

Book of Acts Series - Part 37 | God Only Uses Failures

by Jim Cymbala

The sermon emphasizes the importance of sticking to the truth of the gospel and avoiding compromise, highlighting God's use of failures to bring people to salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.

Duration: 33:17

Scripture: Acts 22:6

Topics: "Book Of Acts"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher reflects on his own journey of success and how it can sometimes lead to a lack of reliance on God. He emphasizes that blessings can become a curse when we forget our need for God. The preacher draws inspiration from the apostle Paul, who endured numerous trials and tribulations in his service to God. He highlights Paul's hardships, including imprisonment, beatings, shipwrecks, and hunger, to emphasize the importance of recognizing our weakness and relying on God's strength. The sermon encourages listeners to embrace difficulties and challenges as opportunities for growth and to remain steadfast in their faith.

Transcript

We're going to continue the series we've been on in the book of Acts. And I want to change this and just read one verse in Acts 22. It's part of Paul's defense, which we'll get to as he's about, he was going to get beat up and killed, and now he has a chance to speak to a rowdy crowd that is angry with him in Jerusalem, right outside the temple gates.

As I was traveling and coming near Damascus, he tells them about midday, a bright light from the sky flashed suddenly around me. I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? Who are you, Lord, I asked. I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you persecute, he said to me.

We talked about that last Sunday, didn't we? The men with me saw the light, but did not hear the voice of the one who was speaking to me. Verse 10 of Acts 22. I asked, what shall I do, Lord? And the Lord said to me, get up and go into Damascus, and there you will be told everything that God has determined for you to do.

I was, listen, I was blind from the light because of the bright light, and so my companions took me by the hand and led me into Damascus. The book of Acts is about how the Christian church was formed. The gospels are about the life of Christ.

Now this is about the life of the early church. It was written so we would model our churches not after culture or after denominational traditions, but that we would model our churches after the word of God. That's why all of this is in there.

How did they think? What did they do? What were their priorities? What were their battles? What were their failures? We're learning about that. Now, former persecutor of the church, Saul of Tarsus, has now become a man called the Apostle Paul. He has gone on missionary journeys that have spread the gospel.

And where we're at here in chapter 21 and 22, he has gone to Jerusalem, to the temple, which we'll get into a moment. And the crowd has some people that know him from his missionary journeys, Jewish people who are against this thought that Jesus is the Messiah, that somehow the Jewish nation has missed their Messiah. They're not happy with that.

And they have persecuted him on his trips. And now they spot him in the temple and a mob scene ensues. And they try to give him a beat down.

And the Roman soldiers rescue him because they're stationed right outside the temple. And because it's a religious holy day festival, they're ready for trouble. And they rescue him.

And they're going to take him in the barracks. But he asks a chance to speak to the crowd. But the crowd has just been trying to kill him.

So we don't know how many, but it's a huge crowd. And we found out last week that he spoke to the Roman soldiers in Greek and then told them he was a citizen later, which makes them really take note of him because you had to treat citizens a certain way if you were a Roman soldier. Couldn't just be giving them a beat down.

And then when he addresses the crowd, he shifts to Aramaic or Hebrew, the dialect that was spoken by Jesus. And he's trying to reason with the crowd. And he gives them his testimony.

We learned last week that testimonies are always in order. This is where I was, but this is what God has done. This is what I believed, but then he broke into my life.

This is where I was lost, but now I'm found. Was blind, but now I see. And he tells them I was raised as a Jew.

You can check on that. I was raised, although born north of Palestine, I was raised in Jerusalem under the feet of a very noted teacher, Gamaliel. You can all check that.

And on top of that, I was persecuting the Christians. I was so zealous for the tradition of the Jewish faith that I was hauling them into prison and trying to get them killed. Had them killed.

Persecuted them unto death. But then I was on this road to Damascus, and I had this light shine, and I was knocked off of my mount. Was blinded, and a voice spoke to me, Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? Who are you, Lord? I am Jesus, whom you're persecuting.

What do you want me to do? Go into Damascus, go into the city, and then it will be told you what I've planned for your life. I'm paraphrasing. And we learned last week that when you persecute Christians, you persecute Jesus.

He didn't say, why are you persecuting my church? He said, Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? Why are you persecuting me? So how you treat Christians, for good or for worse, means that's how you treat Jesus. That's how much he identifies with us as his people. I just want to cover one little bit that I skipped last week, which is important only in this aspect, that we could learn something from it.

Then I want to make a simple point. What was he doing in the temple? That's a very controversial part of the book of Acts, which I've skipped over. Because when Paul came to Jerusalem, he reported to James, who was the head pastor of the church in Jerusalem.

Now, remember, this is decades after Jesus had died and resurrected, decades after Acts 2. When Paul comes there, he gives a report to these people who were in the faith before him. And this is Jesus's half-brother, James, who wrote the book of James. And Paul reports to them what God has done among the Gentiles.

And they go, yeah, and they glorify God, how God has used him. But then they raise a problem for him, which for some reason he yields to. And they say this.

Now, listen, you're in Jerusalem. Your name has become well-known. And what people are saying is that you preach against the Jewish faith and against the temple and against the customs of the law of Moses.

Now, look how many Jewish people believe in Jesus, but they keep the law and the traditions and the holy days and whatever else. What you got to do is there's four men of us that are taking a vow, a special vow, religious Jewish vow. Go to the temple with them and pay their fee because they're gonna have their head shaved as part of some Jewish customs.

Go and do it so it'll calm everything down because all these people who are Christians, but they're still practicing the law, if it gets out that you're just radical like it doesn't matter anymore, there's gonna be all kinds of trouble. And for some reason, and many commentators believe it's the biggest mistake the apostle Paul ever made, that we have in the Bible, he yields to it. And he goes to the temple as if he keeps the law, as if he's a traditional Jew, which he's not.

He's been eating with Gentiles. He has already taught that circumcision means nothing. Circumcision or uncircumcision means nothing.

The only thing that matters is that you're a new creation in Jesus Christ. Even Jesus had said back in the book of John to a woman at a well, don't argue about whether you should worship on this mountain or on that mountain. The Samaritans have their religion.

The Jews worship on Mount Gerizim where the temple was built. A day is coming and is already here when you'll no longer worship on any mountain. For the father seeks those who will worship him in spirit and in truth.

That's all done away with. There is no sacred place. There is no sacred temple.

There is no circumcision that means anything. The law came through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. The old covenant has passed away.

The new covenant has come. The agreement that God has for all of those who put their faith in Jesus. But somehow Paul yields to this, maybe to make peace, maybe to go along with their influence.

And then when he goes to the temple, he's still spotted and a riot breaks out and he still almost loses his life, even though he's going through the motion. And what does that tell us? It tells us that you can never compromise the principles of the gospel of Jesus Christ. You can't add anything to it, like believe in Jesus, but you got to keep the law.

You got to be circumcised. You got to go to the Feast of Tabernacles. You got to go through all that.

The minute you add anything to faith in Jesus Christ, you have now altered the gospel of Christ. And only trouble will come. You can't take anything away from the gospel because it'll work better with the crowd.

See, what James was trying to do was please the crowd. There's a lot of Jewish people who are zealous and proud they're Jews. Yeah, they believe in Jesus, but they're not letting go of their Judaism.

No, they're not. So Paul, go along with it because it's just going to get messy if you start saying that Jesus has brought in that radical of a new day. How many follow what I'm saying? Say amen.

And he ended up almost losing his life anyway. And later in some of his letters, he said, look, all the privilege I had as a Jew, I count as human waste, as dung compared to knowing Jesus Christ as my Savior. Holy days, Passover lambs, none of it means a thing now that Jesus has come.

What does that mean for us today? Why would God put that in the Bible? Well, let's just think about a couple things. The moment to please people, you add something to faith in Christ, you're going to be in trouble in the end. The minute you add to the gospel, let's say a racial overtone that one race of people is special.

There are no two gospels, one for the Gentile or the Jew or the black people or the white people or the people from Sweden or the people from Poland. There is nothing. We're all the same.

We're all the same. And the moment to get the crowd's applause, you add anything like believe in Jesus and wave the American flag. You have now altered the gospel.

Jesus is not about the American flag. Jesus is about salvation from our sin through the grace of God. Can we say amen to that? There are subtle attempts to add something to it that we've had over the ages to add believe in Jesus, but I'm a Pentecostal or charismatic.

You have to speak in tongues or something like that. And pastor, you better preach that because that's what the people, if you want them to react well and give to your ministry, that's what you have to do. You can't do that.

You can never compromise the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is what it is and we find it not in the way you and I grew up, but we find it in the pages of scripture, what they preached and what God did when they just preached Jesus. Then there's another temptation for us.

I think this is more prevalent. Let's take something away from the gospel so that we'll draw a bigger crowd and fit in with more people. Let me give you some examples of that.

Certain televangelists have been put under the spotlight of an interview with let's say Larry King or something back 10 years ago. Is Jesus the only way? Do you really, in other words, there's no salvation outside of Jesus. You mean Buddhists and Hindus and Muslims and all of that.

You mean it's only Jesus. Well, well, who am I to judge? And there's many ways to God. My path is Jesus, but for someone else it might be.

Why is that said? It's a compromise so that you won't be persecuted for the name of Jesus. There is only one name Jesus said. There's only one way to the Father and that's through Jesus Christ.

How many say amen? Come on, let's affirm that. And certain men have shamed themselves because they have supporters who are either atheists because they don't preach a lot about Christ and the cross. So they have followers who give money and they then alter and compromise the gospel to keep the money or the crowd.

And that's very subtle temptation. Or here's another one. Don't mention sin.

If you tell people they're doing something wrong, they don't like that. No one likes to be told they're wrong, Pastor Jim. Just say, believe in Jesus.

Don't do that first part. Repent of your sins. No, but that message is in the Bible.

Yeah, but people won't come back if you start telling them that sleeping with someone who's not their wife and husband is wrong, that it's a new day. No, there is no new day. Come on, how many are with me? Say amen.

What churches do, televangelists do, is they make it more about success and follow your dream and God wants you to be wealthy, which we know is not true in the new covenant for all people. Some people go through great persecution. No, tamp that down.

You're not gonna get a following when you tell people serve Jesus and you'll be persecuted and you'll have people turn on you. But didn't Jesus say, if they hated me, they will also hate you? Didn't Jesus say, no servant is greater than his master? No, but Pastor Simba, that's not good 21st century psychology. That's dinosaur thinking.

I don't care what century. What I'm trying to figure out is what did God say because that's we're supposed to preach. Amen.

These kind of compromisers are made all the time and remember, they can draw huge numbers of people. Jeremiah was the true prophet in his day in the Old Testament, but he wasn't the popular prophet. No, no.

The biggest crowds were from the false prophets who said God is gonna bless, God is gonna bless, God is gonna bless. And here Jeremiah was saying, if you don't get rid of these idols, judgment's gonna come. Well, who wants to hear that? So do you get this whole question of compromise? But in the end, it'll all come to nothing because when you change the message, you dishonor God.

And now we're facing the result of that where all the polling shows that people who do go to church, which is decreasing by the way in America, the people who go to church don't live any different than the people who don't go to church. Same lifestyles, same everything. And there are very clever people who play into that and say tell people not what they need to hear, tell people what they want to hear.

So Paul went along because James was thinking what the people wanted to hear. But the question is, what's the truth, not what people wanna hear. Is that what you do when you go to a doctor? Doctor, give me a checkup.

But don't give me any negative news or I'm walking right out of here because I'm not paying good money to hear that my cholesterol's high. So just give me a pill and tell me something good. And doctor comes back and he has this report with all this stuff and you go, hey, what's up with this? I make an appointment, I'm a polite person, you're a respectful doctor, I have to hear this? What do you mean my blood pressure's high? It is not, I don't receive that.

That blood pressure is not high. Well, we would laugh at anyone who did that. But in church we do that.

Paul says in the last days perilous times will come. People will have a form of godliness, a form of religion, but deny the power of it to really change people's lives. So that's how Paul ended up in the temple that day.

He gave in to James and that strong Jewish Christian lobby that was very, very powerful at that time. But let's get to just the only verse I wanted to share with you. That's an interesting sidelight on the way, but so after he has this encounter with the Lord, he's blind, he's not senseless, and his companions have to lead him into Damascus into a room where we learn later for three days and three nights he doesn't eat or drink anything and he's blind until a man named Ananias comes and prays for him.

What a picture. You talk about a failure? You want to talk about disillusionment? Think of what Paul was facing as he sat in that room somewhere in Damascus. Everything I believed has been wrong.

The people I've been persecuting have been right and I'm wrong. All my good works and my self-righteousness that I was so proud of, it's nothing, it's nothing. He's the Messiah.

He died so that I could be clean. There's no acceptance with God except through Christ and I've been preaching self-righteousness, works of the law, do this, do that, and God will approve you. Everything, my education, my background, everything I boasted in, everything I'm proud of, it's all gone in a second.

He appears to me and now I realize wrong track. I'm in the wrong universe. Think of what he was going through.

All this stuff about Gamaliel and where I sat and my degree and where I went to school and I'm Jewish and that's special. Gone in a second, gone. And that reminds me of a sentence that I've called this sermon.

Should you want to get it or recommend it to someone else? God only uses failures. God only uses failure. In fact, until you get to the end of yourself, until you detest the thought of yourself, until you see that everything that your human wisdom has brought you is worthless compared to Jesus Christ, until you're ready to take all your good works and all the things you never did and I never did drugs and I never slept around, unless you're able to take all of that and throw it down in the garbage heap and say the only thing

I need is Jesus Christ.

The only one who can save me is Jesus Christ. Faith in Christ, turning from my old life and faith in Christ is my only hope of salvation. Paul later goes on to say in his life, there is none righteous, no, not one.

All have sinned and come short of the glory of God. He never calls himself a special messenger, but you know what he calls himself? The chief of sinners, the least of all the apostles, unworthy. See, because until you get to the point of failure, you'll never know how high God can lift you until you go all the way down.

Let's say amen to that. Preaching self-esteem, preaching a positive self-image. God does give you a positive self-image, but you gotta get rid of your own and get the one he has for you.

He only uses, what a failure. Saul of Tarsus, a total, absolute, messed up person. Spent his whole life doing wrong and he was religious on top of it and that goes to show you can be full of religion and out in left field and not even know it.

You can be full of your religious tradition, your Catholicism, your Protestantism, your charismatic stuff, whatever. And you could be totally off the track, possibly, when you have a living encounter with Jesus Christ. God only uses failures.

Take Abraham, the one he chose in the Old Testament to be the father of the Jewish people. When under pressure, he grabbed his wife and went to Egypt. When he saw the man ogling his wife, he said, tell him you're my sister.

And they took her from him. Just to save his neck, he lied and said, she's my sister. And yet God used him.

And he's the father of everyone who has faith. He did that same little maneuver, not just once, but twice. Take Moses, he began his illustrious career even though God saved him as a baby.

He killed somebody when he thought no one was looking and buried the guy in the sand. And the next day, when he was breaking up a fight, two Hebrews said, who made you the referee over us, Moses? We don't care that you were raised in the palace of Pharaoh. What are you gonna do, kill one of us like you did the guy yesterday and you buried it in the sand? Yo, what's up, dude, with that? And he took off.

And he took off. And for 40 years, he lived in the backside of the desert. What kind of success is that? Total mess, total failure.

But that's the only people God uses. Only people God uses. Take David, a man after God's own heart.

Oh my goodness. At one point when he's being chased by King Saul and he's not yet the king of Israel, he tries to find protection in the camp of one of the enemies of Israel. But they know who he is, that he was a mighty warrior as a young man.

So they're like, whoa, what's up with David? So you know what he does? He starts to drool and act like he's a madman and starts writing with a crayon on the walls. Oh yes, that's in the Bible. Well, where's your faith, David? Yeah, well, you know.

And then time doesn't permit me to talk about the time he looked at Bathsheba bathing naked on a roof, got her pregnant, and then ordered a hit, a hit, on Peuriah the Hittite, her husband. And yet God says in a later date, now I have set my chosen one on the throne of Israel. We wouldn't even let him preach.

How many are happy, along with me, that God only uses failures? Could you lift your hand high? Because that's all God has to work with is failure. But it's to the degree that you realize that you're nothing, that's the very degree that God makes you into something. And the ones who fight for, I am somebody, I am something, you don't know where I was born, or I'm West Indian, I'm white, or I'm Southern, or I'm whatever.

The more you hold on to that, the more you stay the hand of God to bless you. Because when you become nothing, God says, now I will exalt you. Come on, let's say amen to that.

Nothing, uses nothing. Ah, but it goes further, brothers and sisters. So let me close with a truth that unfortunately is not heard enough today.

Not only is that the way you have to begin with God, and if you're here today and you've never got to the end of yourself, oh, I pray that God by his Holy Spirit will bring you to the end of everything. On the day of Pentecost, here's what they said when the spirit was poured out when Peter preached. Peter, what must we do to be saved? Who told you you were lost? Oh, God told me I was lost.

A lot of people say, what must I do to be helped? I need a little help around the edges. No, that's not the way you become a Christian. You got to say, what must I do to be saved? Unless you know you're drowning, you don't need a savior to swim out and get you.

But that just so, this will explain your life now. I'm about to explain a lot of things, not only in your life in yesteryear, but today possibly, and very probably in your future. You got to remember that God not only uses failures, he's constantly ordering circumstances so you feel your weakness.

And he uses trials and troubles and difficulties and problems and hatred by other people so that you can learn that when you are weak, then you are strong. So listen, Pastor Simba, where'd you get that? Got it from this book. Listen, Paul is talking to the church at Corinth and he says to them, listen, these so-called super apostles, this by the way blows away so much of what is on being peddled on like these religious networks and these people who have these followings.

This, what do they do? Do they read this? Are they blinded? Are they reprobate? What is going on in their minds? Listen, Paul says, are these so-called people God's servants? So am I. I sound like a madman, but I'm a better servant than they are. I've worked much harder. I've been in prison more times.

I've been whipped much more and I've been near death often. Five times I was given 39 lashes by the Jews. Three times I was whipped by the Romans.

Once I was stoned. I've been in three shipwrecks and once I spent 24 hours in the water. In my many travels, I've been in danger from floods and from robbers, in danger from my own people, the Jews and from the Gentiles.

There have been dangers in the city, dangers in the wilds, dangers on the high seas, dangers from false friends. There has been work and toil. Often I've gone without sleep and I've been hungry and thirsty.

I've often been without enough food and shelter or clothing. What American Christian would even repeat that? What kind of advertisement is that to be a Christian? And here's the greatest Christian we know. And not to mention other things.

Every day I'm under the pressure of my concern for all the churches. Then he goes on to a dream and a vision he had where he was lifted up into the third heaven and saw things that God said, never talk about it. You're not allowed to say what you've seen.

But to keep me from being puffed up with pride because of the many wonderful things I saw, I was given a painful physical ailment which acts as Satan's messenger to beat me and keep me from being proud. Three times I prayed to the Lord about this and asked him to take it away. Listen closely as I close.

Three times I asked the Lord. But his answer was, my grace is all you need. For my power is greatest when you are weak.

I am most happy then to be proud of my weaknesses in order to feel the protection of Christ's power over me. I'm content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and difficulties for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

So I want to tell you something today. I got a great note for you. God is going to deliver some of us out of the situations we're in.

Others, he's going to take us through the situation we're in. But whether he takes us out, to him be all the praise and honor and glory, or whether he takes us through the difficulty, the whole point is to keep Jim Cimbala broken down and feeling weak. Because when I started in the ministry, I didn't have a clue.

I didn't go to seminary or Bible school as a basketball player. Then in the business world, when my wife and I started, the first offering was \$85. There was no one in the church.

And half the people of the handful that came were problems. My preaching was so bad, I fell asleep while I was preaching, much less the congregation. Guess what I needed? Guess how I prayed? Guess on Tuesday afternoons when I went down into the auditorium and I knew three or four people would come.

And we couldn't pay the bills and we both had second jobs. Do you know how weak I was? Do you know how I prayed? Because I only had Jesus. I had no headquarters.

I had no one with money. I had nothing. Ah, but now 10,000 people come in one day.

I've written books. One book of the year award. Ah, my wife and her choirs won six Grammy awards.

Now it's so easy to kind of walk a little different, isn't it? Like yeah, come on now. And God says, I will order your life because I love you. I will teach you to be like my servant Paul so that you will glory and boast and be happy with trials and tribulations and difficulties.

Because when you are weak, I will make you strong. Come on, let's say amen. Glory to God.

Say glory to God while you're clapping. On the webcast, say glory to God while you're clapping. Glory to God.

And that's for all of us. When you say, what's going on? What's going on? Beware. That's why blessings can become a curse.

Because when God gives answers and blesses us, we don't feel our need of him. How many times have I seen that? People faithful in the prayer meeting, just got married, didn't have two nickels to rub together. Difficult without employment, all of that seeking God.

Oh, I need God. I need his deliverance and all of that. And then God brings some blessings.

And the next thing you know, you don't see him anymore. And they've forgotten the principle, when I'm weak, then I'm strong. When I'm strong in myself, then I'm weak in God.

So Satan is a fool. Because God turns what he does against him and works it for a blessing. The very attacks of Satan can be used by God.

Come on, how many have ever been, listen, wait. How many have ever been, I'm gonna close. How many ever been attacked by Satan? Had the bottom fall out? Didn't know what was going on.

But at that moment, you cried to God and he helped you. Come on, lift up your hand, right? So he's gonna help us. And don't be afraid of problems.

James says in another place, count it all joy. James the apostle, count it all joy when you come into all kinds of trials and troubles. I have not got to that place.

In fact, I haven't met maybe one or two believers in my life who when troubles came, they would go, okay, bye. Jim, you won't believe this. Praise God.

Hallelujah. What happened? Just lost my job. Praise God.

I can't believe the blessings he's putting on me. No, no. We tend to panic, don't we? But God says when you have nothing, you have me.

And when you have something, you lose something of me. Let's pray. Praise God.

Praise God. You know what? Let's just lift our hands, no clapping. Just lift your hands up in the air and open your mouth and begin to praise God that he's brought you through every kind of difficulty, every kind of problem.

God, thank you for using problems to make us weak so you could make us strong. Thank you for difficulties. Thank you even for using the weapons of Satan against him so that you could build up our faith and make us strong in you.

I praise you, God. Come on, just open your mouth. Do it in English or Spanish.

Just praise him out loud. Say hallelujah or

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