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When You Feel Like A Failure

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Philippians 2:25-30

I have thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier, and your messenger and minister to my need, for he was been longing for you all, and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill. Indeed he was ill, near to death. But God had mercy on him, and not only on him but on me also, lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow. I am the more eager to send him, therefore, that you may rejoice at seeing him again, and that I may be less anxious. So receive him in the Lord with all joy; and honor such men, for he nearly died for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete your service to me.

There were extenuating circumstances. It really wasn't my fault. You shouldn't blame me!

Back when I was in the fourth grade, I was a bad speller. I did all right in all my other subjects, but when it came to spelling, I was lucky to get a "C." I knew I had to be better than that, but a "C" was just about as good as I got.

There were extenuating circumstances. After the third grade, my old school, Central Elementary was closed. I was sent to West Side Elementary. Most of my friends got sent to East Side Elementary. I wanted to be with my old friends. I didn't like the new kids at West Side. I didn't like the teacher. I didn't even like the building. That probably caused me to spell poorly.

Also, my mother was really disappointed in my spelling grades. She kept telling me to try harder, to do better, to get better grades. Her pressure probably caused me to spell poorly.

When I was in fourth grades, the facts were clear: I was a failure when it came to spelling. I wasn't good enough. I really studied my spelling lists, but still, all I got was a "C."

There in the fourth grade, at West Side Elementary School, I came up with a plan to get a better grade in spelling. Now, I wasn't going to cheat. I was a good boy. I knew cheating was wrong. I knew I couldn't make a list of my spelling words and hide it under my shoe on test day so I could peek at it. I knew I wouldn't do that.

The plan I came up with was a lot different from that! I decided I didn't need to see the whole word spelled out; I just needed a little bit of help on the rough spots.

What I did was make a list of all my spelling words on a sheet of paper, but I was careful to make sure I left out some letters in every word. If one of my spelling words was "school," I'd write down "s, c, h, blank, blank, l." That really wasn't cheating, I thought. After all, I had to know what letters fit in those blanks.

The first time I put my plan in action, I got caught. My teacher saw me sneaking peeks at that piece of paper under my shoe. She came over to my desk and turned my test paper over and took my pencil. She never said a word to me, but I felt terrible.

Not only was I a failure at spelling; now, I was a failure at cheating, too! I was just a little boy, but I felt like a failure, and those feelings hurt.

Several years ago, I saw an advertisement in our denominational magazine for a job as senior pastor in a big church in northern Virginia, just outside the Washington, D.C. beltway. I thought that job looked good. I decided to apply for it. Two hundred other pastors applied for the same job.

The chairman of the pulpit committee told me the easiest cut was the first one. From over two hundred applicants, they narrowed the field to twenty. I was one of the twenty.

The twenty of us were asked to send in preaching tapes. From the tapes alone, they narrowed the field down to ten. I was one of the ten.

The pulpit committee had ten conference calls, one call to each one of the ten candidates. After the conference calls, the field was sliced down to three. I was one of the three.

The pulpit committee got stuck on three. They couldn't decide which one they liked the best. What they decided to do was to fly all three of us into town on the same weekend, have all three of us preach in different churches around town on Sunday morning, and then pick the one they liked the best. That fellow would have to fly back the next weekend to preach for the full congregation.

I said "no, I'm not going to do that." I said I didn't want to be part of a beauty pageant selection process. I said if they wanted to see me in person, it was proper for them to fly up here and see me. I took a high moral stand. I was assertive and self-assured. I said the only time I'd come there to preach on a Sunday was when I was the only candidate to be presented to their congregation.

When I said all of that, I knew I was taking myself out of the running. I really wanted to go there. It was a big, prestigious church. All my friends from seminary would have been jealous.

Then, the chairman of the pulpit committee told me something that really got my hopes up. He told me not to worry. He said he wanted me. He said he thought I still had a better than even chance of being asked to come the next Sunday anyway.

But when he called me a week later, he told me they had had a real battle. He told me the vote was close. He told me he really tried, but he came out one vote short. So, he told me they had hired somebody else. And at that moment, and for several days after, I felt like a failure.

Oh, I knew better in my mind, but emotionally I felt like a failure. It hurt when they didn't want me. It hurt when they liked somebody else better. It hurt when I didn't get the job I thought I really, really wanted. I spent a few weeks second-guessing my decision. I spent several days beating myself up. I really felt like a failure.

Have you ever felt like a failure? Have you ever tried something new and risky and ended up falling flat on your face? Have you ever embarrassed yourself, or made a fool out of yourself? Have you ever let yourself down or disappointed the people who were rooting for you? Have you ever crawled out on a limb only to learn too late that somebody's right behind you sawing it off?

I know the Bible doesn't say it, but I think E-paph-ro-di-tus - the fellow Paul wrote about in this morning's scripture lesson - I think E-paph-ro-di-tus must have felt like a failure.

E-paph-ro-di-tus was a member of the Christian church in the ancient city of Philippi. If you don't know where Philippi is, join the club. I had to look it up. It is located on the eastern tip of Macedonia.

You all probably know that Macedonia is the country just north of Greece. Philippi was a city located on the ancient road to Byzantium (which is modern-day Istanbul, Turkey); Philippi is just a few miles north of the Aegean Sea.

The Christian church in Philippi was founded by none other than the Apostle Paul himself.

The story that culminates in this morning's scripture lesson began when the leaders of the church in Philippi heard that Paul had been arrested and put in prison in far-off Rome. Their founding father was in jail in Rome. That was distressing news. The church people in Philippi rose up with one voice: they wanted to do something to help Paul out.

The elders of the church had a meeting and decided that the best thing they could do for Paul was to send him a gift. They knew that they couldn't send him money. Paul never accepted money.

So, what kind of gift were they going to send him? We don't know. The Bible doesn't tell us what the gift was. I like to think that the elders of the Philippi church voted to send Paul a big fruit basket.

After they had decided what they were going to do for Paul, the next problem they faced was how they were going to get that fruit basket to him. They couldn't pick up the telephone, make a call, charge it to their VISA card, and have it delivered. They couldn't take it down to the local UPS store, have it wrapped and over-nighted to Paul's prison cell in Rome. There wasn't even a pony express rider available. How were they going to get it to him?

The only way they were going to get that fruit basket to Paul was if somebody from the church took it to him. They looked around the room and picked out somebody. That somebody was a young man by the name of E-paph-ro-di-tus.

Just as they were waving good-bye to E-paph-ro-di-tus, the elders of the church said, “As long as you’re there in Rome, hang around a while and take care of Paul.”

They figured a fruit basket wasn’t really enough. They wanted E-paph-ro-di-tus to bake meals and take them to Paul in prison. They expected him to wash Paul’s dirty clothes. They fancied he would run errands and do all the things on the outside of those prison walls that Paul couldn’t do for himself from the inside.

Those were his orders, and E-paph-ro-di-tus was determined to do everything right.

When he got to Rome, he delivered the fruit basket, but before he could cook up a big serving of spaghetti and meat balls for Paul, E-paph-ro-di-tus got sick. He got so sick, Paul thought the young man was going to die.

He got sick, and it meant E-paph-ro-di-tus failed in his duty. He got sick, so he couldn’t take care of Paul. He got sick, so he was no help to Paul at all. As soon as the young man got well enough to travel, Paul told him to pack himself up and ship himself back to Philippi; and he also said, “I want you to take this letter back with you.” The letter E-paph-ro-di-tus took back with him is the one we know of today as Paul’s letter to the Philippians.

I imagine that on that trip back, E-paph-ro-di-tus hung his head in shame. What failure he was. He was supposed to be a help to Paul, but he ended up being a hindrance. Instead of being a blessing, he was a drain. Instead of showing how valuable he could be, he was a liability.

I can just imagine the scene that first Sunday after E-paph-ro-di-tus got back to Philippi - after he had handed over Paul’s letter to the church leaders: he probably limped off to a distant corner of the sanctuary, red-faced and embarrassed. He slumped in his seat, realizing how badly he had disappointed the people of his church. He hung his head. I’m sure he felt like a failure.

The elder broke open the seal and started reading out loud Paul’s letter to the Philippians. Somewhere about the middle of that letter, E-paph-ro-di-tus heard his name read out loud.

It was just one short paragraph tucked in the middle of the letter. It was only a very few words.

But those words changed his life.

That young man who had been slumped in the corner sat up a little straighter -

That young man who had been thinking how badly he had disappointed his church -

That young man who had been convinced he was a failure -

He heard some marvelous words.

Paul called him a hero.

He said he had risked his life for Paul and the church.

Paul called him a brother and a fellow worker,
a soldier and a minister to Paul's need.

They were just a few short words, but they had the power to change E-paph-ro-di-tus. After hearing those words, he was a failure no more. After hearing those words, he was a man of value and worth.

Wouldn't you like to know how that happened? Wouldn't you like to have it happen to you? Wouldn't you like to shake off the mantle of failure that's draped across your life and replace it with the shining armor of a soldier for Christ?

It happened to E-paph-ro-di-tus. It can happen to you!

There are three little things you can learn to do that's going to make it happen.

Number one: remember that God knows when you are hurting.

It comforts me to remember that Paul took notice of E-paph-ro-di-tus, this one sickly, drooping, discouraged, despondent young man. Paul knew that he felt like a failure. So, he included words in his letter to make E-paph-ro-di-tus feel better about himself.

Paul learned how to do things like that from Jesus, himself. Jesus always knew when people were hurting.

It comforts me to remember that Jesus was aware of that one poor woman who reached out a timid hand through the crowd just to touch the hem of his garment. He noticed her. He healed her. He told her she had great faith. [Matthew 9:20-22]

It comforts me to know that Jesus loved a hated tax collector who sat lonely and scared up at the top of a Sycamore tree; Jesus loved him enough to tell him to climb down from that tree and begin a new life. [Luke 19:2-10]

It comforts me to know that Jesus cared enough to bring all the little ones closer to him, that he invited them to come play at his feet and crawl up on his lap, even when the adults didn't like it [Matthew 19:13-14];

- that he cared for the blind beggar enough to make him see [John 9:6-11]; - that he wanted to touch the outcast leper enough to make him clean [Matthew 8:1-3];

- and that even when he was hanging up on that cross dying in pain, he cared enough to comfort and save a thief for eternity [Luke 23:43].

It comforts me to know that our God knows when I hurt, and that he cares enough about me to do something about it.

And if you are really going to be one of his followers, you have to get busy looking around to see what you can do for all the hurting people encircling you.

Because:

There's someone in your circle of friends who needs to know that you care.

There's someone out there who needs to know that you believe in her.

There's someone out there who needs
 your tender touch to heal the hurt,
 your strong arm to wipe away the tears,
 your faith to help him face the fears.

Number two: remember to speak good words. You have to remain positive in your behavior with God's children, young and old.

Mother number one comes to the check-out counter at Tops with a cart-full of groceries and one squirming four-year-old son. The boy picks up a glass jar of pickles and tries to hand it to the check-out girl. The mother yells, "Put that jar down! You'll drop it! I know you will."

And to the check-out girl she says, "He's so clumsy. He's always dropping something." Right at that moment there is a terrible crash, pickles and juice and broken glass spatter all over the floor. There's a crying child; there's and a mother who yells, "Now look what you did. You never do anything right!" And, there's a sad check-out girls who knows she has to mop the floor!

Mother number two comes to the check-out counter at Tops with a cart-full of groceries and one squirming four-year-old son. The boy picks

up a glass jar of pickles and tries to hand it to the check-out girl. The mother quickly takes the jar of pickles out of his hands, gives him a loaf of bread and says, “Here, try this. I really like it when you help me.” She turns to the check-out girl and says, “He really likes to help. He is my wonderful helper. He helps me pick up things at home. He is my wonderful helper.”

Right at that moment there is a proud and smiling mother; there is a happy and confident four-year-old boy; and there is a relieved check-out girl.

Children believe what they hear. If the message you give to them is a positive one, you are going a long way to helping them build good characters. The same is true for adults. If you know how to give out good news, you will be able to hear good news.

In his letter, Paul wrote about all of his positive expectations for his young friend, E-paph-ro-di-tus.

Isn't there someone who needs to hear some positive words out of you?

Some one of God's children is out there just waiting for you to show that you genuinely care about her. And one of the best ways you can show that you care is when you recognize and affirm her strengths. Speak good words.

This is the great pull of the New Testament. It is certainly part of what it means to have the mind of Christ within you. If you have Christ in your life, you will look for, find, and affirm the strengths in other people.

Number three: remember to care for yourself. You can never fully love someone else until you love yourself. You can't care for someone else until you care for yourself. You can't even give your life over to Jesus Christ until you cherish your own life.

Paul had a positive self-image. Later on in his letter to the Philippians, Paul wrote, “... join in imitating me...” [3:17] He also wrote, “What you have learned, and received, and heard, and seen in me - DO...” [4:9] Paul had a healthy self-appreciation.

If you are a follower of Christ, you won't put yourself down. You will remember how precious you are.

Paul's self-appreciation didn't come from outside. He didn't have a fan club hanging around, screaming about how great he was.

The fact is, in his day, most people said Paul was funny looking. The general consensus was that Paul was dishonest, and a no account preacher. Most people thought he was really, really boring.

The last time I went to Simms to buy myself a new suit of clothes, I decided to give something a try. I know their suits are all discounted, but I wanted to see if I could get a larger discount because I'm a minister. I said to the salesman, "Can you give me something off the price? After all," I said, "I'm just a poor preacher." "I know you are," the salesman responded, "I used to listen to you on the radio."

Paul heard what the people were saying about him. Paul didn't wilt under criticism. He didn't give up when people didn't like him. In his day there were several evangelists who were dazzling the crowds. They were entertaining and far more popular than Paul was. They would fly off any where at any time to preach to large and appreciative audiences.

"Have you heard brother so-and-so preach," the people would ask each other, "he's so good. He's so spiritual. I hang on his every word. But Paul! He can't preach. His sermons always put me to sleep."

Paul had heard it all, but he refused to fold up his tent and stop spreading the gospel. Referring to these popular preachers of his day, Paul wrote, "I think that I am not in the least inferior to these superlative apostles." [II Corinthians 11:5]

That is a Bible verse you ought to memorize and personalize: I am not in the least inferior to these superlative preachers. I am not in the least inferior to these superlative salespeople, or husbands, or wives. I am not in the least inferior to these superlative parents, or students, or athletes, or teachers, or bosses. I am not in the least inferior to these superlative Christians! You fill in the blanks with those people who make you feel so small.

Don't put yourself down, even when you feel like a failure. In the name of Jesus Christ, affirm yourself. Appreciate who you are in Jesus Christ. And look forward to being the man or woman you could become through faith in Jesus Christ.

Whenever you feel like a failure, remember to take three steps: step one, remember that God cares about you when you hurt; step two, look for the good in life and tell someone else about the good; and step three, learn to love yourself.

You won't need to blame extenuating circumstances. There'll be no need to cheat.

As long as you keep taking those three steps, you will never feel like a failure again.