Mark and Recovering from Failure

Over the summer we're looking at the team the apostle Paul gathered around him. And last week, we looked at Barnabas. This week we're going to look at a young man whose life Barnabas helped turned around, and that's John Mark and recovery from failure.

In the introduction to his book, Rebuilding Your Broken World, Gordon MacDonald contrasts two races. The first is in the film *Chariots of Fire*. It's 1924 and Eric Liddell is running the 400m, but he stumbles and falls to the ground, and as the other runners get ever further away, we watch in slow motion as Liddell picks himself up, gets back on the track and starts running with everything he has, and wins.

The second race is the women's 3000m at the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics. And the South African, Zola Budd, and the American, Mary Decker, clash, and Decker is left sprawled on the floor. Except unlike Eric Liddell, Decker stayed down, in tears of anger and grief at the chance of victory gone.

And MacDonald's question is, when you fall on your face and your world implodes, because of bad choices you've made, or because of what someone else does to you, what determines whether you get back up and back in the race, or you stay down, in the dirt and tears of brokenness?

Well, Mark knew what it was to go down on the track. So we're going to start by looking at his early life. So, turn to Acts 12.

The apostle Peter has been imprisoned for preaching about Jesus. But in the middle of the night, he's miraculously freed from prison and finds himself in the streets of Jerusalem. And Luke tells us, v12, 'when he realised this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying. And when he knocked at the door of the gateway, a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer.'

So that tells us that Mark's mother is wealthy enough to own her own house, a house big enough to host a church-wide prayer meeting, and to employ a servant girl. And the fact that Peter knows to head there tells you this probably isn't the first time the church has met there or Peter has visited. So it seems like Mark has enjoyed an upbringing that's well-off financially, whilst being exposed to the church coming round and apostles visiting.

And he showed potential. As we saw last week, Barnabas and Paul have been serving the church up at Antioch, and they come down to visit Jerusalem. And then look at v25, 'And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had completed their service, bringing with them John, whose other name was Mark.' So, when they head back to Antioch, they take Mark with them. He's like a teenage athlete who gets talent spotted, or a young trainee in a company who the bosses take a shine to. Barnabas and Paul, these entrepreneurial apostles, look at Mark and see a guy with the potential to be a significant leader in the future.

So, as they set off on their first missionary trip from Antioch, Luke tells us in Acts 13:5, 'they had John [Mark] to assist them.' And the trip is a huge success, so huge in fact, that they decide to do it all again.

Except that's where the trouble starts. Look at Acts 15:37-38, 'Now Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. But Paul thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work.'

So, we don't know when, but at some point on that first missionary journey, somewhere between landing in Pamphylia - modern day Turkey - and them arriving back in Antioch, Mark had abandoned his mentors and headed home. And we don't know why. Was he simply homesick and missing Rhoda's cooking? Having grown up sleeping in nice comfy beds, did he struggle to cope with roughing it on mission? Or did it stick in the throat of this young Jewish man to watch Paul and Barnabas take the gospel to the gentiles?

Whatever the reason, in Paul's mind Mark had blown it. He had, v38, 'withdrawn from them' and 'had not gone with them to the work.'

And Paul was a man 100% committed to the task Jesus had given him. I mean, however driven you are, Paul outstrips us all, doesn't he? And in his eyes, Mark had put his own comfort ahead of his friends, and when Paul could see countless thousands needing to hear the gospel, Mark just saw enough money in his hand to buy a one-way ticket home.

And whatever Mark's potential once was, this was now his reputation. He's a liability. A failure. And Paul won't contemplate having him on the team again.

The Reality of Failure

Last weekend we went to Lac de Bret, where there's a rope swing. And you're on a bank and you pull the rope back as far as you can, and then you run and jump and swing out over the lake. And Lukas and the girls all made these beautiful arcs, as the rope carried them low over the water, before lifting them up, until, at the peak, they let go, and dropped triumphantly into the lake. But then it was my turn. And there was no glorious rise above the water, followed by a triumphant drop, I just left the bank and flopped. The others soared, I sank. They flew, I failed.

Now, at one level we're all like that, aren't we. We've all failed to achieve the heights for which we were created. We've all fallen short of the glory of God.

And yet, some of us, or someone we love, will experience a personal failure out of the ordinary. When, because of decisions we make, or courses we pursue, instead of soaring, we sink, morally. Instead of flying we fall on our faces and our world implodes. And just like John Mark, our future lies broken. And a reputation is shot; and credibility gone; relationships are damaged and dreams die. And you look back and think, why did I do that?

Back in 1988, Mike Pence, the current Vice-President, was running for election to Congress. And in his desire to win, he ran a campaign of highly personal and negative attacks against his opponent, and Pence lost. And on looking back, he said, "It was a terrible experience—a bloodbath. We lost the race and lost our mission." And he realised that in his pursuit of power, he had compromised love for God and love for neighbour. And it brought him, he said, to a dark place spiritually and emotionally.

But Pence is not alone in having compromised faith and love to get what he wants more, is he? And what's extraordinary about the Bible is that young John Mark is not alone in having fallen on his face either. The story of humanity begins with Adam failing. Then you watch as Abraham throws his wife under a bus to save his own neck. You watch as Moses forfeits the Promised Land because, at a crucial leadership moment, he fails to honour God as holy. You see Samson, a man of huge potential, reduced to a broken shell because he never conquers his lust. You see King David risk everything and commit adultery and murder. You see Elijah so exhausted by spiritual conflict that he sinks into a pit of self-pity, wishing he was dead. You watch Jonah flee his calling and then bitterly resent God's mercy. And you

look on as Peter, not once, not twice, but three times denies ever having anything to do with Jesus, so he can save his own skin.

It's like watching a game of ten pin bowling, isn't it? As one after another falls to moral failure, or a failure of courage, or a failure of theology.

And whatever the surface level causes were for John Mark and all the others, the underlying cause is always the same, isn't it. When we love something more than God it can lead us to make life-imploding choices.

And so the Bible and our own experience tells us - failure is all too real.

But maybe you hear that, and think, 'Nah. For others, yes, but not for me.' But listen, if you think this could never happen to you - you're probably most at risk. Listen to what Paul says in 1 Cor 10:12: 'You who think you stand, take head lest you fall.' As GK Chesterton said, 'the one spiritual disease is thinking that one is quite well.'

So, if your doctor can tell you what not to do, to avoid a heart attack, like, don't smoke, don't drink, don't eat anything other than broccoli, what are the things that put you in danger of a spiritual or moral heart attack?

The Risk Factors for Failure

Risk Factor Number 1. Forgetting the Reality of Evil. Look at Ephesians 6:13, where Paul says, 'Take up the whole armour of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.' Now, a soldier can forget to wear his body armour in St Sulpice and he's at zero risk, but if he does that in a war zone it could cost him his life. And there's no need for you, as a Christian, to wear armour, is there, *unless* you have an enemy hell-bent on attacking you. But you can forget that. You can forget there is such a thing as evil, and an evil day; you can forget that there is such a thing as the world, the flesh and the devil, the unholy trinity that stands against you. But if do you forget it, it can be costly.

Last summer we camped in the Khalahari desert. And when you do that, there are certain things you don't do - like get out of your car; or go for a nice evening stroll outside the compound, because there are lions in the Khalahari. So, listen to what Peter writes, 'Be sober minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour' (1 Peter 5:8). But you can be so consumed with work, or so conformed to the surrounding culture that you drop your guard, like a boxer floored by his opponent, and forget that you have an adversary who wants to destroy you, or your family, or your marriage, or your church.

And maybe John Mark forgot that.

But the flip side is that rather than forgetting you have an enemy, you forget that God is greater than your enemy, that Christ has conquered evil, and made a public spectacle of it. And that also puts you at risk, because if you think the fight is hopeless your resolve to fight weakens. And you think there's no point taking a stand, or fighting sin, that you might as well give in. And despite having enjoyed an incredible victory over the prophets of Baal at Carmel, Elijah listened more to the threats of Jezebel, and took his eyes off the power of God, and fell into a dark hole wishing he was dead.

But Jesus forgot neither of these things. When Peter suggested Jesus should pursue safety instead of the cross he said, 'Get behind me satan, you don't have in mind the things of God, but the things of man.' He

knew both the reality of evil and the power of God. And he calls you and me to live with a wartime mentality, knowing that final victory is certain. It's why in the Lord's Prayer he teaches us to pray, 'deliver us from evil', so that daily we remember, we have an enemy *and* a far greater deliverer. So, take a spiritual check-up: are you in danger of forgetting either of those?

Risk Factor no. 2. Forgetting temptation will come knocking. I was talking recently to someone who's a keen fly-fisherman. And apparently fish will go for different types of lure - different flies, different bait, on different days. And one of the skills you learn is using the right fly to catch your fish. So, what's your fly? What is it that most tempts you? Not the person next to you, but you.

You see, the whole thing about temptation is that it's something attractive and appealing to you. And it doesn't look like something bad, it doesn't look like a hook, it looks like a juicy fly. It doesn't look like something that's going to break your world, it looks like something that's going to make it. And we put ourselves at risk when we forget that today temptation will come knocking. And maybe Mark forgot that, maybe he failed to recognise his growing desire for comfort back home for what it was. And David certainly forgot it as he saw Bathsheba in a bath tub.

But again, Jesus teaches us to pray, 'lead us not into temptation.' So daily pray, 'Father, I know that today temptation is going to come knocking. Help me to see through its disguise.'

Risk Factor no. 3: Being found alone. Now, when you watch a nature program, it's always the animal cut off from the herd who cops it, isn't it. And look at Hebrews 3:12: 'Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God.' But then the writer immediately follows that with, v13, 'But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today", that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.' In other words, we need one another to remind each other that sin is deceitful. And we put ourselves at risk when we wander off from the flock. So, spiritual check up: is your attendance at church or home group becoming erratic; or are you tending to be present in body, but absent in spirit?

Risk Factor no. 4. Failing to Invest. Now, how many of you remember Blockbuster stores? The shops where you used to be able to rent video cassettes to watch at home. In his book *How Will You Measure Your Life*, Clayton Christenson, professor of Business Administration at Harvard tells the story of how Blockbuster went from total market dominance to extinction in a matter of years, because they thought no one would ever be interested in streaming. They saw the potential to invest but thought it wasn't worth their time or money.

Now when someone's world implodes, it's tempting to ask, what went wrong in the 5 minutes or 5 hours before this person made the choice they made? But in reality it's more likely to be about the choices made in the 5 months, or 5 years before. Choices about what they'll invest their time and energies in. In 2 Peter 1, Peter writes, 'Make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge and knowledge with self-control and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective and unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.' But when our worlds break up because of some moral failure on our part, there's often been a failure over months or years to supplement, to add to our faith things like these. So, ask yourself, am I investing in those things that matter most, the things that protect my heart rather than put it at risk?

Risk Factor no. 5. Failing to Recognise Your Personal Weak Spots. After the First World War the French built the Maginot Line to defend against invasion. The problem was, it didn't extend all the way north. And when the enemy did attack, that's where they attacked.

So ask yourself: where are the gaps in my defensive line? When am I, where am I most at risk? When Mark deserted his mentors, he was travelling, away from home. When Peter denied Jesus he had been up most of the night. When David committed adultery he was relaxing on his sun lounger. When Elijah fell into depression he was emotionally exhausted. So ask yourself, when are you at your weakest? Maybe that's when you're tired, or stressed, or away, or lonely. Reckon with your weak points, and then do what is necessary to strengthen your line.

Ok, but to finish, if failure is real, and risk factors common, Mark's story tells us there is a path to rebuilding.

The Road to Recovery:
Years after Mark's fall on that first missionary trip he gets mentioned in Paul's letters. Except, now, talk of failure has gone. Look at Colossians 4:11. Paul is talking about Aristarchus, Justus, and Mark. And he says, 'These are the only men of the circumcision among my fellow workers for the kingdom of God, and they have been a comfort to me.' So, Mark, the young man Paul once refused to take with him, because he had deserted him and not gone to the work with him, is now a comfort to have around and a fellow worker for the kingdom.

But there was better to come. In his last letter to Timothy, from prison in Rome, Paul knows his time is up. And he says to Timothy, 2 Tim 4:11, 'Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry.' Paul is alone and lonely. And who does he want beside him? Timothy and Mark. The young man who had abandoned his friends, and failed to go with them to the work, is now wanted by the side of the man he had let down, and his reputation now is one of proven usefulness. And if church history is correct, Mark went on to lead the missionary effort into Africa, and wrote the gospel that bears his name.

So how come his life has been rebuilt? What's been going on to see him restored? Well, we don't know the specifics. What we do know is the 'who'. Because after his failure, Acts 15:39, 'Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus.' It's the last we hear of Barnabas, but because of Barnabas it's not the last we hear of Mark.

In the Lord of the Rings, the moment comes when Frodo is totally broken and can't go on. But he also knows that he can't give the ring to anyone else. And the situation seems hopeless. Except for Samwise Gamgee. And when Frodo most needs a friend, Sam says, "Come, Mr. Frodo! I can't carry it for you, but I can carry you."

And the reason Mark's life was rebuilt, the reason he could stand again, was that Barnabas bent down and picked him up and carried him. You see, Barnabas knew that at heart we're all failures, but Christ came as our ultimate friend, to carry us, so we should carry each other. As Paul writes in Galatians 6:1, 'Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness.'

So, if it ever happens that you're involved with a friend who fails, be a part of their rebuilding, because Mark's life and God's grace in Christ tells you, failure is not the end.

But secondly, whether it's you or someone else, if we're to recover, we need to face our sin. In the aftermath of his moral collapse, David prayed, 'I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me' (Ps 51:3). And as Jesus began the rebuilding work in Peter's life he first asked him, three times, 'do you love me?'. He was bringing him face to face with his failure to love.

You see, if we're to genuinely rebuild, rather than just paper over the cracks, there's no room for evasion or self-pity. As someone once said, God forgives our sins, not our excuses. So, be radically honest with yourself and God as to why this happened.

But thirdly, receive grace. The danger is that, having failed, you think you need to work and prove, and show this isn't the real you. That this was just a moment of madness. But when we fail morally, or spiritually, or in courage, we need to confess 'this is the real me, this is what I'm like', and then receive Jesus' grace that meets us as we really are. Psalm 103:14 says, 'For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust.' You see, God is the only one who's *not* surprised by our failure. And at the cross Christ paid the price for it. He absorbed in himself everything we deserve to receive. So now, instead, you can go to him for everything you don't deserve, for goodness and mercy and a second chance.

And as you do, hope will come. Psalm 37:23-4 says, 'The steps of a man are established by the Lord, when he delights in his way; though he fall, he shall not be cast headlong, for the Lord upholds his hand.' And because of Jesus God delights in you, so you will not be cast headlong.

Fourthly, be marked by thankfulness. Now it may sound strange to say that in the aftermath of failure you should be thankful, but the Lord promises to work all things, even our sin, or the sin of others against us, for our good. And if pride lies under every sin, thankfulness humbles us, as it reminds us: everything we have is God's gracious gift. So in your brokenness begin to thank God that he will use even this for his glory and your good. As I look back on my own failures, I wish with all my heart I had behaved differently. But I would not lose the lessons he taught me through failure for anything.

In his book *Spiritual Depression*, Martyn Lloyd-Jones wrote, 'We must never look at any sin in our past life in any way except that which leads us to praise God and magnify his grace in Christ Jesus.' So don't look at your sin in despair, do it in praise and thankfulness, knowing that where sin abounds Jesus' grace abounds all the more.

But fifthly, and finally, Root Yourself Back in Community. If being isolated puts us at risk of failure, the shame and guilt we feel after failure can drive us away further away. But that only makes things worse. God used Barnabas to restore Mark, and he will use others to restore you. So don't avoid them. Seek out accountable relationships and allow God to speak his truth into your life through them.

And let those of us who have known the restoring grace of God share that grace, so that the church becomes a community of grace. A place where failures like us can find a future filled with hope.

'Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God, our Saviour, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.' (Jude 24-5).