

I was reading to a group of first graders on Tuesday at McBay Elementary. I'm a volunteer in the reading program and have really enjoyed going to the school interacting with the kids. This week instead of reading a book to the kids I asked them what they had on their lists for Santa. One by one they went down their Christmas wish list. One boy said, "I want a sword. A real one, and not a fake one." Another boy said he wanted a turtle. One girl said she wanted a laptop, while another girl wanted a cell phone. Besides the turtle and sword, most of kids wanted something related to technology. I was disappointed that not one kid mentioned a Red Ryder BB Gun! What has this world come to? I asked the girl who wanted the cell phone: "What on earth are you going to do with a cell phone. You're in first grade!" If you thought the cell phone was a crazy idea, you're not going to believe what the boy in the back wanted for Christmas. He raised his hand and quietly said, "I want a GPS for Christmas." A GPS! I said, "What, are you having trouble getting from the school bus to the front door? Do you need directions to your room?"

While it might seem ridiculous for a first-grader to have a GPS system, it's not that far-fetched for some adults, me included. Now I don't have a GPS system and probably never will, but I can see how something like that would help someone like me who is directionally challenged. If there is a way to get lost I will find it. I once got turned around in Dawson. Dawson – a town of 800 people! So if I took the initiative to get a GPS system it would probably do me good. These things are amazing. Some of them you simply say where you want to go and then you are given directions – in whatever language you choose! English, German, Italian, etc. If you want to get directions to Brookshire's in German you can do it. If you want a lady with a British accent to tell you how to get to the mall, knock your socks off. It's amazing what technology can do today.

Now they didn't have GPS systems back in Isaiah's day, but as things turned out they didn't need it. In our text today Isaiah is speaking of what it will be like when the people of Judah return to Jerusalem after years in exile in Babylon. The imagery and poetry is amazing:

“Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert...A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be

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for God's people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray." (Isaiah 35:5-8)

There it is! Forget GPS on God's Highway. We don't need a British lady telling us where we are headed! We don't need to be told to take a right or left, to north or south, east or west. We are on God's Highway following God and when we are following God we cannot go wrong. "Not even fools shall go astray," says Isaiah. Even someone as directionally challenged as I am cannot possibly get lost on God's Highway.

This is a wonderful scripture highlighting the fact that even when all seems lost, for those who follow God there is always a way. Even in the midst of pain and apparent failure, God never gives up on us and neither should we. This text from Isaiah might sound crazy to some people. The eyes of blind shall be opened? The ears of the deaf unstopped? The lame shall leap like a deer? Waters breaking forth in the wilderness? Streams in the desert? Those things don't happen. Not in the world we know. In the world we know there are limitations. Blind people are blind. The deaf cannot hear. The lame cannot get up, much less leap like a deer. And streams are not in abundance in deserts. But Isaiah wants to paint for us another picture of how things really are with God. When all seems lost and hopeless, that is when God is at His best and when we find out what this faith thing is really all about. The world that we see and the world that God sees are very often two different things. What we think of our lives depends in great measure on our perspective and where we are coming from.

Artists David Bayles and Ted Orland tell a story about an art teacher who did an experiment with his grading system for two groups of students. Here is what happened:

The ceramics teacher announced on opening day that he was dividing the class into two small groups. All those on the left side of the studio, he said, would be graded solely on the quantity of work they produced, all those on the right solely on its quality. His procedure was simple: on the final day of class he would bring in his bathroom scales and weigh the work of the quantity group: fifty pounds of pots rated an "A", forty pounds a "B", and so on. Those being graded on quality, however, needed to produce only one pot – albeit a perfect one – to get an "A". Well, came grading time and a curious fact emerged: the works of the highest quality were all produced by the group being graded for quantity. It seems that while the "quantity"

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group was busily churning out piles of work – and learning from their mistakes – the “quality” group had sat theorizing about perfection, and in the end had little more to show for their efforts than grandiose theories and a pile of dead clay. (John Maxwell: *Failing Forward*)

It’s interesting that both groups were working on essentially the same project – making pots – but they came up with two totally different results based on their initial outlook and approach. I think we can learn a lot from that story and relate it to our own lives. What do you and I expect out of life? What do we expect out of God? More importantly, when the chips are down, as they inevitably will be in all of our lives, how do we react? If this text from Isaiah says anything at all to us it says that no matter the circumstances – things could be as bleak as can be – there is always hope with God. Just when you and I think we are down for the count, that is when should buckle down, persevere, and trust in God’s promises.

Truett Cathy was discharged from the Army in 1945. When he returned home to America he was ready to pursue his dream of owning and operating a restaurant. He opened his first restaurant with his brother Ben. The name of the restaurant was Dwarf House in Hapeville, Georgia. It was open twenty-four hours, six days a week, and was profitable from the first week. However, it wasn’t long after that Truett faced the first of several setbacks.

Three years after the restaurant opened Truett’s two brothers were killed in a plane crash. Truett was devastated. Once he got over the initial shock, he continued to run the restaurant on his own. A year later he opened a second restaurant. But a few weeks after the second restaurant opened a fire destroyed it. To make matters worse Truett had practically no insurance. Then a few weeks later he discovered that he had polyps in his colon that would have to be removed. Instead of rebuilding his restaurant, he went in for surgery. One operation turned into two and he was out of action for several months.

So what does an active entrepreneur do when he’s stuck in bed for months at a time? The time Truett spent sick in bed he played with a new concept. He had always loved chicken, and it had been an important part of the menu at Dwarf’s House. For a while the restaurant had offered a boneless chicken breast on its menu. Truett wondered, “What would happen if I took that chicken breast, seasoned and fried it just right, and put it on a bun with the right condiments?” The answer became the Chick-fil-A

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Sandwich and the start of one of the largest privately owned restaurant chains in the world. Chick-fil-A operates more than nine hundred restaurants around the country. The business continues to grow but it never would have happened if Truett had given up and allowed the negative circumstances surrounding him to define his future.

One of the biggest lessons I've learned in ministry so far is to not allow failure to keep you from growing. In fact, failure is not in and of itself bad. How we respond when we fail is the key. We can either become paralyzed by fear and not try anything new and daring, or we can keep plugging away and turn our failures into positives.

George Frederick Handel was a musical prodigy. His father wanted him to study law, but he gravitated towards music at an early age. When he was seventeen he was the organist his church. A year later he became a violinist at the opera house in Hamburg. By age 21 he was a keyboard virtuoso. By the time he was forty he was world famous for his talents in composing music.

In spite of his talent and fame, he faced quite a bit of adversity. Competition with rival English composers was intense. Audiences were fickle and sometimes didn't show up for his performances. On more than one occasion he found himself penniless and on the verge of bankruptcy. Then his problems were compounded by his failing health. He suffered a stroke which left his left arm limp and caused him to lose the use of four fingers in his right hand. He recovered but was depressed. Handel retired in 1741 at the age of fifty-six. He was discouraged, miserable, and consumed with debt.

In August of 1741 something incredible happened. A wealthy friend named Charles Jennings visited Handel and gave him a libretto based on the life of Christ. The work interested Handel so he began writing. His cycle of inactivity was broken. For twenty-one days he wrote nonstop. Then he spent another two days creating the orchestrations. In twenty-four days, he had completed the 260-page manuscript. He called the piece *Messiah*. Today, Handel's *Messiah* is considered a masterpiece. One of Handel's biographers wrote, "Considering the immensity of the work, and the short time involved, it will remain, perhaps forever, the greatest feat in the whole history of music composition."

*(Failing Forward, John Maxwell).*

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You are not going to write another *Messiah* and will probably not start one of the largest restaurant chains in the world, but we can learn from these kind of stories that failure is not permanent and that what seems hopeless today may not be so tomorrow. All of us in this sanctuary have experienced failure before and will experience it again in one way or another, but as Christians we have the hope and assurance that God goes with us through the difficult times. And more than that God looked down on us over 2,000 years ago and decided to become one of us to save us and redeem us from all the struggles in life. I want to encourage you today that whatever you may be struggling with, don't give up. Keep going. Keep believing. Keep trusting in God. Stay on God's Highway and God will navigate you through this life's ups and downs and ultimately into life eternal in His kingdom.