

Pilgrim's Problems

Turn your troubles into triumphs
on the road to God's front door



KARL HAFFNER



Pacific Press® Publishing Association
Nampa, Idaho
Oshawa, Ontario, Canada
www.pacificpress.com

Contents

Introduction.....	8
1. Failure.....	21
2. Loneliness.....	34
3. Anger.....	45
4. Loss.....	59
5. Resentment.....	73
6. Guilt.....	84
7. Pride.....	94
8. Fear.....	105
9. Greed.....	117
10. Futility.....	128
Conclusion.....	140

Introduction

“Condemn the fault, and not the actor of it.”

—WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

Some years ago, after I spoke at a religious conference, a gentleman handed me a note on his way out of the auditorium.

“Thank you!” I said.

He scowled. His face was so sour he probably could have sucked buttons off a sofa. Then he barked, “Sonny, you may want to read that letter before you say ‘thank you.’ ”

“Oh, OK! It’s one of *those* letters!” I smirked.

So later that year (I wasn’t really anxious to get to it) I tore into it. Sure enough, it wasn’t a merry missive. While I can’t remember exactly what the missile said (Why keep hate mail?), I do recall one of his gripes centered on my choice of illustrations. He felt strongly that pastors should never disclose their own struggles and shortcomings. He was offended that I should tell of the time my wife, Cherié, and I had an argument or when I lost my cool in a traffic altercation. As he put it, “I don’t want to see the pastor’s pimples.” He was implying, of course, that preachers ought to cake on enough makeup that we don’t look real. The rationale is that it’s better to be dishonest and look holy than to be honest about our imperfect holiness.

Well, guess what? Pilgrims have problems too. Even saints struggle with sin. Mind you, preachers are not always up front about this. We’re

PILGRIM'S PROBLEMS

masters at posturing ourselves as the squeakiest of the clean. Listen carefully and you'll notice how often preachers tell stories that put them in the best possible light.

For example, ever hear a preacher refer to a TV show by saying, "I was just flipping through the channels the other day and I happened to see . . ."? The disclaimer is subtle but meant to be noticed: "I don't watch much TV. I just so happened to have twenty-six seconds between seventeen Bible studies and thirteen baptisms when I tuned in and saw . . ."

***There is so much good in the worst of us,
And so much bad in the best of us,
That it hardly behooves any of us
To talk about the rest of us.***

—EDWARD WALLIS HOCH

Well, the truth about this preacher is that sometimes I sit down and watch TV. Bag of Cheetos snacks in the left hand, bowl of Ben and Jerry's Chunky Monkey ice cream in the right—and I'm not flipping channels. Nor am I watching 3ABN; sometimes I camp on FOX.

As recently as last night I was flipping through the channels (re-ally!) and heard a TV preacher tell a story of eating pizza with his son. He began the story with this qualifier: "I haven't had pizza in two years, but to be with my boy I compromised my health standards and . . ."

Why the need to explain how long it had been since the last slice of pleasure? Like most pilgrims he wanted to preserve an appearance of perfection. But, of course, we all know it's bunk. Truth is, no one's perfect.

If you can accept that truth, then you're ready to sign on for this journey through the pages of Scripture that inform us on how to triumph over troubles like loneliness, resentment, pride, and guilt. That's what this book is all about.

Introduction

God's most-honored dead

Our first step in this journey begins with a tour through God's Westminster Abbey. In London, there's a giant, thousand-year-old cathedral called Westminster Abbey, built in the form of a cross. It has been the setting for every coronation since 1066 and for numerous other royal occasions. It still functions as a church dedicated to regular worship and to the celebration of great events in the life of the nation. It is also where England buries her most-honored dead: kings, statesmen, soldiers, scientists, poets, musicians, and scholars. The elite get buried in the Abbey.

In a sense, God has a Westminster Abbey too. It's located in Hebrews chapter 11. That's where you'll find the saints whom God would honor most. Who gets this special burial? Do you suppose it's limited to pilgrims without problems? Let's take a look.

Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for.

By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.

By faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did. By faith he was commended as a righteous man, when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith he still speaks, even though he is dead.¹

No surprises yet. Abel is the first pilgrim to make God's honor roll. He was, after all, the first martyr. We read on:

By faith Enoch was taken from this life, so that he did not experience death; he could not be found, because God had taken him away. For before he was taken, he was commended as one who pleased God. And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.²

PILGRIM'S PROBLEMS

Again, it's no surprise to find Enoch among God's most-honored dead. Remember that he walked with God.

But now our tour takes an odd twist. "By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family. By his faith he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that comes by faith."³

No man is perfect unless he admits his faults. But if he has faults to admit, how can he be perfect?

—ANONYMOUS

Excuse me, but did I hear Noah included among God's most-honored dead? Isn't that the same guy who celebrated the end of the Flood by getting drunk? How much confidence would you have in an evangelist who blew into your church and celebrated a successful series by getting plastered? Yet God must consider Noah to be special. After all, he's buried with the most-honored dead.

Now get a load of this next guy.

By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. By faith he made his home in the Promised Land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. By faith Abraham, even though he was past age—and Sarah herself was barren—was enabled to become a father because he considered him faithful who had made the promise. And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore.⁴

Introduction

Why would Abraham get a five-verse plaque posted in his honor? He's the spiritual *schmuck* who lied to the government at the price of his wife's chastity. He got booted out of the country. That's worse than cheating on your income tax!

It only gets worse!

By faith Moses' parents hid him for three months after he was born, because they saw he was no ordinary child, and they were not afraid of the king's edict. By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time. He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward. By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the king's anger; he persevered because he saw him who is invisible. By faith he kept the Passover and the sprinkling of blood, so that the destroyer of the firstborn would not touch the firstborn of Israel. By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as on dry land; but when the Egyptians tried to do so, they were drowned.⁵

***As you receive the Spirit of Christ—
the Spirit of unselfish love and labor
for others—you will grow and
bring forth fruit. The graces of the Spirit
will ripen in your character. Your faith
will increase, your convictions deepen,
your love be made perfect. More and more
you will reflect the likeness of Christ in all
that is pure, noble, and lovely.***

—ELLEN WHITE, *CHRIST'S OBJECT LESSONS*, 67

All this flattery for a murderer—give me a break.

PILGRIM'S PROBLEMS

And we could go on. Next we see Rahab, the prostitute. Then comes Samson, the chap who needed Dr. Laura, Dr. Phil, Dr. Ruth, and Dr. Seuss—any doctor! And let's not forget David; he's included among God's most-honored dead. He was not only an adulterer but a murderer (and to think he did all this while he was General Conference president!).

Take-homes from the tour

You can learn a lot in museums—and this one is no exception. Of the many take-homes we could dig from this chapter, let me highlight three.

1. In our weakness, we are made strong.

In verse 34 the author wants us to know that a common thread weaving through all the sordid stories of the saints is that their “weakness was turned to strength.”

Recently I heard the story of a ten-year-old boy who took up the sport of judo—despite the fact that he had lost his left arm in a car accident. The boy signed on to study under an old Japanese judo master. Although the boy was making great progress, he felt frustrated because, after three months of training, the master had taught him only one move.

“Sensei,” the boy respectfully protested, “why can't I learn some other moves?”

“Keep perfecting this move. It is the most important one,” the sensei replied.

Not fully understanding, but fully trusting the teacher, the boy kept training. After several months he was ready for his first competition.

Surprising himself, the boy easily won his first two matches and advanced to the semi-finals. The next match proved to be more difficult, but after some time, his opponent became restless and charged. The boy deftly used his one move to score a victory.

Stunned by his unexpected success, the boy was now in the finals. This time, his opponent was quicker, stronger, and more experienced. For most of the match the boy seemed to be outplayed. Worried about the boy's safety, the referee tried to call the match. “No!” the sensei insisted. “Let the match continue. My boy is still in it.”

Introduction

Shortly thereafter, the boy's opponent dropped his guard. Instantly the boy used his one move to pin him. Thus, the boy left with the first-place trophy that stood nearly as tall as he did!

On the ride home, the boy and the sensei discussed every move of each match. Then the boy asked the burning question: "Sensei, how did I win the tournament when I really only knew one move?"

"You won for two reasons. First, you've almost mastered one of the most challenging throws in judo. And second, the only known defense for that move is for your opponent to grab your left arm." The boy's biggest weakness had become his biggest strength.

***We have a bat's eyes
for our own faults, and an eagle's
for the faults of others.***

—JAMES L. GORDON

Remember that story the next time you're inclined to beat yourself up because of your flaws. Truth is, you're a perfect collage of strengths and weaknesses. Embrace them both. For God can work through you even when you feel inadequate; or better yet, *especially* when you feel inadequate.

The apostle Paul once wrote this: "I quit focusing on [my] handicap.... Now I take limitations in stride, and with good cheer, these limitations that cut me down to size—abuse, accidents, opposition, bad breaks. I just let Christ take over! And so the weaker I get, the stronger I become."⁶ In our weakness we are made strong.

2. In our trials, we are called to faith.

In verse 39 of Hebrews 11 we find another common compliment that applies to all the imperfect pilgrims. After a graphic description in verses 34-38 of the horrendous trials that these saints endured, the author tells us: "These were all commended for their faith." Why did

PILGRIM'S PROBLEMS

all these people land in God's Westminster Abbey? Because in their trials, they demonstrated great faith.

One of my favorite stories of faith is that of ABC news correspondent Josh Howell. He's the man who held an apple for Olympic gold medalist, Darrel Pace. The demonstration was the headliner at an archery exhibition in New York City's Central Park. Shooting steel-tipped hunting arrows, Pace punctured many bull's-eyes without a miss.

Then he called for a volunteer. "All you have to do," said Pace, "is hold this apple in your hand, waist-high." Josh Howell took a bold step forward. As he stood there, a small apple in his hand, a larger one in his throat, Pace took aim from thirty yards away as the audience gawked.

Then *thwack!* Pace launched a clean hit that exploded the apple before striking the target behind. Everybody applauded Howell, who was all smiles—until his cameraman approached with a hound-dog look. "I'm sorry, Josh," he said. "I didn't get it. Had a problem with my viewfinder. Could you do it again?"⁷

3. In our faith, we are made perfect.

Notice how this chapter ends: "These were all commended for their faith . . . God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect."⁸

Notice, God assumes the responsibility to make us perfect. God's plan for His people is that they would be "made perfect." Too often we grit our teeth and try our hardest to be perfect. But it's very frustrating. God says, "That's My job. I'll assume responsibility to change you."

What, then, is our responsibility?

We must exercise faith. We have to trust God to change us. The battle is not in trying to stop sinning. The battle is in trying to keep trusting. God does the changing. We do the trusting.

The children's book *Little Lord Fauntleroy* tells the story of a seven-year-old boy who went to stay with his grandpa. Although the man had a reputation of being extremely mean and selfish, the lad took a great interest in him. Over and over the boy complimented his grandpa, finding only positive things to say about him.

"Oh, Grandpa," he gushed, "how people must love you! You're so good and kind in all you do." No matter how disagreeable the

Introduction

elderly man was, the grandson saw the best in everything Grandpa did.

Finally, the youngster's unquestioning love softened the heart of the cantankerous old man. Grandpa couldn't resist the unwavering trust that the boy had in his goodness. As a result, he gradually began to change his ways, and in time he became the unselfish and kind person his grandson thought him to be.

Although it's just a make-believe kid's tale, it does capture the true story of us all. Like Grandpa, you and I *can* change. We can become unselfish and kind—just like Jesus! Now mind you, this change doesn't occur by trying hard to change. That's as fruitless and frustrating as trying to get a tan in a dark room by gritting your teeth and clenching your fists and chanting, "I will get a sun tan! I will get a sun tan!"

How often do we try to change and fight temptation by that method of trying really hard to be perfect? "I will not take a drink; I will not gossip; I will not eat that pie; I will not . . ." It's much simpler. To tan, live in the sun.

Similarly, to overcome sin, live in the Son. Don't waste your time trying to be holy. Instead, live in the presence of He who is holy. Then, as you live in the Son, you'll change. He will make you perfect in His righteousness.

Ellen White puts it like this: "Christ died for us, making full and abundant provision for our redemption. Although by our disobedience we have merited God's displeasure and condemnation, He has not forsaken us; He has not left us to grapple with the power of the enemy in our own finite strength. Heavenly angels fight our battles for us; and co-operating with them, we may be victorious over the powers of evil. Trusting in Christ as our personal Savior, we may be 'more than conquerors through him that loved us' (Rom. 8:37)."⁹ It really is possible to prevail over our problems—but this does not happen in our own power. We are conquerors by trusting in Christ.

Now let's put some skin on this concept of faith and consider what it looks like in real life. In 1930 on an island in the Philippines, a man name Frank Laubach climbed to the top of Signal Hill. He felt crushed by a sense of disappointment with his life. His

PILGRIM'S PROBLEMS

career was a failure in his eyes. He had hoped to be president of a college. He almost had the opportunity, but out of chivalry he voted for his opponent and lost the position by one vote. Three of Laubach's children died of malaria. Because of health hazards, his wife and remaining child lived 900 miles away. The people he was trying to help rejected him. God seemed very far away. Although a student of the finest theological education available, Laubach thought of Jesus as a good man who lived a long time ago, but nothing more.

In despair, he sat on the summit and tried to talk to God. That's when something very mysterious happened to him. His belief—and you can decide for yourself what you think—was that God began to speak to him.

God invited him to do an experiment with the rest of his life—to devote himself to living and walking with God. The target was to make each hour a continual, inner conversation with God and to be perfectly responsive to His will.

***If the best man's faults
were written on his forehead,
he would draw his hat over his eyes.***

—THOMAS GRAY

For the next forty years, that's what Frank Laubach did. He wrote this:

The most wonderful discovery that has ever come to me is that I do not have to wait until some future time for the glorious hour. I need not sing, "Oh that will be glory for me—" and wait for any grave. *This hour* can be heaven. *Any hour* for *any body* can be as rich as God! For do you not see that God is trying experiments with human lives. That is why there are so many of them. He has one billion seven hundred million experiments going around the world at this moment. And His

Introduction

question is, “How far will this man and that woman allow me to carry this hour?”¹⁰

How far? Frank Laubach devoted his life to this one question. He got very practical, using images, props, notes, Scripture, pictures, sounds, and anything else to remind himself to live in the presence of God. In his books he outlined dozens of ways that he would try to help his mind, minute by minute, realize that God was with him all through the day.

Far from making himself into a hermit, this partnership with God thrust Laubach back into the world and made him into an unbelievable blessing for others. He believed the acid test of true spiritual life is that it leads you to feed the hungry, visit the sick, give where there’s poverty, serve where there’s need.

That’s what happened to him. He became the leader of the worldwide literacy movement. (The phrase, “Each one, teach one” originated with him.) He became an advisor to U.S. presidents. He was also one of the primary shapers of U.S. foreign policy after WWII—especially the Marshall plan that rebuilt cities out of ashes.

Frank Laubach’s secret was simple: He learned to walk with God. He put feet to his faith so that every moment was an experiment in trusting Jesus. He lived simply, deeply, continuously, one day at a time in conversation with Christ. Like Enoch, he walked with God.

If God were inducting modern-day saints into His Westminster Abbey, no doubt Frank Laubach would have a plaque in his honor.

For in his weakness, he was made strong. In his trials, he was called to faith. In his faith, he was made perfect. Frank Laubach discovered the perfection of Jesus—residing moment by moment in Him.

You, too, can enter into this adventure. How? By faith.

BRINGING IT HOME

*Who do I think would be included in God’s Westminster Abbey today?
Why?*

PILGRIM'S PROBLEMS

What step of faith is God asking me to take right now?

What weaknesses do I have that God might use as my strengths?

How can I use my trials to build faith?

Devise a personal plan to practice Laubach's technique of living every minute in the presence of Jesus. Take a risk today that requires reckless faith in God. Write a letter to God confessing your imperfections. Ask Him to change you from the inside out.

¹ Hebrews 11:1-4.

² Hebrews 11:5, 6.

³ Hebrews 11:7.

⁴ Hebrews 11:8-12.

⁵ Hebrews 11:23-29.

⁶ 2 Corinthians 12:9, 10, *The Message*.

⁷ Adapted from Bob Teague, *Live and Off-Color: News Biz* as found on Web site: <<http://www.christianglobe.com/Illustrations/theDetails.asp?whichOne=f&whichFile=faith>>

⁸ Hebrews 11:39, 40.

⁹ Ellen White, *God's Amazing Grace*, 1973, p. 10.

¹⁰ Frank Laubach, *Letters By A Modern Mystic, Excerpts from letters written at Dansalan, Lake Lanao, Philippine Islands* as quoted at <<http://durrance.com/laubach.htm>>.

CHAPTER ONE

Failure

“A failure, within God’s purpose, is no longer really a failure. Thus the cross, the Supreme Failure, is at the same time the Supreme Triumph of God, since it is the accomplishment of the purpose of salvation.”

—PAUL TOURNIER

Two bums were leaning against a tree in the fields. One said, “I’m sick and tired of this life. I’m sick and tired of sleeping in the cold and rain, begging for food, wearing torn clothes. I’m sick of it.”

The second bum said, “If you feel like that, why don’t you get a job?”

The first bum sat up and said, “And admit I’m a failure?”

Generally speaking, we’re not big on admitting failure. Even though we’ve all been bummed out by that feeling, right? Failure is that familiar feeling of saying something you regret, of compromising your integrity, of caving in to the same old sin, of being paralyzed by lurid thoughts, of snubbing God—again.

And whether you care to admit it or not, failure is a part of your spiritual portfolio. Every pilgrim’s got a problem on this one. But don’t despair. Consider Karen Mains’s take on failure:

Nature shouts of this beginning-again-God, this God who can make all our failures regenerative, the One who is God of risings again, who never tires of fresh starts, nativities, renaissances in persons or in culture. God is a God of starting over, of genesis and re-genesis. He composts life’s sour fruits, mold-ering rank and decomposing; He applies the organic matter to

PILGRIM'S PROBLEMS

our new day chances; He freshens the world with dew; He hydrates withered human hearts with his downpouring spirit.¹

The psalmist put it like this: “My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.”² The author of Lamentations adds, “Because of the Lord’s great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.”³

No matter the magnitude of your failure, you can begin again. This truth sings from the story of Jacques Celliers. Since stories tend to be our strongest teachers, we’ll devote the remainder of this chapter to one story. Let’s begin with the tragic end of his story.

Jacques Celliers died in Java, at a prisoner-of-war camp just before peace was declared in 1945. In gross violation of camp rules, an irate Japanese officer was poised to execute one of the prisoners. In an attempt to save his friend’s life, Celliers approached the Japanese officer and kissed him on both cheeks like a French general honoring a soldier after a decoration for valor. The shock and humiliation of this gesture so infuriated the officer that he had Celliers killed instead.

***Reconciliation is not weakness
or cowardice. It demands courage,
nobility, generosity, sometimes heroism,
an overcoming of oneself
rather than of one’s adversary.***

—POPE PAUL VI

The manner of Celliers’s death was disturbingly inhumane. The prisoners were ordered to dig a hole in the center of the compound. Celliers was then escorted out of his cell and dumped into the hole. His comrades were then forced to fill the hole, leaving exposed only Celliers’s bruised head. Two days later, his strikingly handsome face and sun-bleached hair slumped into the dirt.

Before he died, however, Celliers recorded his life story. Wrapping his journal in a piece of military ground cloth, he buried it in

Failure

the cell floor where it was later discovered. In it, the story of Celliers's triumph over failure is preserved. It begins with these sobering words:

I had a brother once and I betrayed him. The betrayal in itself was so slight that most people would find "betrayal" too exaggerated a word, and think me morbidly sensitive for so naming it. Yet as one recognizes the nature of the seed from the tree, the tree by its fruit, and the fruit from the taste on the tongue, so I know the betrayal from its consequences and the tyrannical flavour it left behind it in my emotions.⁴

Celliers was the oldest of four children—two girls, two boys. Both of the girls died in the typhoid epidemic that ravaged their homeland of South Africa. Thus only the two boys remained.

There could not be a sharper contrast between Celliers and his brother. Celliers was tall, strong, and incredibly handsome. His skin was flawless, his face punctuated by dark blue eyes and crowned in flowing blond hair. Stories flourished of times when Celliers would walk into a crowded room and people would cease their conversations to stare. Celliers was a natural leader with a keen intellect, a sharp tongue, and natural athletic abilities. He fostered a deep love for the outdoors, often roaming the bushveldt of South Africa to observe the majestic animals. It was clear that destiny had smiled upon him at birth.

His brother, seven years his junior, was different in every possible way. He was short, awkward, poor at academics, and as athletic as a platypus wearing ice skates. His hair was thick and dark and grew menacingly low onto his forehead. His skin was Mediterranean olive. His eyes burned of an intense radiant blackness, which prompted Celliers to later recount, "I could never look in them without feeling curiously disturbed and uncomfortable." Celliers also added, "I wish I could deal more firmly with this subtle discomfort but I cannot. I only know it was there from the beginning and as far back as I can remember it expressed itself from time to time in an involuntary feeling of irritation which, no matter how unreasonable and unfair, no matter what precautions I took to the contrary, would break out im-

PILGRIM'S PROBLEMS

patiently from me.”⁵ He cared little for animals but loved to work in dirt. Whatever he planted seemed to grow.

There was one area, however, where genetics had flipped the coin. Celliers was tone deaf. In contrast, from an early age the younger brother had a clear, unhesitating soprano voice which developed as he grew older into a manly and perfectly pure tenor instrument. He even composed music that moved the deepest emotions. Celliers recalled a signature tune that always stirred his innermost, unrealized longings. The lyrics went like this:

Ride, ride through the day,
Ride through the moonlight
Ride, ride through the night.
For far in the distance burns your fire
For someone who has waited long.

But there was one irregularity, more than any other that blighted that brother's life. Between his shoulders grew a razor-edged hump. It brought him such shame that he never spoke of it. His mother padded his jackets to try and camouflage that awful projection. Although it was actually nothing more than a slight deformity, it grew like a mountain in his mind, making him a recluse from the world. In his journal Celliers recounts, “We never referred to it by name. We always designated it by an atmospheric blank in our sentences. For instance, I would say, ‘But if you do go swimming there wouldn't they see...blank.’ Or he to me: ‘D’you think if I wore that linen jacket it would...blank...you know?’ ”⁶

That hump is what prompted Celliers to begin his story with the confession, “I had a brother once and I betrayed him.” The torment of his failure dated back to his senior year in school. Half-way through that last year, Celliers' parents decided to send his brother to join him at boarding school. Although the brother needed another year at the village school, the parents thought it would be easier for him if he had an older brother to guide his awkward paces that first year away from home.

The year had gone well for Celliers. He recalls,

I was in the first eleven, captained the first fifteen, won the

Failure

Victor Lodorum medal at the annual inter-school athletics, and was first in my final form. . . . Both masters and boys confidently predicted that at the close of the year I would be awarded the most coveted prize of the school, that for the best all-round man of the year. It was to this brilliant and crowded stage that I returned from vacation with my strange brother at my side.⁷

Little did Celliers anticipate how quickly the students would spread the news of this “strange fish” that had been thrown up on the school beach when his brother arrived. Celliers recalls, “From the very first evening, the start was not encouraging. First impressions are important to the young and never more important than when there are initiation rites to perform.”⁸

***Forgiveness is the fragrance
that the flower leaves on the heel
of the one who crushed it.***

—MARK TWAIN

Celliers had discussed the initiation proceedings on numerous occasions with his brother. He told him about running the gauntlet in pajamas with the students standing in two rows flicking wet towels plaited to a fine lashlike point; about waking up at night and finding a boy sitting with pillows on his head while others put a slip-knot of a fishing line round his toes and pulled at them until they bled in a perfect circle; about being made to measure the distance from school to town with his toothbrush on the holidays. As Celliers described the type of initiations that could transpire, nothing seemed to dismay the brother. The only thing he truly feared was his back being exposed and ridiculed.

On numerous occasions Celliers responded to his brother’s big question: “You don’t suppose they would make fun of . . . you know . . . will they?”

PILGRIM'S PROBLEMS

"Of course not," Celliers replied. "You're going to a decent school, not a calf pen."⁹

In spite of Celliers's emphatic answer, his brother worried constantly about being exposed. Over and over Celliers heard the same question: "They won't—will they?"

One evening Celliers snapped. "Won't what? Never ask me again! Do you understand?"

The question was on his brother's lips again as Celliers conducted rounds of the dormitories the night before the initiations were to take place. Noticing his brother's apprehension, Celliers turned quickly away and bade him a curt "good night" before slamming the door.

After rounds Celliers joined the head monitors of the other three dorms in the office of the captain of the school. Following the usual pleasantries, the captain said, "We need to talk about the little matter of tomorrow's initiation. I take it you've all interviewed the newcomers in your houses. Have you any youngster you think should be excused?"

"Yes," the young man next to Celliers replied. "I have a boy with a weak heart who brought a doctor's certificate."

"No problem," the captain replied.

"Yes," said another, "I have a boy who is blind as a bat. He'd probably better be excused all the physical rites though there is no reason why he shouldn't be available for the rest of the fun."

After a couple other students were mentioned, the captain looked keenly at Celliers. "No one?" the captain asked.

"No," Celliers said.

"You've got a young brother in your house, haven't you?" the captain asked.

"I have."

"What about him?"

"Well, what about him?" Celliers sparred.

"I was merely wondering if he was all right—"

"Of course he's all right." Celliers's answer was vehement; still the captain persisted.

"Forgive me, old chap," he said. "I don't want to badger you. If you say he's all right we all accept it. But, knowing you, we realize the last

Failure

thing you'd ask for would be special dispensation for a relative. So if you've any reason for wanting your brother excused tomorrow we'd none of us think of it as favouritism."

Spontaneous agreement was expressed around the table. But Celliers insisted, "Awfully decent of you but there's no reason, honestly."

The following day after classes, Celliers hid in the distance as he spied on his brother standing by the door of the senior science laboratory. He stood tentative, as he always did when possessed by only one thought.

Suddenly a stampede of unruly students appeared. They hoisted the Celliers kid on their shoulders and started chanting, "Why was he born so beautiful, why was he born at all?" The mob grew rowdier and rowdier until one of the bigger boys shouted, "Chaps, this newcomer has got to do something for our entertainment. What shall it be?"

"Make him sing," a voice from the mob replied.

"Right!" the student punched him with a fist on the shoulder and demanded, "Come on, Greenie, you've had your orders. Sing, blast you, sing!"

Celliers remembers it like this:

Music as I have told you was peculiarly my brother's own idiom. With the prospect of singing, even in such circumstances, his courage appeared to come back. He obeyed at once and began to sing:

Ride, ride through the day,
Ride through the moonlight
Ride, ride through the night.
For far in the distance burns the fire
For someone who has waited long.

The opening notes were perhaps a trifle uncertain but before the end of the first line his gift for music confidently took over. By the second line his little tune sounded well and truly launched. But he didn't realize, poor devil, that the very faultlessness of his performance was the worst thing that could have happened. ... The boys, quick to feel that the clear voice singing with such unusual authority was cheating the design of its ritual uttered an extraordinary howl of disapproval.¹⁰

PILGRIM'S PROBLEMS

The gang began to press toward a long, deep horse trough chanting, "Greenie's a liar and a cheat, He can't sing a note. Greenie's a fraud: drown him, drown him in the moat!"¹¹

Celliers remembers what happened next:

For a moment my brother's white face remained outlined against the afternoon fire flaming along the red-brick quadrangle wall, his eyes ceaselessly searching the screaming, whistling mob of schoolboys. Then he vanished like the last shred of sail of a doomed ship into a grasping sea. ... I could not see what was happening. My experience told me that my brother was being ducked vigorously in the trough as we had all been before him. I knew the "drown" in the chant really meant "duck." All the same I was extremely nervous. I watched the struggle and tumult of yelling heads and shoulders by the water-trough, wondering whether it would never end.¹²

Instantly the crowd went motionless and silent. An arm shot up holding a shirt and behind it a naked torso.

Those who experience soul hunger are to be blessed with satisfaction. Their earnest, prayerful struggles will not be in vain; for there is no failure with God. For all our imperfections there is forgiveness with God.

—ELLEN WHITE, *SINGS OF THE TIMES*,

SEPTEMBER 5, 1895

"Look, chaps!" a voice rang out with a curious reflection. "Greenie has a humpback!"

For a moment there was silence as the boys stared at the dripping wet hump. Then they exploded with laughter, twisting and turning in hysterics.

Failure

In that moment of terror, a teacher burst onto the scene and squelched the madness. But peace came too late and at too high a cost. That young, vulnerable, awkward boy was scarred for life. After the revealing of his ugly scar, he dropped out of school.

Celliers remembered and lamented in his prison cell, "I had a brother once and I betrayed him." Celliers felt overwhelmed by his failure. The brothers rarely spoke again after the incident. A door on brotherhood had been slammed so tightly shut that neither of the two boys could pry it open.

The young brother went home to his garden and solitude and never sang a note. Celliers graduated and became a successful lawyer, but his heart was empty.

At the outbreak of World War II, Celliers was one of the first to volunteer. Although he was recruited for an administrative post in the Adjutant-General's department, Celliers insisted that he be commissioned in the infantry instead. Getting his wish, he was soon sent with the first division of infantry to the battlefields of North Africa. There, the great need was for a special patrol to capture enemy soldiers to provide them information. Celliers volunteered to carry out this dangerous mission and penetrate deep behind enemy lines. In this military maneuver Celliers found his niche. Coupled with his lifetime's experience in stalking game in his native land, Celliers was uniquely gifted for this task, thus ensuring success. He describes it like this:

I got better and better at killing. In particular I was so good at the kind of raid I have described that I was taken away from my battalion and set to plan and lead raids further and deeper behind the enemy lines. I came back each time impatient of offers of leave and rest, asking only to be kept active and employed. I volunteered for every difficult and hazardous operation. . . . I gave myself no time for anything except war, hoping thereby to escape from my shadows, but they were too adroit for me.¹³

Next, Celliers was sent on a special mission to Palestine. He was stationed at a monastery called Imwash, one of the traditional sites of

PILGRIM'S PROBLEMS

the ascension of Christ. The monks had vacated the space only days before their arrival, leaving fresh smells of frankincense and myrrh hanging about the cool corridors and gray stone halls.

Almost immediately, Celliers fell ill with malaria. In the past he had recovered quite quickly, but on this occasion the fever wouldn't break. With the help of his batman, Celliers was moved out of the monastery into the open, under the canopy of clouds and stars that he loved so much. There he could be closer to the healing powers of nature.

Being outdoors, as it turned out, only prompted more bouts of delirium. Looking toward the holy shrine that marked the spot where tradition claims that Jesus ascended, Celliers believed he saw Jesus with the disciples. In his hallucination he heard someone say, "Judas is dead! Judas is dead!"

Celliers saw himself, as it were, approaching Jesus and saying, "There are many rumors in Jerusalem and Rome that are not true. See, I am Judas . . . I am alive and I am here."

Celliers believed Jesus took both his hands and helped his fever-riddled body to its feet. Then, looking upward, Jesus exclaimed, "Thank you, Father. Now at last we can both be free."

"But I'm not free," Celliers protested. "I had a brother once and I betrayed him—"

"Go to your brother," Jesus replied, "and make your peace with him even as I have had to do with my need of you."

In that moment the fever broke and sweat poured out like a tropical rain. Celliers determined to visit his brother at any cost, for he would not carry the lie of his betrayal with him to death.

Before breakfast the next day, Celliers summoned a doctor from Jerusalem and secured a month's convalescent leave. Though everyone thought it would be impossible, Celliers then managed to get from Palestine to Egypt and from Egypt to South Africa, with the help of old friends in the South African Air Force.

While driving to his brother's home, Celliers noticed how parched the land was. There was no grass left on the veldt, and the scrub was twisted and burnt black by the sun's fire; sheep and cows were so lean that their ribs and bones seemed about to pierce their taut skins. Vultures circled continually overhead. The smell of death was everywhere.

Failure

Arriving at his brother's home, Celliers approached the front door. Before he could knock, his brother's wife came out. Through a hardened expression she managed to utter a semblance of a greeting. "Well, this is a surprise. Come in and I'll call your brother. He'll be amazed to see you." And then she asked, "Why didn't you send us word you were coming?"

***A Christian will find it cheaper to
pardon than to resent. Forgiveness
saves the expense of anger, the cost of
hatred, the waste of spirits.***

—HANNAH MORE

"That's a long story," Celliers said, "and I can explain later. But where is he? I'll go and find him."

"Then I'll go on seeing to the dinner," she said. "He's in the garden at the back, giving the last of our water to the trees and vegetables. We've had a terrible time, as you've noticed I expect. No rain for a year. Sheep and cattle dying and all this lovely garden is practically dead." She glanced sharply at Celliers as if he'd been off on vacation rather than fighting a bloody war.

Celliers walked to the back of the house and saw his brother a short distance away, bent over a plant. The blighting hump was even more pronounced in middle age.

In a few strides, they were face to face. In his brother's dark eyes, Celliers saw a life imprisoned from a moment far back in time. "*Ouboet*," he said to his brother, using this Afrikaans term of endearment. "It's good to see you again, *Ouboet*—and still growing things."

The younger brother stammered. "*Ouboet*, um, I wish I'd known, ah, you were coming. I'd have liked to be there to meet you. But come on up to the house. You must be tired. Can you stay long?"

"No," Celliers explained quickly. "In a sense, I've no right to be here at all. It's taken me a fortnight to get here, and I'll be lucky to be back on the front in time if I'm not to get into serious trouble. So I'm going back in a few hours to catch the night train north. I've been hitch-hiking my way by air down here. I've come here just to see you."

PILGRIM'S PROBLEMS

"Really, *Ouboet*?" he said in disbelief. "Is that really so?"

"I've come all this distance to you because of my great wrong. Of all my failures in life, not one has plagued me more than the time I betrayed you. I am here to ask your forgiveness."

"Oh, but surely, *Ouboet*," he started to protest.

Begging him to listen, Celliers went on to recount in stark detail the events of that late afternoon when he had betrayed his brother. Pained, dark eyes locked with troubled blue eyes and in a broken voice the kid brother managed to say, "You mean you came all the way from Palestine to tell me this? You took the only leave you've ever had from the war to come and tell me this?"

Celliers nodded, too broken up to speak.

"*Ouboet*, you've done many fine things," the younger brother said, "but never a braver one than you've done today. At last we're free of it all, thanks to you." In that moment of love and forgiveness, the brother's love was reborn.

Celliers dismissed himself to prepare for tea. As he reached the steps of the house, he heard a crystal clear tenor voice, silent for decades, beginning to sing:

Ride, ride through the day,
Ride through the moonlight
Ride, ride through the night.
For far in the distance burns the fire
For someone who has waited long.

For the first time, Celliers heard a second stanza to the song:

I rode all through the day,
I rode through the moonlight
I rode all through the night.
To the fire in the distance burning
And beside the fire found
He who had waited for so long.

As if by some celestial cue, thunder rumbled deep in the angry sky. The cavalry of the great army of clouds was rounding up the last strays

Failure

of blue. The downpour of rain began to revive two shredded, separated lives. Physical rain, yes; but spiritual rain rejuvenated as well. On that day the rain of the Holy Spirit healed the scorched and stricken hearts.

That same Spirit is available to you. He longs to drown your failure today.

BRINGING IT HOME

What mistakes do I most deeply regret? Why?

How can I learn from my failures?

What does the story of Celliers teach me about failure?

Is there anyone with whom God would have me seek reconciliation? Why not do it now?

Write a modern paraphrase of Psalm 51.

Share the story of Celliers with a friend. Discuss specific ways you can practice the lessons from the story.

¹ Karen Mains, *With My Whole Heart*, as quoted in *Bible Illustrator*; by Parsons Technology, index 4034.

² Psalm 73:26.

³ Lamentations 3:22, 23.

⁴ Laurens van der Post, *The Seed and the Sower* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1963), 48.

⁵ Post, 53.

⁶ Post, 61.

⁷ Post, 76.

⁸ Post, 77.

⁹ Post, 79.

¹⁰ Post, pp. 87, 88.

¹¹ Post, 88.

¹² Post, pp. 88, 89.

¹³ Post, pp. 117, 118.