



Sermon Series

Praying Our Way to Pentecost

FAITH FAIL

Luke 22:31-34

Did Jesus' prayer work? We believe prayer works. We know it works in the sense that prayer connects us to our heavenly Father and further aligns ourselves with the heart of God. We know that prayers are not wasted, and that God responds to the pleas of his people in ways we can see and in ways that we will never understand. However, there's this lingering question: "Did the prayer work the way we wanted it to work or are we so removed from the purposes of God that our requests and petitions aren't fulfilled?" If there's anyone for whom we would expect prayer to "work" it would be Jesus, right? Don't we assume that the prayers of the Son would be answered by the Father because they are one?

I've been struck by the concept that we don't think Jesus' prayer worked because we refer to Peter's denial as his failure. Even the commentaries in which Jesus prayed that Peter's faith wouldn't fail it referred multiple times to the failure of Peter's faith. We're left with the options that either Peter's faith failed, or Jesus' prayer did.

The word that Luke records Jesus using in his prayer that his faith would not "fail" is used twice more in Luke. First in Luke 16 when Jesus encourages us to "*use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.*" The second time we find this word used is a chapter later in the moment that Jesus dies on the cross. Luke writes, "*The sun stopped shining. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two.*"

The word Jesus uses to describe his prayer for Peter means to "to come to an end, die out, no longer functioning". Luke uses this specific word to make it clear to us that to *fail* is like the status of our finances once we have died: they've come to an end. It's like the sun when Jesus died on the Cross: it was no longer functioning. When our faith has died out, it's come to an end and it's no longer functioning.

We don't use the word fail that way. We use it to refer to every time we mess up. When I try to jump over a puddle and overestimate my vertical leap and land smack dab in the

middle of the puddle, it's a fail. When I attempt to get my kids to lower their voices by raising my own - fail. When I pick the slow checkout lane - fail. The word fail has become a catch-all for all my mistakes & missteps. I fail when there is a gap between my understanding and my obedience. I don't try to excuse my way out of that situation. I'm willing to call it what it is: a failure. Whenever I choose comfort over calling or preference over faith, I failed. Failing is so frequent in my own life that I feel like my faith has failed many times.

Perhaps Jesus' view of failure doesn't match our own. If it doesn't, you may be referring to something as a failure that Jesus never would have. You may be referring to something as a failure that Jesus wouldn't even pray to keep you from. Maybe what you view as failure is something that God wants to bring you into.

I believe that God answers prayer and I believe that God answered Jesus' prayer. I believe God is still answering Jesus' prayer when he prayed for us in John 17 "that all of them may be one." The prayers of Jesus are one of the only things I believe has kept the Church together through the polarization and divisiveness of the last couple of years. Has it been easy? No. Has it been pretty? No. Has the Church given itself over to lesser things than Kingdom issues? Absolutely. But did we fail? It appears not. Not by Jesus' standard. We have not come to an end. We're still functioning. I don't just mean that the Church is still meeting, although that does matter. The Church is still functioning as witnesses and agents of the Kingdom that is in our midst.

Jesus' prayer for us didn't fail and neither did his prayer for Peter, because Peter's faith didn't fail. Peter's faith was still functioning. It did not come to an end. Peter denies knowing Jesus, but ultimately, his faith did not fail.

A faith that falters is not the same as a faith that fails. Peter will be shaken by the events that are about to unfold, but Jesus makes it clear that these events have been requested by Satan to "*sift all of you as wheat.*" Sifting is the process of removing the coarse particles from the finer ones. It's where what is undesired is removed from what is sought after. It is, in essence, a crisis of faith. Peter's faith falters within the crisis, but it does not fail. And because it does not fail, it emerges stronger on the other side. This same Peter becomes the leader of the early Church. This same Peter preaches boldly at Pentecost and 3,000 are added to the number of disciples. Yes, his faith faltered even after this moment, but it never failed.

Why do we view "falter" as "failure?" Why am I quicker to label something a failure than Jesus is? Why am I quicker to label something finished than Jesus is?

There's a concept within weightlifting that you need to "train to failure" or "go to failure." The idea is that you so overtax the muscle that it is impossible for you to do another rep, to lift any more. However, in our understanding of the word failure, it doesn't mean the muscle is finished for good. You've got another set - you've got more work to do. By Jesus' terminology we could say you "train to falter" and it's a necessary part of growth. Without the strain and overstimulation, the muscle doesn't grow.

Maybe you need to start looking at life and faith the same way. Let's consider our "falters" as steps of growth. Our crises and moments of need are the very tools that God uses to refine our faith and cause it to be stronger on the other side.

We struggle with this because we expect our faith to be perfect. We admit that we won't be perfect, and yet it seems that we're often surprised at the realization of our own struggle. I think I would have responded just like Peter, "Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and death." I would have overestimated my own faithfulness and then assumed that my faith had failed.

Maybe we call it a failure because it takes us by surprise. We overestimate our faithfulness and can't clearly see the work that God is still doing in us and the work that he is still calling us to do.

After Jesus tells Peter his prayer, he gives him a task. He says that Satan has asked to sift "all of you as wheat," but he prays for Peter alone, that his faith - though it falters - would not fail, and that after he has turned back, that he would strengthen the other disciples. Jesus' prayer was not for the sake of Peter alone, but that his faith would not fail *so that* he could strengthen the others.

Has your faith failed? Of course not. It's faltered, been tested, gone through crises, been sifted, but it's still here. It's still functioning and within that reality lies a task, a calling - return to strengthen the others.

Recent studies and trends around church attendance, spiritual life, and declining faith say all signs point to spiritual apathy. Faith has faltered. I often wonder if we modernize, intellectualize, and create terminology and studies around declining faith not to better understand what is taking place, but to excuse our own apathy in our role to be part of the solution. If we can label and explain the sociological trends that got us to where we are, then we can comprehend it and feel less responsibility to act.

The very people we label as "done with faith" or assume that their faith failed are the very people that Jesus would instruct us to "strengthen after we have turned back."

Jesus provides two answers to the question "How can faith withstand the onslaught of Satan?" The primary answer is Jesus' intercession on our behalf. The second answer is that those who falter, but do not fail, will return to strengthen the others.

Did your faith fail? No. You have overestimated your faithfulness at times, but do not underestimate the call that God still has on your life. Strengthen the brothers. Encourage those who need encouragement. Your actions determine whether it was a failure or a falter. I believe Jesus' prayers work, which means there is work for you to do.

Remember the words of Winston Churchill: "*Success is not final, failure is not fatal: it is the courage to continue that counts.*"