Word.

It happened again the other day. I spoke harshly to my youngest daughter. I didn’t love her with my words or guide her with my example. I didn’t display the gospel through my actions. Dress it up any way you want, but the reality remains: I sinned. I failed. I thank God for grace that convicted me and prompted my repentance. It was a fresh reminder that not all failure is sin, but all sin is failure.

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Maybe the worst type of failure is the unannounced, smash-mouth, big and hairy, knock-you-to-the-ground failure, the kind that leaves you dazed and wondering who you really are. Jake experienced some of that, but there are other more prominent examples. Think of the star athlete with a driving ambition to be more than good—he wants to be the greatest. So a little juice here, a little cream there, and his performance-enhanced stats put him at the top of his game. Until a random test turns his legend into a myth, and nobody wants his autograph anymore. His dreams collapse into dust.

Where is God when our highest ambition leads to our greatest defeat?

Large ambitions open the door to
large disasters.

With ambition comes failure. Small ambitions can lead to small failures, like the new recipe that results in a culinary disaster. Large ambitions open the door to bigger disasters. The famous eighteenth-century explorer James Cook once said, “I . . . had ambition not only to go farther than any man had ever been before, but as far as it was possible for a man to go.”¹ Cook’s last voyage ended when he was savagely slain by Polynesian islanders. His ambition took him as far as he could go, and it cost him his life.

Maybe how to handle failure isn’t a theoretical question for you. Your failure visits you almost every day, bearing miserable tidings from the past. You’re left constantly wondering what you should do. Talk about it yet again? Break out the sackcloth? Schedule an appearance on *Dr. Phil*?

The biblical message is not merely that we should handle failure well. It’s that God works miraculously in failure for his glory and our godliness. The divine perspective on human failure is this: *Failure is ambition refused for a better plan.*

Does that seem hard to swallow?

If so, you’re not alone. But let’s look how it was displayed in the story of a remarkable young man.

Failure as Ambition Refused

One of the most significant events in the spread of the gospel throughout the world over the past three centuries occurred in 1749 with the publishing of *The Life of David Brainerd*. This small book had a curious beginning.

The great preacher Jonathan Edwards had befriended a sickly young man and brought him into his home to recuperate. The young man, David Brainerd, acquired a serious illness in a lonely and arduous ministry to the American Indians on the colonial frontier. He would never recover. He passed away at the age of twenty-nine in Edwards's home, leaving behind all his earthly possessions. Among them were personal diaries that Edwards began to read in earnest. Believing the diaries contained rich spiritual insight from a man of uncommon godliness, Edwards edited and published the material as *The Life of David Brainerd*. Little did Edwards know this small volume was to become the most widely read, reprinted, and influential of all his works for more than a century. Countless missionaries, including Henry Martyn, William Carey, Robert Murray McCheyne, and Jim Elliot, were inspired to the mission field by Brainerd's story.²

And yet, were it not for the single most devastating failure of Brainerd's life, his missionary efforts would have never gotten off the ground.

Brainerd was born in 1718 in a small Connecticut town. Raised by devout Puritan parents until he was orphaned at fourteen, he was swept up in the Great Awakening and powerfully converted at the age of twenty-one. Fueled by ambition for pastoral ministry, he enrolled in Yale College to receive the necessary training.

As a third-year student, Brainerd had proven himself to be bright, articulate, and at the top of his class. But like all of us, his tongue wasn't as smart as his brain. The overthrow of his dream came through a tongue too often loosed with immature fervor. According to Edwards's biography of him, young Brainerd's character was colored by an "intemperate, indiscreet zeal."³ That's Edwards's way of saying that Brainerd had a big mouth and knew how to use it.

In an ill-timed display of that youthful indiscretion, Brainerd criticized one of his tutors, Chauncey Whittelsey, announcing that

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he “has no more grace than a chair,” and wondered that the man “did not drop down dead” for his lack of support toward students awakened by God.⁴ But Yale wasn’t looking for customer feedback. Though he’d nearly completed the work for his degree and was about to graduate at the head of his class,⁵ Brainerd was immediately expelled.

To complicate things, one needed a university degree to pastor in Connecticut. This meant that Brainerd’s remark was a career-ending comment. It shut the door to church ministry, cutting off oxygen to his ultimate dream.

Shortly after the incident, he confessed, “I seem to be declining, with respect to my life and warmth in divine things; have not had so free access to God in prayer to-day as usual of late.”⁶ Brainerd didn’t see it yet, but God was refusing his ambition for a better plan.

The Better Plan for Being Laid Low

As failure works its humbling grace, the better plan activates. Do we see it unfold? It’s those stomach-turning moments we all hate. Our rapid ascent stalls, we fall to earth with a thud, and we stumble blindly about trying to pick up the pieces of our broken plans.

Think about the situations experienced by people you know: the airtight business plan that went belly-up; the dream house that never factored in the unexpected layoff; the engagement ring and bended knee that encountered an unexpected “No, I can’t marry you”; the construction costs that came in at double the estimate; the marriage that unexpectedly dissolved; the evangelistic strategy that bore little fruit. You know, the stuff of life.

These aren’t heady moments when we’re tempted to exalt in our intellect or talent. They’re a shock to the system. They throw a fist to the jaw of our desires. They become defining moments as God commands our attention to rescue our ambitions from their earthbound aspirations.

Failure humanizes us. It reconnects us with the reality that there’s a vast difference between having an ambition and satisfying it.

For our ambitions to go well, we’re dependent upon God. Only he is omniscient and able to achieve all he desires. Only he can satisfy his ambitions at all times. The rest of us have a pretty pathetic

batting average. And that's by merciful design, because it disabuses us of the illusion that we're in charge of our lives.

Failure reconnects us with the vast difference
between having an ambition and satisfying it.

It's God's way of removing our glory and restoring his own. God will lay low anyone who competes for his supremacy. Our dreams crumble, and in desperation we reach out to God and his rock-solid promises. In the cleft of his Word, our vision of God grows, and we shrink to our rightful place.

In humbly responding to God's purpose in our failure, the first step is to acknowledge it. I'm sure that David Brainerd was tempted to rationalize his situation and maybe even blame others for it; I mean, he was human, right? Still, those closest to him remarked that he never focused on the punishment he received at Yale. Instead he owned the wrong he'd committed. This work of contrition resulted in a sincere and heartfelt confession to everyone he offended—beginning with the holy God to whom he owed primary allegiance.

I humbly confess, that herein I have sinned against God, and acted contrary to the rules of his word, and have injured Mr. Whittelsey. I had no right to make thus free with his character; and had no just reason to say as I did concerning him. My fault herein was the more aggravated, in that I said this concerning one that was so much my superior, and one that I was obliged to treat with special respect and honour, by reason of the relation I stood in to him in the college. . . . I have often reflected on this act with grief; I hope, on account of the sin of it: and am willing to lie low, and be abased before God and man for it. And humbly ask the forgiveness of the governors of the college, and of the whole society; but of Mr. Whittelsey in particular.⁷

And Edwards writes,

I was a witness to the very Christian spirit which Brainerd showed at that time. . . . There truly appeared in him a great degree of

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calmness and humility; without the least appearance of rising of spirit for any ill-treatment which he supposed he had suffered, or the least backwardness to abase himself before those, who, as he thought, had wronged him. What he did was without any objection or appearance of reluctance, even in private to his friends, to whom he freely opened himself.⁸

I know what you're thinking: *Now comes the payoff*. The humbled hero has learned his lesson, and in a Hollywood-style, last-minute reversal Yale reinstates him. Right?

Not even close. The administration remained unmoved. Under no circumstances was Brainerd permitted to finish his degree. His dream to pastor had to die.

Sometimes providence allows a punishment beyond what the failure requires. God is just, but he's able to use apparent injustice for his purpose in our lives. Maybe you've met the guy who gets seriously nailed the first time he cuts a corner (the same corner others have safely cut for years). Or the parent who erupts once at an umpire and is forever labeled as the Little League big mouth. Maybe for years Brainerd was known as "Almost a Yalie." Life's like that sometimes. Our lowest moments become our biggest label. But David Brainerd was willing "to lie low, and be abased before God and man for it."⁹ It was his failure; he was willing to accept the full consequences.

Though he was denied his dream because of his failure, something more important than ministry fulfillment was at stake. Whatever pride David Brainerd had in his gifts or accomplishment took a mortal blow in this experience. God attacked something that needed to go so Brainerd could become something he was called to be.

Meanwhile, God became bigger and more precious to him.

Giving up his ambition kindled something else in his heart. As Brainerd humbled himself before God, clarity came for his next assignment. In God's plan, Brainerd's hard-won humility would allow him to become God's spokesman for people who had never heard his name before.

As a pastor for more than two decades, I've noticed a curious thing. There are certain kinds of entrenched pride that only failure uproots. Scripture says it this way: "Let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall" (1 Cor. 10:12). God has a special training

program for those who think they stand, for the men and women who think, *My success is locked down, my reputation impeachable, and my future under control—all because of me!* It's to these God says, "Take heed!" It's the Bible's way of saying, "Look out!" If you think you've arrived apart from God, then grab a parachute and find the rip cord—a fall may be coming your way.

There are certain kinds of entrenched pride
that only failure can get at.

Sometimes God loves us so much he'll nudge us off the edge of the altar we've erected to ourselves or to our accomplishments. We fail big-time, but that failure brings a voice that pierces our pride so we're finally able to hear. God is unrelenting in his love, and sometimes the thud from hitting bottom can actually be the sound of pride shaking loose. We may get up with our head spinning, but it's amazing how that jolt can knock the self out of our ambition.

How we respond to such a jolt is key to who we become. Os Guinness writes:

How do we each react when we find that our noblest dreams and most profound strivings are staring in the face of failure? Never for one moment must we allow ourselves an excuse to ease up in pursuing God's call. Not for a second can we think of taking the bitter pill of apparent failure and sugarcoating it with rationalizations about the difficult times in which we live. God knew the times in which he called us to live, and he alone knows the outcome of our times as he knows the outcome of our lives and our work. Our "failures" may be his success. Our "setbacks" may prove his turning points. Our "disasters" may turn out to be his triumphs.¹⁰

It certainly worked this way for Brainerd. One commentator observed, "After his expulsion, he never again separated faith from practice; as a missionary, he took the precise step of putting his faith into practice."¹¹ Brainerd got the point: Gifts and ambition don't make the man, but responding in humility to failure often does. In the

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unfathomable mercy of God, failure addresses not only what we're doing, but who we're becoming.

Failure is hard. There are easier ways to learn humility. But when we ignore those, God remains faithful to us, even if that means laying us low. He's a faithful Father, always helping us move faith into practice and pointing the way to the better plan.

Midnight Train Moments

We can develop some strange and faulty ideas as we go through life. We define progress as a constant ascent up the ladder of dreams. Then we fuse our joy with how much progress we're able to obtain. The mere idea of not climbing or, even worse, stepping off the ladder for a time is sheer lunacy to us. We're climbers. To stop climbing would mean we stop being who we think we are.

But God sees progress differently. To work in our souls, he occasionally pulls us aside for a little one-on-one time. It may be illness, crisis, an unexpected downsizing, an unfavorable evaluation, loving discipline from God, or a host of other reasons especially chosen for us. And the effect is always the same. We go from running full speed in a well-defined race to unexpectedly standing on the sidelines.

These times are not random. They're often preparation for a divine redirection. I think David Brainerd could relate.

Before the way was cut off for him to the pastorate, Brainerd had no thought of being a missionary to the Indians. But now he had to rethink his whole life. There was a law, recently passed, that no established minister could be installed in Connecticut who had not graduated from Harvard, Yale, or a European university. So Brainerd felt cut off from his life calling.¹²

Have you ever felt that way? Done something dumb that permanently shut a door you felt called to walk through? Pursued something big only to meet spectacular failure? I call them "midnight train moments" after the famous Gladys Knight song:

He kept dreamin' that someday he'd be a star,
But he sho' found out the hard way that dreams don't always
come true.

So he's pawned all his hopes and he even sold his own car,
 Bought a one-way ticket back to the life he once knew;
 Said he's leavin' on that midnight train to Georgia,
 Said he's goin' back to find the simpler place and time.¹³

Now I'm no Pip, but I know who composes the “midnight train moments” of life. Our Father has designed those times when we've thrown ourselves wholeheartedly at something, missed it, and now need an exit strategy. It's the long, lonely road back from failure. Abraham traveled it. So did Joseph. David? You bet. The great apostle Peter? Absolutely. God thinks nothing of taking our life plan, ripping it in two, and rewriting it—for our good.

When our plans lie in ruins, we know that God has a better plan. No need to pawn our hopes; we just have to invest them in a different direction and thank God for his wisdom.

The great eighteenth-century evangelist George Whitefield experienced the sting of being sidelined but also the song of trust in God. When Whitefield sustained a head injury, a younger man was called to serve in his place. Upon hearing how this man powerfully served in his absence, Whitefield rejoiced, saying, “Blessed be God that some can speak, though I am laid aside.”¹⁴

Unsatisfied Goals

Are you an ambitious goal-setter? I like goals too. Okay, I love goals. I love the feeling of striking a completed item off of my to-do list. Finishing several tasks in a short period gives me the equivalent of a runner's high. It sets my endorphins dancing.

Goals may be great esteem-boosters and even solid guideposts, but they also tell us something about ourselves: They reflect desires. Sometimes goals reveal a heart that understands God's Word and is ambitiously reaching for ways to glorify God. At other times, goals are a monument to an exaggerated self-assessment.

I remember starting an entry-level position in a large company. My goal—and I say this with all humility—was to be a senior executive within a year. Looking back, it would have taken a brain transplant or the sudden mass resignation of about five thousand people for me to hit that goal. It wasn't rooted in reality.

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Think about the young mom who dreams of all her kids reading by three (never mind that her two-year-old isn't even walking yet), or the slacker in his late twenties who says, "I want to be a millionaire by the time I'm thirty." Or Jake, whose trifecta goals revealed an inflated sense of selfish ambition.

Sometimes we confuse our goals
with God's will.

But think about this: If we're not perfect, then our goals aren't perfect either. Sometimes we confuse our goals with God's will. We think they're the same thing. So an inevitable part of life is the frustration of at least some of our goals. We simply won't get everything we want or do everything we desire. God has a different plan than simply giving us the satisfaction of a completed to-do list. He frustrates us to change us—to turn our life in a different direction. But even more important, to bend our heart toward the habitual posture of submission and obedience. He gets us off our fast track and onto a lonely train at midnight to somewhere we didn't plan to go.

David Brainerd ran smack into his midnight train moment, and he bent his will toward God in the midst of it.

One of the things that amazes me about Brainerd is how quickly he saw the midnight train and got his ticket. I'd have been carrying a protest sign outside Yale's administration building and letting the air out of Professor Whittelsey's buggy tires until I got justice. But Brainerd bent his knee before the providence of God.

On his birthday of the same year he was expelled, Brainerd reflected on his experience. This was his conclusion: "This day I am twenty-four years of age. O how much mercy have I received the year past! How often has God *caused his goodness to pass before me!*"¹⁵

David Brainerd saw his failure as God's mercy. And once he saw that, he began to see a new future. His soul was anchored not to his dream but to his hope in God.

Learning the Lesson of Failure

God works in us in order to work through us. The internal work moves us to a place of peace where we come to terms with God's ability to work good even when we're bad. Resolving our regrets in light of God's goodness brings great glory to God's name.

John Piper sees that message as a prominent feature of Brainerd's failure:

There is a tremendous lesson here. God is at work for the glory of his name and the good of his church even when the good intentions of his servants fail—even when that failing is owing to sin or carelessness. One careless word, spoken in haste, and Brainerd's life seemed to fall apart before his eyes. But God knew better, and Brainerd came to accept it.¹⁶

Brainerd was able to move beyond feelings of shame, anger, or self-pity to see his experience in light of God's sovereignty. That wasn't just good applied theology. It was the first marker on the road to rest and peace and the eventual purpose for which God was preparing him. The peace he sought wouldn't be discovered by raging against "the man," or playing the blame game, or wallowing in self-pity. It could be found only in what Ephesians 6:15 calls "the gospel of peace."

How did that work? That's an important question, particularly if you live haunted by some failure in your past.

The gospel reminds us that God controls all situations. If God put Pilate in power and worked through his weakness to save the world (John 19:8, 11), then Yale's review board was certainly within his jurisdiction as well. That meant Brainerd's failure and the board's rejection were not random. God controls people in power and the decisions they make, whether or not they feel God's invisible hand on their backs. And he does it by working through the desires of their heart, as Proverbs 21:1 affirms: "The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will."

Brainerd concluded that his failure and the board's overreaction were God's will. Through it all, God was working some extraordinary end. Trusting God's wisdom became a place of comfort and rest despite the uncertainty of his future.

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I felt myself exceeding calm, and quite resigned to God, respecting my future employment *when* and *where* he pleased: my faith lifted me above the world, and removed all those mountains, that I could not look over of late . . . I now found sweetly revived in my mind the wonderful discovery of infinite wisdom in all the dispensations of God towards me, which I had a little before I met with my great trial at college: every thing appeared full of the wisdom of God.¹⁷

The gospel shows us that Jesus chooses those who are failures to display his glory.

The gospel shows us that Jesus chooses those who are failures to display his glory. Peter denied Christ three times and fled from him in his moments of greatest need. He was a failure as a disciple and as a friend. The gospel makes no sense for those who don't see themselves in Peter's failure. Those who aren't failures have no need of good news. Jesus says, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners" (Mark 2:17). We're sinners, so we fail. Jesus, the Great Physician, is the only one who never fails. Because of his death and resurrection, we're not chained to our failures.

The cross is the ultimate wisdom of God for our failures. It's God's reminder that our failures are never big enough to interrupt God's plan for our lives. For Peter, and for all of us, there's hope beyond failure. There's another chance.

I once heard a story about Thomas Edison and his team that invented the light bulb. When it was finished, he gave it to a young boy to carry to another part of the building. You guessed it. The kid dropped the bulb. Edison was undaunted. He immediately had another made, then called the boy back, handed him the second light bulb, and instructed him to try again. He actually gave him a second chance. I guess he made it because I'm writing under a light bulb right now.

The gospel announces that we're not defined by our dropped light bulbs. There's always another chance. Because the gospel works, we can have rest.

This kind of gospel confidence inspires gospel attitudes. How do we really summon the courage to treat people kindly who have acted against us? Why not just smack them upside the head and be done with it?

Brainerd embraced the better plan. God's will became his will. His soul was at rest. Rather than being defined by his failure, he moved on. Instead of launching a campaign for vindication, he became an agent of peace. Experiencing God in that failure would transform the way he approached people and problems for the rest of his short life. Just listen:

God has made me willing to do anything that I can do, consistent with truth, for the sake of peace, and that I might not be a stumbling block to others. For this reason I can cheerfully forego and give up what I verily believe, after the most mature and impartial search, is my right, in some instances. God has given me that disposition that, if this were the case that a man has done me an hundred injuries and I (though ever so much provoked to it) have done him one, I feel disposed and heartily willing humbly to confess my fault to him, and on my knees to ask forgiveness of him; though at the same time he should justify himself in all the injuries he has done me and should only make use of my humble confession to blacken my character the more and represent me as the only person guilty.¹⁸

The gospel restores God to the center of our failure-analysis. God's power, love, and care become the lens through which we interpret our experience. Only from a place of peace and rest can we say of others who've humiliated us, "You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good" (Gen. 50:20).

Finding Our Definition

Failure will be an end for us if we remove God from the equation. For David Brainerd, God was very much a part of the equation. For him, another day was dawning.

Shortly after his expulsion, a group of ministers, sympathetic to Brainerd's situation, licensed him to preach. This opened the way for him to be appointed as a missionary to the Indians.

Revival wasn't immediately sparked by Brainerd's arrival on the

Rescuing Ambition

mission field. His experience in his new calling became much like mine and yours—trial and error, discouragement, pressing on despite little fruit. Almost a year into it, Brainerd wrote this:

As to my success here I cannot say much as yet: the Indians seem generally kind, and well-disposed towards me, and are mostly very attentive to my instructions, and seem willing to be taught further. Two or three, I hope, are under some convictions: but there seems to be little of the special workings of the divine Spirit among them yet; which gives me many a heart-sinking hour. Sometimes I hope, God has abundant blessings in store for them and me; but at other times, I am so overwhelmed with distress that I cannot see how his dealings with me are consistent with covenant love and faithfulness; and I say, “Surely his tender mercies are clean gone for ever.” But however, I see, I needed all this chastisement already: “It is good for me” that I have endured these trials, and have hitherto little or no apparent success.¹⁹

How does a man who has gone from college expulsion to little success in service conclude, “‘It is good for me’ that I have endured these trials, and have little or no apparent success”? How can ambitions thrive under the cloud of indiscernible achievement? It’s not a theoretical question. It’s one every Christian eventually faces.

In the shadow of failure we find humbling grace. We learn that we’re limited. We discover that God is more interested in who we’re becoming than in what we’re achieving. We find our definition not in our failures or successes but in Christ.

For David Brainerd, failure was a lesson, not a label. It didn’t condemn him; it coached him. The practice of trusting God and humbling self became a paradigm for enduring future disappointments for the moments when ambitions remain unrealized. Os Guinness says it this way:

If we define all that we are before our great Caller and live our lives before one audience—the Audience of One—then we cannot define or decide our own achievements and our own success. It is not for us to say what we have accomplished. It is not for us to pronounce ourselves successful. It is not for us to spell out what our legacy has been. Indeed, it is not even for us to know. Only the Caller can say.

Only the Last Day will tell. Only the final “Well done” will show what we have really done.²⁰

Remember, we fail because we’re not God. Whether it’s the result of selfish ambition or the design of God for our good, failure isn’t foreign. Failure is ambition refused (one way or another) for a better plan.

Brainerd persevered, and eventually God smiled upon his service: Revival broke out among the Delaware Indians. God was faithful indeed.

But God’s smile and his faithfulness are still there even if, in this life, we never see any fruit from our ambition being redirected by failure into God’s better plan. A friend brought to my attention these words from Samuel Rutherford, who felt his earthly ministry was a complete failure: “Grace grows best in winter.”

For David Brainerd, God’s grace and mercy meant that his failure opened a door for new ambitions. His expulsion was God’s redirection. And within a few years, one of the greatest theologians in the history of the world, Mr. Edwards himself, was publishing Brainerd’s diary. And that diary, including Brainerd’s account of God’s dealing with him in failure, became one of the most influential tools in the history of world missions.

And on that day in heaven when Brainerd heard “Well done,” I imagine him rejoicing over the Savior’s power. God redeemed even his greatest mistake. His ambition was rescued when it was refused for a better plan.