

# Getting Past Failure (and Success)

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Preaching on:  
Isaiah 49:1–7

2022 was the year of my midlife crisis. And it was a really wonderful experience. I wish that I could have done it like 10 years earlier, but I don't think that I could have—all things have to come in their own time. And it was a wonderful experience: I didn't buy a sports car. Not that I would mind having one. I didn't have an affair. No tummy tuck or other kind of plastic surgery or any kind of improvements like that. I made it through intact, which is a good thing. I think midlife crises get poked fun at a lot for being, you know, men trying to hold onto their masculinity and virility and deny the fact that they're going bald, and you know, dealing with the fact that they don't feel as cool and relevant as they used

to.

But I don't think that's what a midlife crisis is about at all. One of my companions through this crisis was the poet Rilke who once wrote, you must not understand life. "You must not understand life, and then it will become a celebration." Now, midlife crisis, I think, is about a shift in perspective: letting go of everything that you think you were supposed to know about life and letting life be just what it's supposed to be. There were a lot of lessons that I learned over the course of this experience, but the one I want to share with you this morning is that my midlife crisis helped me realize that I will no longer put all of my effort and energy into being a successful person. Instead, I'm just going to do my very best to be myself in whatever circumstances I happen to find myself in. Charles de Foucault (who was canonized as a saint last year in the midst of my midlife crisis) once said, "I want to preach the gospel with my life." At the end of my midlife crisis, I hope that I can do something similar.

And we can't preach the gospel with our lives if we're expending all our resources on trying to be some sort of a big success. Because the experience of midlife, I am finding through work and through family commitments and through aging and through the disillusionment of our youth, it shows us definitively that life is not success. That's not what life is. Life is limitation. And that's okay. We cannot do it all. We cannot have it all. We must make choices. And success itself can be sort of like a drug or like an evil charm, right? It makes us feel really good temporarily, but it never really deeply satisfies us. It makes us seem cool and enviable to others. But beneath all that fame and esteem, there is often a spiritually ravaged soul, desperate for something more real. But whatever road you take to get there to that something more real, you are going to have to pass through the reality of failure.

And so, I guess I'm hoping that a little bit of my acceptance of myself as I am, the reality of failure, is going to rub off on other people, the people I pastor to, and the people I love. You do not need to be a success to be a part of this church. You do not need to be a success to be loved. You do not need to be a success to be called and loved by God. In fact, sometimes success just gets in the way with all of its competition and all of its pretensions. Far better than success, for the deep fulfillment of your soul, are things like honesty, right? Openness, vulnerability, availability to other people, and compassion. And these are traits and virtues that are best forged when we stumble, when we fall down, when we fail. That is when we deepen as human beings. When we succeed, we build walls around ourselves, narrow walls. But when we fail, we go deep. Why are we so afraid of failure? Why are we so turned off by limitation?

I think it's the fear of failure that causes us to define success so narrowly and so claustrophobically that success, even when we experience it, doesn't satisfy us. We're all convinced that we'll be happy once we're truly successful, instead of simply realizing just this basic and intuitive truth: Being happy in and of itself is a success! We've got it all backwards. And so we hold ourselves back from ourselves. We hold ourselves back from the world, and instead we try to project success. We want to look good. And we're not just trying to fool others. We're not just trying to fool ourselves. We're trying to fool life

itself. And it never works. So, eventually, there's a crisis.

And with that, I turn to our text this morning. This is the second servant song from the prophet Isaiah. Traditionally, we Christians interpret this as being a prophecy of Christ. And as you read it, I think it's obvious why our Jewish friends and neighbors and loved ones continue to interpret the suffering servant to be Israel itself. And that's clear in the text. "And he said to me, you are my servant, Israel." And the biblical scholars go even further back than that. And they say even "Israel" is added to the text later. And that this prophecy goes way back and was probably originally about some historical king or other personage that's sort of lost to us. And there's all these theories about who it is. None of that really matters, who specifically it is about, because it illustrates a theme within scripture—something that I think God is trying to highlight for us: This idea of somebody being called from the very beginning of their life. It's throughout the prophets. It's in the Psalms. "The Lord called me before I was born while I was in my mother's womb. He named me." Right? This sense of destiny that we sometimes feel when we are young and energetic, that we have been called for great things. And we go out there and we try to seize it, make it all happen, make it all work. But then comes the crisis. "But I said, I have labored in vain. I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity." Spinning wheels. It's not working out. The great dreams that I had aren't all coming together in exactly the way that I thought they would.

But the servant allows himself to have the crisis and to turn to God and to say, "Hey, what is going on here? Why am I suffering? Why isn't this working?" And in that moment, that moment of crisis, God chooses to reframe the whole calling. And now listen to what God says: "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel. I will give you as a light to the nations that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth." The original calling was too small, it was too focused on myself, on yourself, on what we wanted. And in the crisis, God shifts the perspective. Stop trying to understand life. Let life be a celebration. It's not just for you, it's for everyone. This is how God comes into the text to expand its boundaries in that moment of crisis.

So in my midlife crisis, I don't want, anymore, to succeed for myself. I don't want to succeed for my dreams, for my family, for my profession, or for my church. I do not want to succeed with or for anybody or anything. I do not want to succeed. I want to be myself and give of myself to everybody. I want to preach the gospel with my life to everyone I meet and interact with. I don't want to be a success. I just want to be somebody in your life. That's a bigger dream than I ever had before—to just be somebody who makes a difference in your life.