

“OH LORD, DON’T LET ME FALL AWAY”
Ephesians 2:4-10, James 5:19-20, John 15:1-8
January 27 & 28, 2024

“In basketball one of the most important skills for players to have is the ability to rebound. Rebounds occur because a shot somewhere has been missed. There is no need for a rebound unless something has been missed. If a shot was missed, that means a shot was attempted, but somehow something went wrong in the attempt that caused the shot to be missed and therefore we have the need for a rebound.

“One reason a shot can be missed is that a player was off in their perspective. They were looking at the goal, but what they saw and what they did didn’t match. They were unable to sink the basket. They may have shot too short, too long, too hard, or too soft, or to the left or the right, ultimately missing the basket. There was not a correlation from the eye to the action.

“Another reason that shots are missed in basketball games is because the opposing team is in a player’s face. It’s the job of the opposing team to wave their hands in the shooter’s face and obstruct their view. They are supposed to provide a distraction.

“Sometimes shots are missed because a player is fouled. A foul means that a player has been illegitimately handled, producing an inability for them to make the shot.

“Any coach will want their player to go for a rebound on their missed shot. The player shouldn’t walk off the court, quit the game, or throw in the towel because they have missed a shot. A good player will go back up for the ball and retrieve it to shoot again.

“In the Bible, there are lots of people who missed shots. Many of God’s servants missed their target and had to deal with the consequences of missing their shot. In fact, a study of the Word of God will turn up many people whom God used who were on the rebound.”¹

But guess what folks? In our own game of life, we also miss shots, and we have options before us as to whether or not we’re going to continue in the game, seeking to follow God’s ways. Once we

¹ (Tony Evans, *Tony Evans’ Book of Illustrations*, [Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2009] pg. 95, #269)

realize that we've missed our shots and gone away from God's guidelines, we can rebound and seek to try again, doing a better job the next time at making the shot. This requires accepting God's grace, asking for His forgiveness, and then striving to do better on the next attempt. It means we don't dwell on the mistakes we've made, but rather look forward toward other chances to be faithful at following God's commands and making the shots count. God doesn't want us to give up trying to do His will and following His ways. He wants us to keep at it, rebounding to attempt to make the shots count and be victorious in following all His ways.

This is reflected in our lesson of Ephesians 2 today. Paul says, "*But because of His great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions - it is by grace you have been saved*" (2:4). God knows that we mess up, that we turn away from His laws and commands, and that there are even some that have never heard His laws and commands in order to follow them. God knows that on our own, we are helpless to do a better job in our life. Without His help we continue to miss the mark because of our wrong perspective, or because the enemy is distracting us, or because we've been maligned or fouled in some way. It happens in our lives that we miss the mark and fail making the shots at following His laws and commands.

But God does not leave us there, broken, ashamed or beaten up. No, God knows our condition so He sent Jesus Christ to us so that through Him we might be able to rebound, to take advantage of His many second-chance opportunities. God wants us to succeed in our lives at following Him, but we can't do it if we give up or refuse to rebound for another chance to become faithful to His will and His ways.

So, when we give ourselves over to God's care, He "*raises us up with Christ and seats us with Him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus...*" (2:6). Jesus' sacrifice on the cross gives us the chance to start all over again, to realign our perspective, to get rid of the enemy's distractions, and to prevent the fouls from affecting our lives, so that we can actively pursue His will and His ways.

Paul explains by saying, "*For it is by GRACE that you have been saved, through FAITH - and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God, not by works, so that no one can boast*" (2:8-9). God has

already provided a way for us to rebound after our failures to do His work and His will. God wants us to achieve successful discipleship with Jesus, so that we can live according to His standards and make our lives count toward the successful mission of transforming the world for the sake of Jesus Christ.

But that means that often we need to change our perspective about life. Instead of giving our all for the sake of our own personal pleasure and desire, we need to look at what God is calling us to do and be, and where He might be directing our shots to be taken to touch the lives of others. Maybe we've overlooked our own ability to be a witness for Jesus. Maybe we've become too forceful in living our lives. Maybe we've accepted an improper worldview that skews the biblical teaching that directs the way God desires that we live our lives. Maybe we've just bulldozed on ahead and done what we've always done, forgetting that people are different and need different approaches at learning the truth about God's love through Jesus Christ. Our perspective needs to change so that our efforts match God's desired outcome.

It also means that we need to take note of where the distractions are coming from that keep us from doing well. Is our attention focused on us or our family only with the neglect of others? Are we spending too much time doing one particular thing that we miss the chance to share how God is working in our lives? Are there societal events taking place that cause us to become afraid or worried? Is there someone in our life that is causing us to be hurt or angry? All these distractions can keep us from performing well as a servant of God, and we miss our goals of living for Jesus.

And it also is difficult for us to live for the Lord when the unexpected happens. The car accident causes us to lose our ability to focus on serving the Lord because it demands all of our attention to recover from that accident. The illness or physical complication in our lives draws us to be inward focused, and we lose the ability to see how we can still serve those who are serving us. The financial struggles we face can make us so angry that we can't see straight or even relate to the one who has put us into that situation. So we fail to show love and forgiveness, thereby losing our ability to share the grace of God with the ones who have wronged us. Maybe it's the unexpected death of loved ones that

causes us such grief that we are unable to focus on anything else for quite a while.

God's grace is available for each one of us to rebound out of whatever has caused us to fail at serving the Lord Jesus, if we'll take the opportunity to see it and follow it. As believers in Jesus Christ, God has created us to be His workers, ready to do His good works that He has given us to accomplish (Eph. 2:10). And God gives us the strength and endurance to press on through the missed shots of faith, and to rebound in our own lives so that we can continue to follow Jesus every day.

The danger for all of us, however, is that when we miss the shots at following God's ways, we can give up altogether following Him and just go off on our own and do our own thing, missing the chance to try again and thereby giving up on the game altogether. If major failures take place in our lives we tend to just want to throw up our hands and say, "I quit!" The enemy succeeds in discouraging us to the point where we just don't want to try any more, and our failures seem to prove to us that we just cannot serve as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

But that's where God's sanctifying grace kicks in to remind us that He's still working on us, to make us what He wants us to be. That sanctifying grace enables us to see life a little bit differently, from God's perspective, and provides us with new ways to live so that we might accomplish the work God has for us. Little by little, God begins to remove the distractions and prevent the fouls we have received that limit our effectiveness to serve Him. When we turn to Jesus, seek His loving forgiveness, and ask for His direction, He graciously provides that direction, enabling us to rebound from our failure and become successful for Him.

But it takes work on our behalf to make the corrections from those things that are preventing us from living as servants of Christ Jesus. The saying is true, that success comes from 10% inspiration and 90% perspiration. That means that we have to determine in our minds to focus on God's ways, and then diligently strive to follow those ways. For many of us it begins with a very steep up-hill climb. And during that climb we can easily become discouraged or disappointed, because our failures keep happening. But as we persevere in our faith, we will find that the failures aren't made so often, and that

our perspective begins to clear up to see God's ways as being best for us. And as we progress, we will see how God's strength and encouragement guide us deeper in our effectiveness to accomplish His work given to us.

But there may come a time when we face another struggle. We may begin to succeed so well, that we look at those around us who are still failing and we shake our finger at them and condemn them for constantly missing the shots. We forget where we have experienced God's sanctifying grace in our own lives, and we begin to judge others, rather than to help them along in their own journey of faith.

When that happens, we feel like we need to be the referees and throw these folks out of the game, since they've "fouled out" already. They have missed their chance so often that we count them as worthless, and we no longer invest time or energy in them. "They're losers" we tell ourselves. "They can't do anything right, so why waste our time on them anymore" we convince say.

But that's where the wisdom of James 5:18-19 challenges us. *"My brothers and sisters, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring that person back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins."*

We're not to just discard others because they've fallen again. No, it is our responsibility to seek to bring them back into the truth. Where would we be if the Apostle Paul had been given up as a lost cause by the other followers of Jesus? God used a variety of people to call him back into the truth of Jesus Christ, and then was able to use Him in a mighty way to promote the Christian Church. God told Ananias, *"This man is My chosen instrument to proclaim My name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel..."* (Acts 9:15). God knows the heart of each person and His purpose for them. We are just to remain faithful to call them back from their failures so that they might be used for God's purpose as they rebound and turn for God's help to do better.

Think of Chuck Colson, who failed miserably and ended up committing a great crime. Yet God worked in His life in such a way that allowed him to begin a tremendously successful jail and prison ministry.

And look at one like Mike Warnke, who was a drug addict and a Satanist high priest. God confronted his life with faithful believers of Jesus Christ, and he came to know the Lord Jesus, and began a successful campus ministry reaching teens and young adults for Jesus Christ. Even when he was deep in the enemy's camp, serving the enemy of God, he was not cast off as worthless, but through God's grace was brought back into the household of faith through Jesus Christ.

Over and over again, people are confronted with their sinful ways and find the grace of our Lord God Almighty, and then are used in mighty ways to rescue others from the failures of life. God provides us His second chances so that we might rebound from our missed shots in life and keep on striving to serve Him.

“The fact that you live a better life, do better things, and are a nicer person may make you a better neighbor, but it doesn't make you fit for heaven. That can only happen by grace.

“Suppose three men decided they wanted to swim from California to Hawaii. Well, one may swim farther than the others, but all three would end up dead because Hawaii's too far.

Likewise, “God is too high; He's too holy for us even on our best days, weeks, or years to make ourselves acceptable to Him. Our salvation is based on God's grace.”² And once we experience God's grace for us in our own life, we are expected to share it with those around us so that they might find eternal life, too, through our sharing the same sanctifying grace that we've received from Jesus Christ.

And that's where our Gospel lesson comes into play for us today. Since we cannot achieve perfection on our own, Jesus offers us a way that we might move in that direction. When we are tempted to just give up and quit our walk with the Lord Jesus, there is still hope for us if we cling to our faith in Him. Listen to His words in John 15:1-8. (READ John 15:1-8)

Jesus is the One who provides us life. As His servants, we receive His power and resources to do His work, IF we remain in Him. He is the life source for all those who follow Him and grow close to Him. And that life source pumps into our lives giving us the hope we need to keep working for Him,

² (Tony Evans, *Tony Evans' Book of Illustrations*, pg. 140, #424)

even through the failures and missed shots. If we remain connected to Jesus, He enables us to bear much fruit.

If Jesus is the vine, and we are the branches, we have to remain connected to Him if we stand any chance at changing our lives so that we can accomplish His work. If we are removed from the source of power, encouragement, hope and love, our lives grow stagnant, and we are incapable of achieving anything that the Lord has called us to do. In order to be faithful witnesses of Jesus Christ, we have to remain in Him, learning about His life, about how He lived, and about How He instructs us to live. Unless we seek Him, study His Word and follow His commands, there is a great chance that we will be cut off from His encouragement and support to go our own way. And when that happens we live only with our own strength, our own wisdom and our own resources. And when those run dry, we find ourselves dried up, empty and tossed up onto the bonfire of destruction.

But that's not God's desire for any one of us. When He created us, god wanted us to be His servants, willing to do what He calls us to do. His hope is that we choose what is best for our lives and follow His guidelines and standards so that we may be blessed through them. And having been blessed by God, we then can use those resources to provide others with the chance to find Him, too, having received their own second chances to make the shots count that brings victory to many.

And here's an important thing to remember. Jesus tells us, *"If you remain in Me and My words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. This is to My Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be My disciples"* (John 15:7). God delights to bless those who seek to do His will, so when we ask Him for the things we need to accomplish His purpose in us, He is pleased to supply us with whatever we need to get the job done.

So as a church, we've missed lots of shots. We've fail in many ways to accomplish God's purpose for us. Yet, we have done the great work to seek His guidance, to follow His will and His ways, and we're starting out again as a new church in a new denomination. Since we've remained in Christ Jesus, and we're seeking to do His will and His ways, how might we pray and ask for God's blessings

for us? What might we need to change in order to become more productive? What perspectives do we need to refine and focus upon so that we might start making the shots we're risking for the Lord? What distractions might we need to eliminate so that we might zero in on Jesus' work for us? What fouls do we have to get over in order to get back into the game and begin accomplishing God's mission for our church?

I know that habits and patterns in our lives are hard to change once they've become established in our lives. But how might we pray to invite God to begin a new work in us? How can we encourage each other to find God's work for us?

God's sanctifying grace works in us individually and corporately to guide us so that we might bear much fruit and reach many more for the Gospel of Jesus Christ. But we've got to be willing to step up, rebound from the missed shots, and strive to keep on working for the Lord so that we might work together toward His victory for us. Ask great things of the Lord our God! Call out to Him and invite Him to work through us for His glory, and watch what He can do. Open yourselves to follow His Way, Truth, and Life in Jesus Christ, and He will faithfully guide you to do His work. And then diligently strive to make it happen. God is willing to give us all we need, but He expects us to do the work to bring it about.

Let's pray. Father, forgive us of all our missed shots. Whatever it was that made us miss scoring a victory for You, expose that to us so that we might correct our ways and begin following Your ways. Give us the courage to keep on working hard for You. Don't ever let us fall away from You, but continue to call us to serve You in the ways that you have blessed us to do. Give us eyes to see Your direction for this congregation, so that we might be faithful to accomplish all Your work. Help us not to be afraid to ask You for what we need to make this church vital and effective for You, touching the lives of so many more with the Good News of Jesus Christ. Change MY heart oh God, so that I might lead in a way that brings honor and glory to You. Change all of our hearts, Lord, so that we might grow closer to You all the days of our lives. This we ask in Jesus' Name. AMEN