

BARF ON THE BEACH
All Washed Up: How to Deal with Failure
A Study of Jonah 3:1-10

Characteristic of Completeness: Faithfulness

Big Idea: Do your job, and leave the results to God.

Related Scriptures: Exodus 3:11-12; 4:10-12; Joshua 1:8-9; Judges 7:1-25; 1 Samuel 17:41-49; Isaiah 40:29; 53:6; 2 Corinthians 3:5-6; 12:9; Philippians 4:13; 1 John 1:9

Introduction

1. There is a little blue box in a small closet in the Library of Congress. The label on the box reads: “Contents of the President’s pockets on the night of April 14, 1865.” That’s the night Abraham Lincoln was assassinated.

The little blue box contains five things. A handkerchief, embroidered “A. Lincoln” A country boy’s pen knife. A spectacles case repaired with string. A purse containing a \$5 bill—Confederate money. And some old and worn newspaper clippings.

The clippings were concerned with the great deeds of Abraham Lincoln. One article reports a speech by British statesman, John Bright who called Lincoln “one of the greatest men of all times.”¹ Today, most would agree with that statement. But, back then it was not so clear. In fact, Lincoln was one of the most maligned American presidents in history.²

The clippings in his pocket bring to mind a poignant mental picture of President Lincoln. Not the stately, imposing man depicted by the Lincoln memorial. Not the eloquent man delivering one of his great speeches. Not the brilliant politician, navigating the country through perilous times. It’s an image of the private man seated alone in the Oval Office seeking some encouragement, some solace from a few newspaper clippings as he reads them in the soft, flickering glow of a candle. Could it be that Abraham Lincoln was fighting back questions we all face? Am I doing okay? Am I a failure? Is my life counting for something? Am I all washed up?

Lincoln was no stranger to failure.³

- a. In 1832, he was defeated in his bid for election to the state legislature, finishing eighth in a field of thirteen.
- b. In 1833, he purchased a store with a partner, William F. Berry. The store went under, leaving Lincoln deeply in debt.

¹ Charles R. Swindoll, *The Quest for Character*, (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1987), 62.

² *Grolier Encyclopedia Americana Online*.

³ *Illinois Gateway*, <http://www.sos.state.il.us>. and *Grolier Encyclopedia Americana Online*.

- c. In 1838, he ran for Speaker of the Illinois House. He was defeated.
- d. In 1854, he ran for the U.S. Senate. He bowed out of the race.
- e. In 1857 he ran for the U.S. Senate again. He was defeated.
- f. In 1860, he is elected President at a time when southern states were seceding from the union.⁴ He was considered a poor administrator and an ineffective leader of his own Republican party. During the civil war, partisan newspapers assailed Lincoln as a “half-witted usurper,” a “mole-eyed” monster with a “soul . . . of leather,” a “turtle at the head of government.” Even men of his own party charged that he was “unfit,” a “political coward,” a “dictator,” “timid and ignorant,” “shattered, dazed, utterly foolish.”
- g. After the Civil War, Lincoln articulated a comprehensive reconstruction program to reunite the nation. It was bitterly opposed and politically defeated. Lincoln was deeply saddened by the defeat. So, on April 11, 1865, in a public address, he defended his reconstruction policy to the people.⁵
- h. That was three days before Abraham Lincoln went to Ford’s theater to see a performance of “Our American Cousin” . . . with 5 things in his pocket, including the old worn newspaper clippings. Imagine, Abraham Lincoln fighting back questions we all face. Am I doing okay? Am I a failure? Is my life counting for something? Am I all washed up?

- 2. How do you answer questions like that? How do you deal with failure? How can you be effective in life when you feel all washed up? These are the issues I’d like to address this morning.

But ► first, I want to poke around at what it means to feel all washed up—to identify some aspects of feeling like a failure. Then, ► I want to unpack a little plan for dealing with failure—a plan for being effective—a plan I discovered in the book of Jonah. First, how you feel; then, how to deal.

- I. On ► how you feel, there are a couple of aspects to feeling like a failure that I want to point out. There are two parts of feeling all washed up.
 - A. First, you feel small. You have a low opinion of yourself. You feel like a nobody. You feel discouraged, disqualified, despondent. You may feel small because of past failures.
 - 1. Jonah is an example. He may have been tempted to feel this way. Let’s pick up our ongoing story of Jonah.

⁴ *Grolier Encyclopedia Americana Online.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

- a. In Chapters 1 and 2, we saw that God told Jonah to go preach to the Ninevites. Jonah ran by sea, and was eventually swallowed by a huge fish. After three days and three nights in the fish's belly, the fish ► barfs:

^{NKJ} Jonah 2:10 So the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.

- b. Then, Jonah is called a second time to give a message to the ► Ninevites.

^{NKJ} Jonah 3:1 Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, 2 “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and preach to it the message that I tell you.”

- c. We don't know how much time has passed from the time he was disgorged to the time of the second command, but it is reasonable to expect there was a time of recuperation. During ► that time, he was probably feeling small.

(1) He was probably feeling disgraced as a prophet. He had run from God. He was the only Old Testament prophet for whom we have a recorded attempt to run from God. The sailors on the ship knew he had run from God. Recall that the ship was about to break up in the storm (1:4)—it was probably damaged. They had thrown their cargo overboard (1:5). It would have been logical for the sailors to return to port and tell Jonah's fellow countrymen about his running. The disgraceful news would have spread quickly.

(2) Not only was he feeling disgraced as a prophet, he was probably feeling degraded as a person. Because of the digestive juices inside the fish, he was probably washed ashore with no hair, no skin color, no fingernails or toenails, and no clothes. (Remember the true account of a man in a fish for 48 hours who looked like this.) Jonah probably felt pretty small.

2. Perhaps you can relate. Perhaps you feel like a discouraged failure. See if you can identify with any of these statements:

- a. “I have failed so many times in my relationship with my wife, I'm embarrassed to even try anymore.”

- b. “I’m 5th or 6th on my husband’s list of priorities. I guess I’m not desirable enough to do better.”
- c. “Most people think I’m successful, but I’ve never lived up to my potential. *I’ve* never felt successful. I doubt I ever will.”
- d. “I’m middle-aged and out of a job. No one wants me. I’ve got nothing to show for my years of work.”
- e. “I seem to fall short in everything I do. I’m not very smart, not very good-looking, not very athletic, not very popular.”
- f. “I can’t turn my life around now. I’ve got too much baggage. I’ve messed up my life so badly, God is done with me.”
- g. “I’ve trusted Christ as my Savior, but I haven’t lived like it. So, I can’t talk about God at work or with my kids. It would be embarrassing and hypocritical.”

B. The first aspect of feeling all washed up is you feel small. The second aspect is your calling looks too big. What God wants you to do seems impossible. Success seems out of reach.

- 1. Again, Jonah is an example. His calling looked big. His task was formidable. Let me list some obstacles for you.
 - a. Jonah was probably barfed ashore in northern Israel. Unless there was projectile vomiting involved, the journey to Nineveh was long, about 500 miles. One day’s journey was about 15 to 20 miles. Do the math, and the washed up prophet is staring at a month’s journey through the desert.
 - b. And the city of Nineveh is big and intimidating. In our text, Verse 3 ► describes Nineveh:

^{NKJ} Jonah 3:3 So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, a three-day journey in extent.

This probably means it took on average 3 days to walk *around* the administrative district of Nineveh comprising several suburbs, with a circumference of about 55 miles.⁶

⁶ Nelson Study Bible.

Verse 10 of Chapter 4 says there were over 120,000 people living in Nineveh at that time. That was big back then. By comparison, the city of Samaria, the capital of northern Israel, only had about 30,000 people.

Nineveh had a huge, imposing inner wall, 8 miles in circumference, 50 feet wide and 100 feet tall.

- c. And ► the Ninevites spoke a different language than Jonah.⁷ This raises questions. Did Jonah speak in Hebrew, his native tongue, which was then interpreted by the Ninevites? Or did God give him the words to speak in their language? Or did he speak Aramaic, a trade language which may have been understood by both Hebrews and Ninevites? Whatever the case, the language barrier makes the assignment even tougher. This is not a comfortable, natural form of communication for Jonah.
- d. And compared to other callings of other prophets, Jonah's looked unreasonable. His fellow Jewish prophets, his contemporaries, his peers, Hosea and Amos, were also prophesying in that day. But they were prophesying to their *own* people, not foreigners. And they were doing it in more than one short sentence. In a minute, we'll see that God seems to have given Jonah just one sentence to deliver. How odd!
- e. And Ninevites were atrocious. You may remember previous accounts of Ninevites or Assyrians performing heinous acts of violence against their enemies. Stacking heads in pyramids. Burning women and children. Skinning enemy leaders.

Jonah's task seemed big indeed, perhaps overwhelming.

- 2. Perhaps you feel that God wants you to do something you just can't do. Your calling looks too big. See if you can identify with any of the following statements:
 - a. "I can't be as good a person as God wants me to be."
 - b. "I could serve my husband 'til the cows come home and there's *no way* he would romance me or show me some affection."
 - c. "My boss is so callous, so slippery, so unfair, there's *no way* I can serve him whole-heartedly."

⁷ Probably Sumerian and/or Akkadian. Jack Finegan, *Myth & Mystery: An Introduction to the Pagan Religions of the Biblical World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1989), 21.

- d. “There’s *no way* I can train my child spiritually because I don’t know that much about the Bible myself.”
 - e. “There’s *no way* I can overcome my addiction; it’s too strong.
 - f. “There are so many demands placed on me, I can’t seem to excel at anything.”
 - g. “I know I hang with the wrong crowd at school, and in a way, I feel badly about it, but there’s *no way* anybody else will accept me.”
3. Feeling small, and faced with something big. That’s the feeling of being all washed up.
- II. That’s brings us to ► the second big hunk of my sermon: How do you deal with failure? How can you be effective in life when you feel all washed up, when you feel small and life looks awfully big? I find three helpful things to do:
- A. The ► first thing is: Recognize that failure is normal. We all fail. We tend to lose sight of this in our culture—a culture that focuses on success and winning. Let me read you some interesting facts about failure that you don’t hear about too often.⁸
- 1. Football coaches Tom Landry, Chuck Knoll, and Bill Walsh together accounted for 9 of the 15 Super Bowl victories from 1974 to 1989. They also share another distinction. They had the worst records for first-season coaches in NFL history.
 - 2. After Fred Astaire’s first screen test in 1933, a memo from the director said, “Can’t act. Slightly bald. Can dance a little.”
 - 3. One football expert’s assessment of Vince Lombardi early in his coaching career: “He possesses minimum football knowledge, lacks motivation.”
 - 4. It was said that Beethoven as a boy, “handled the violin awkwardly, and preferred playing his own compositions instead of improving his technique.” His teacher called him, “hopeless as a composer.”
 - 5. Walt Disney was fired by a newspaper editor for a lack of ideas, and he went bankrupt several times before starting Disneyland.
 - 6. Thomas Edison’s teacher said, “he is too stupid to learn anything.”

⁸ John Maxwell, *How to Fail Forward*, Injoy Life Club tape.

7. Albert Einstein did not speak until he was 4, did not read until he was 7, and his teacher described him as “mentally slow.”
8. Louis Pasteur ranked 15th out of 22 in his undergraduate chemistry class.
9. Henry Ford went broke 5 times before he succeeded.
10. Winston Churchill failed the 6th grade.
11. Michael Jordan was cut from his high-school basketball team.

No matter who you are, you don't have a corner on the failure market. Everybody fails.

You may be thinking: “Nice list, Bob. But those aren't examples of disgraceful moral failures.”

I guess you're right. But, I don't really need an example list of disgraceful moral failures. Because the Bible says everybody's on that list. Everybody. For example, Isaiah ► 53:6 says:

^{NKJ} Isaiah 53:6 All we like sheep [or all we like Jonah] have gone astray; We have turned, every one, to his own way . . .

Every major Bible character apart from Christ failed. One of the things I love about the Bible is that it doesn't glamorize people of God. They're human. They fail. Jonah is a lot like you and me.

And the Lord has given us a remedy. First ► John 1:9 tells us:

^{NKJ} 1 John 1:9 If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us *our* sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not encouraging moral failure. I'm not condoning it. I'm just saying that we need to recognize that everybody fails. That's the first thing.

B. The ► second thing is this: Distinguish between your job and God's job. This is important because we have a tendency to wrongly assume responsibility for God's job.

1. What's Jonah's job? In a word, obey. His obedience involves two things: go and preach. Verses ► 1 and 2 tell us:

^{NKJ} Jonah 3:1 Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, 2 “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and preach to it the message that I tell you.”

These are things he can do. God has equipped him. God gives him the message he is to preach. The specific message is ► simple:

^{NKJ} Jonah 3:4b . . . “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”

Note what is *not* Jonah’s job. It’s not his job to make them repent. It’s not his job to change their minds. It’s not his job to make them see their evil ways. It’s not his job to show them he is right. It’s not his job to make them positive toward God. These are things over which he has absolutely no control.

His job is simple: Go and deliver the message.

2. Well, what’s ► God’s job? It’s God’s job to manage the results. He’s in charge of outcomes. God controls the changing of people.
 - a. It is interesting to note some things that God may have used to affect the Ninevites, things which Jonah probably didn’t realize:
 - (1) History tells us there were two plagues in Nineveh leading up to this time, in 765 and 759 B.C.⁹ The Ninevites were not believers in the God of the Bible, but they had their own deities and mythologies.¹⁰ The plagues may have been considered by the Ninevites a sign of divine anger.
 - (2) Also during this time, there was a total eclipse of the sun on June 15, 763.¹¹ This also may have been considered a sign of divine anger.
 - (3) Also, Nineveh was experiencing internal strife.
 - (4) And Nineveh itself was facing a territorial struggle with mountain tribes to the north.¹²
 - (5) So just when the Ninevites were beginning to look over their shoulder, fearing destruction, here comes the miraculous, bleached prophet they may have heard rumors about, and he comes with a one-liner warning of their destruction! God may have used the very things that made Jonah feel ineffective and washed up. Which points up an important

⁹ John D. Hannah, “Jonah,” *The Bible Knowledge Commentary, Old Testament*, eds. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, (USA: Victor Books, 1985), 1462.

¹⁰ Finegan, 21f.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² H.L. Ellison, “Jonah,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 7, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 1985), 361, 381.

biblical truth to keep in mind: God's power is perfected in our weakness. In ► 2 Corinthians 12:9, the Lord says:

^{NKJ} 2 Corinthians 12:9 "My strength is made perfect in weakness."

God can do tremendous things through you no matter how washed up you feel. Your failures and weaknesses can, in fact, equip you to be the instrument through whom God works most powerfully.

- b. God does tremendous things through Jonah. The results are incredible. They come from God, not Jonah. The bleached, bald Jewish guy awkwardly delivers an offensive one-line sermon. And the Ninevites repent! They believe! Beginning in ► Verse 5, it says:

^{NKJ} Jonah 3:5 So the people of Nineveh believed God, proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least of them. ► 6 Then word came to the king of Nineveh; and he arose from his throne and laid aside his robe, covered *himself* with sackcloth and sat in ashes. ► 7 And he caused *it* to be proclaimed and published throughout Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles, saying, Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything; do not let them eat, or drink water. ► 8 But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily to God; yes, let every one turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. ► 9 Who can tell *if* God will turn and relent, and turn away from His fierce anger, so that we may not perish? ► 10 Then God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it.

3. The ► second way to deal with failure is to distinguish between your job and God's job: Our job is to obey; God's job is to manage the results.
- C. Now, the third thing is closely related to the second. Here ► it is: Simply do your job, and leave the results to God. In fact, that's ► the big idea of my sermon: Do your job, and leave the results to God. Carry out your assignment, and turn over the outcome to the Lord. Focus on following through with the work God has given you, and don't worry about the consequences.

It's a matter of faithfulness. Indeed, ► faithfulness is our Characteristic of Completeness for the week.

1. To obey God is to be successful, regardless of the results. The results are up to God, not you. The key to Jonah's success was obedience not results. If Nineveh had not repented, Jonah would have been no less successful.

God has chosen to use people as part of His master plan. Our role is to obey and leave the results to God.

2. This is countercultural. For the most part, our world is more concerned about the results than about the process. The end justifies the means. Profit is held in higher esteem than process. Championships are rewarded more than character.

Not so with God. He is calling us to simply do our jobs, to obey, and leave the results to Him.

3. Let me give you some practical applications of this idea:
 - a. Sharing the good news of Jesus is our job; saving people from their sin is God's job (Acts 1:8). Leave the saving to Him.
 - b. Loving others is our job; fixing them is God's job (John 13:34). Leave the fixing to Him.
 - c. Training our children is our job; making them grow is God's job (Deuteronomy 6:4).
 - d. Sharing our burdens is our job; lifting them is God's job (Galatians 6:2).
 - e. Confessing our sins is our job; cleansing them is God's job (James 5:16).
 - f. Serving one another is our job; satisfying all our needs is God's job (Galatians 5:13; Philippians 4:19).
 - g. Being humble is our job; exalting is God's job (1 Peter 5:6).
 - h. Praying is our job; miracles are God's job (Philippians 4:6-7).
 - i. Accepting one another is our job; judging is God's job (Romans 15:7).
 - j. Teaching is our job; changing others is God's job (Romans 15:4).
 - k. Faithfulness is our job; outcomes are God's job (Matthew 25:23).

Closing:

Are you feeling all washed up? This week, maybe you could carry a little piece of paper in your pocket as Abraham Lincoln did. As a reminder. As an encouragement. When you feel all washed up, you could pull it out and read it: 1) Recognize failure is normal; 2) Distinguish between your job and God's job; and, 3) Do your job, and leave the results to God.