

Buzz King
buzz@BuzzKing.com
BuzzKing.com
303 437 7419

Acts 2:37–41, ESV

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The Sylmar Earthquake: Fish all over the floor.

When I was fifteen there was an earthquake in southern California that knocked down freeway overpasses, destroyed much of a large hospital, and destroyed many residential, retail, and industrial buildings. Our house was near the epicenter. It happened very early in the morning, before rush hour, which was the apparent reason that there were so few casualties. But sixty people were killed and there was about \$20 billion in damages.

Schools were of course cancelled because the freeways were down. My immediate reaction right after the house stopped shaking was that just the night before, I had taken my planarian home from science class; we had cut them in half, and I was waiting to watch the missing half grow back. The tiny planarian was lost forever somewhere in the mess of books, clothing, and overturned furniture in my bedroom. Our family had left a

huge mirror propped up against the wall in the hallway of our tiny house; it was shattered, and my father ran barefoot through the broken glass to see if the three of us kids were okay. Just a couple of days before, my older brother and I had switched beds, which meant that he was sleeping under a tall cinder block and board bookshelf that we had built; it landed on him, causing some cuts and bruising on his face. The duct work in the house was fractured in multiple places and the chimney fell. The kitchen floor buckled, and ever after that, there was a hump that you could trip on. A cast iron frying pan flew out of the oven and embedded itself in the opposite wall. The legs broke off our piano. But ours was a single-story house and it was wood frame. It flexed with the earthquake and there was, all in all, very little damage. Most of the houses in our neighborhood, however, were two stories tall and did significantly worse than ours. Up and down the street, there were houses with heavy structural damage. The nearby freeways, many of which stood on huge pillars, were destroyed. Interestingly, the heavy damage caused by that quake caused engineers to develop more earthquake resistant freeway designs, and the freeways that were then built to replace the damaged ones have survived multiple, hard quakes since then. My high school, many miles away and a mountain range away, suffered much damage, and when the school finally reopened many weeks later, I discovered that the forty-foot steeple on the chapel, which had fallen during the quake, had been replaced with a short, stubby thing.

The morning after the quake, a buddy of mine and I got on his motorcycle and

we rode around town looking at the damage. Much of the old downtown of where we lived at the time, which is in an area that is now called Santa Clarita, suffered minor to moderate damage. As we rolled through fallen bricks and broken glass, listening to burglar alarms ring, we came to the tropical fish store where had I bought the fantail mollies that I liked to breed at home; I would sell the babies back to the fish shop. We got off the motorcycle and stepped through the broken glass door. Inside, almost all the aquariums were on the cement floor. There was glass, water, and dead fish everywhere. The woman who owned the place stood in the center of the huge mess, her hands to her face, crying. I vividly remember her saying something like “I’m ruined. I’m not insured for any of this.” She turned to us and went on to say that she should never have invested everything she had – and borrowed a lot more – to start this stupid business. It had been her dream, and now it was destroyed. It’s the first time that I can remember truly feeling empathy for someone.

I’ll get back to this story, but let’s first look at a Bible quote. This is from Matthew, just before Jesus and the Apostles head for Gethsemane, where the Apostles will famously fall asleep right after Jesus asks them to please stay awake while he prays. Jesus is awaiting his arrest. He knows that he will be tried and killed. This is Matthew 26:30–35:

³⁰ And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. ³¹ Then Jesus said to them, “You will all fall away because of me this night. For it is written, ‘I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.’ ³² But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee.” ³³ Peter answered him, “Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away.” ³⁴ Jesus said to him, “Truly, I tell you,

this very night, before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times.”³⁵ Peter said to him, “Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you!” And all the disciples said the same.

Jesus tells Peter that Peter will, when challenged by people who are present when Jesus is arrested, lose his courage and deny being with Jesus. Peter claims he will not. But then, he does indeed let his fear get the better of him, and he denies being a follower of Jesus.

Here are verses 73 to 75 of the same chapter:

⁷³After a little while the bystanders came up and said to Peter, “Certainly you too are one of them, for your accent betrays you.”⁷⁴ Then he began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, “I do not know the man.” And immediately the rooster crowed.⁷⁵ And Peter remembered the saying of Jesus, “Before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times.” And he went out and wept bitterly.

This is a tremendous failure on his part, a great loss of standing with God, and we might think that Peter’s days as the leader of the Apostles and as the stone on which Jesus will build his church are over. He had just gone from being the most righteous of the Apostles, Jesus’ right-hand man, to claiming he doesn’t even know Jesus because he is afraid of being persecuted for his faith. At this point, we might wonder what will happen to him after Jesus dies.

But let’s look at what Luke tells us about Peter in the Book of Acts. Jesus has risen. He has handed the job of spreading the faith to his Apostles. The Holy Spirit has descended on the Apostles. Peter now emerges as a true leader. He is speaking to Jews. The time has not yet come for others like Paul to spread the faith to Gentiles. People are asking Peter and the other Apostles what they should do. They are asking for

spiritual guidance. We hear Peter declare the following to those who are seeking his advice. Here is Acts 2:37–41:

³⁷Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?” ³⁸And Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.” ⁴⁰And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, “Save yourselves from this crooked generation.” ⁴¹So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.

We are told that those who received his word were baptized, and that in fact there were about three thousand people baptized that day. It is all accomplished under the spiritual leadership of the Apostle who once denied knowing Jesus the Christ.

Peter, the man who once failed horribly, worse than any of us have ever failed at anything, ultimately becomes the seed of the new church. The faith will eventually spread outward from Jerusalem, and this speech that Peter makes in Acts is widely regarded as the very beginning of the birth of the church. We see that Jesus wasn’t wrong when early in his ministry he had declared this to Peter:

¹⁸“And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. ¹⁹I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”

Clearly, Jesus knew that Peter was human, that he had weaknesses, that he could fail, that he could make bad decisions. Most importantly, though, Jesus knew that Peter would turn his life around and be the founder of the church in Jerusalem.

In truth, we all face failure and loss. Often it is our own fault, often it is not.

Usually, it's a bit of both. There are things we could have done differently, even if we didn't do something out and out stupid. Spouses run off. Jobs are lost and careers are lost. We find ourselves hopelessly upside-down on a mortgage. We spend years and several tens of thousands of dollars on a secondary education, and we never get a job in our area of study. We get into legal trouble. Sometimes the failure is extremely horrific: we get badly injured while driving distractedly, we lose all our assets in a terrible investment, or legal troubles lead to a ruined life. Do we always bounce back and rise again, as Peter did?

Well, sometimes not in a way we would have predicted. Failure sometimes takes us in a different direction than we would ever have attempted. Failure or loss can take us to a place that's far better than we would have achieved without that failure. Perhaps if I had failed at getting tenure as a professor, I would have become a pastor at a much younger age. I am indeed happier now. In fact, sometimes success today proves many years later to be a failure. The bottom line is this: what matters is how, after a failure, we perceive the future. Have we given up? Do we believe that there is no way that a success that reverses and in fact overwhelms the failure could ever happen? Yes, it's true, though, that we sometimes never recover from a great loss. People sometimes lose children. They are gone forever in this world.

But when what has happened to us is so tragic, so overwhelming that we cannot

recover from it, we have no choice but to turn our futures over to God. It's when we can do that – that is when we allow God to make the best of our lives here on Earth and to lead us into the Kingdom of God. Continuing to live, holding that love you have for that lost child close to you, remembering the love that child gave you, and knowing that you can never lose that love and that someday, you will hold your child again – that is called faith. Very importantly, your personal nightmare will give you empathy for others, if you let it. Then as you step through life, though the Kingdom of God, you will be surprised at what God will let you do with that empathy, what you will do for others who are suffering.

That woman rebuilt her business. My friend and I, several months after the earthquake, walked past that store. We went in. There were new aquariums on the metal shelves. It turned out that she had found a tropical fish store that was going out of business. So, she bought the man's stock, including his equipment, cheaply. With a smile on her face, she told us how she had found a way to get back into business without borrowing much money at all. I told her that her new store looked better than the old, which was true. She beamed and said that indeed, although she had no earthquake insurance and had to pay for everything herself, she was able to do things better the second time. She had a brand-new section in her store, one devoted to salt water fish, which some businesses, like medical offices, were buying because they were so much more colorful than fresh water fish. She was spending a certain amount of time

maintaining huge tanks now, in those businesses. Because of this new line of commercial business, she was making more money than before the earthquake.

That business remained there for many years after the earthquake. I can remember when I was much older, and in graduate school, visiting my parents and going to that shop. The same woman was running it. She had several employees, and the store was packed with customers. I reminded her of who I was, the boy who had sold her black fantail mollies that he had bred at home and who had visited her shop the day of the Sylmar earthquake. She grinned and hugged me and told me it was great to see someone from the old days, someone who was there when she was at the bottom.

There is a failure, a loss that all of us believers are experiencing right now, and it's not our fault at all. It's the crumbling of the Church in America and western Europe. Churches are being shuttered. Huge evangelical churches have survived better, but all in all, there are far fewer practicing Christians in the United States than there were thirty years ago. Many people are wondering if we have hit bottom yet. But there have been very successful revivals in the past, where dwindling church memberships have led to a rethinking of how we should practice our faith. This has led to some very positive changes. If nothing else, the people who populate churches today are, on average, far more sincere believers than the typical believers in the 60's, 70's, and 80's, who came to church simply because society expected it of them. And churches are

growing strongly in other parts of the world, like Central and South America, parts of Asia, and Africa. It could be that one day, those folks will evangelize Americans. Many of the immigrants coming into this country now are believers and they are helping to populate our churches. I believe that the day will come when Christianity will be like Peter, going from the depths of failure to a truly exalted level of success.

This church survived the pandemic; many churches did not. But the pandemic, which tore a hole in many congregations, caused churches to learn about video, audio, the Internet, and social media, and in general, forced us to learn to reach out to the rest of the world electronically. In the end, this will lead us to do great things, and most churches would not have entered the digital age if they had not been forced to.

We also need to have faith that God will never put a burden on us that we cannot overcome. God will never take us to a place where we cannot be more than we were before. Peter knew that he had failed. It's hard to blame him. He was trying to stay alive. The Bible tells us that after he denied Jesus, he went out and wept bitterly. But he did not let this huge failure break him. He became determined to be the leader that Jesus needed. He did become the rock, the cornerstone of the church. We need to let every failure we suffer give us an opportunity to learn, to seek God's guidance more strongly than ever, and become more than we would have without the failure.

Importantly, Peter's success, his recovery from failure was perhaps not the success that his worldly peers would have envied. It is widely believed that Peter was

eventually executed because of his faith. Nero burned much of Rome in 64 A.D., and when the public became enraged, he deflected his guilt by blaming it on the followers of Jesus. This led to an intense wave of persecution, and it is believed that Peter was crucified this same year or shortly thereafter. We don't have firm evidence, as the Bible does not explicitly tell us how Peter died and does not place him in Rome. But Ignatius, an early Christian writer and the Patriarch of the church in Antioch, wrote in approximately the year 110 A.D. that Peter was a leader of the church in Rome, and so did Irenaeus, a Greek Bishop, in about 180 A.D. This would have placed Peter in Rome during the reign of Nero. And in A.D. 195, Tertullian, who played a major role in growing the Roman church and giving it legitimacy, wrote:

"But if you are near Italy, you have Rome, where authority is at hand for us too. What a happy church that is, on which the apostles poured out their whole doctrine with their blood; where Peter had a passion like that of the Lord."

Other Christian writers in the period from 100 A.D. to 300 A.D. also wrote that Peter was executed. There are also people who feel that these words of Jesus, as quoted in the Gospel of John, predicts Peter's execution. After Jesus has arisen from the dead and appeared to the Apostles, he says this to Peter:

¹⁸ Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go."

We do need to trust God to help us turn our failures and our losses into successes

and gains. But we also must let God decide just what kind of success he wants from us.

Peter's life was apparently cut short because he overcame his failure. He did indeed let God decide how he would move forward and serve God.

Finally, we must let our faith be the power that allows us to rise up when others collapse and give up. We need to overcome our failures and our losses, and let God direct us where we will go, and most of all, we must never, never give up on serving God and God's people. Let me finish with Proverbs 24:16:

¹⁶ *for the righteous falls seven times and rises again,
but the wicked stumble in times of calamity.*