

### If You Couldn't Fail

It is an especially solemn experience to overhear someone who loves us pray for us; to overhear, late at night, our mother or father praying for our safety as we prepare to go off to college or work or war. In the seventeenth chapter of St. John's Gospel we are privileged to overhear just such a prayer of Jesus for us. He was leaving us and going to the Father, and in his absence our safety was his great concern. John Calvin wrote, "The object of the whole prayer is that the disciples may not lose heart, as if their state were worsened by the bodily absence of their Master. ...when the disciples were deprived of Christ's bodily presence it was no detriment to them, because God received them under His guardianship, the power of which is everlasting."

~~This is a picture, not only of Christ on the night he was betrayed, but~~  
also of the ascended Christ today at prayer. Listen to what he's praying. Christ prays that God will protect us so that we might be a united church; that none of us might be lost; that God would keep us from the evil one; and that we might be dedicated to carrying out to its completion Christ's mission to the world. The success of that mission has been guaranteed by the crucifixion of Christ. The crucifixion was like D-Day. Forty years ago General Eisenhower and Field Marshall Montgomery watched over the D-Day invasion of Normandy as millions of G.I.s stormed Omaha and Utah beach. The successful outcome of that invasion guaranteed allied victory over the forces of Nazi totalitarianism. Nineteen and twenty year old soldiers went on to liberate Europe and bring an end to the satanic concentration camps. Many gallant soldiers still would die before Victory Europe day, but the final outcome had been decided.

The day that Christ died is the Christian's D-Day. On the cross Christ

was locked in deadly battle with the Prince of Darkness. It looked as though Christ were pinned down forever by those nails. He died in the struggle. But three days later he rose victorious from the dead to tell us the outcome of his battle. Christ was wounded but Satan's head had been crushed. Satan's power had been vanquished. He had wrested Satan's throne. He had harrowed hell. That was the *church's* D-Day. That day the outcome of the war with Satan was forever settled.

Then the church, led by the Risen Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit, and having established a beach-head in this world in Jerusalem on that first Pentecost Sunday, went out to conquer Palestine and Rome and the utter most parts of the world for Christ. And ever since that time the hosts of hell have been on the run wherever the Gospel of the Kingdom has been proclaimed in power. ~~Christ has given us orders to carry the attack~~ all the way to the gates of hell. It's not the church that's suppose to be on the defense between now and Christ's return. It's the devil that's should be on the defense. Christ has promised that the gates of hell shall not prevail.

So confident is Christ of the final victory that he left the field of battle forty days after his resurrection, on Ascension day, like a general who leaves before the battle is entirely over and goes home confident that his army will complete the task.

His kingdom cannot fail--  
 He rules o'er earth and heav'n;  
 The keys of death and hell  
 Are to our Jesus giv'n:  
 Lift up your heart,  
 lift up your voice!  
 Rejoice, again I say, rejoice!

But so often we do not rejoice. We go lippity-lippity, like Peter

Rabbit in Farmer MacGregor's garden, afraid of failure, in fear of the defeated devil, hoping to be snatched out of the sinful world; a sorry, wretched, ragged, discouraged, bunch of pilgrims who more often look like refugees fleeing in disarray from disaster than kings and priests preparing to enter into our inheritance.

Listen to what's being said, in print and on radio and TV by a good many evangelical Christians. It could be summarized like this: "Yes, the world is in a mess, but this has been predicted in the Bible; the world is radically sinful and ruled by the devil. But don't worry. When the time comes, all true Christians will be snatched out of the world to dwell in safety with the Lord." The implications of this teaching are obvious: there is nothing Christians can do about the evil in the world, no steps we can take which will avert the monstrous catastrophe; all we can do is comfort one another in our catacombs until we are snatched away to heaven. The appeal of such thinking is surely to our selfish instincts. The world may be going to hell, but 'when the roll is called up yonder, I'll be there'. That to me rules it out as an expression of the mind of Christ.

But what if we could overhear Jesus praying for us? With what confidence would soldiers march into battle if they knew their army was assured of ultimate victory? And when we over-hear Jesus praying for us now, with what confidence would we go into battle today against evil. If this morning we would over-hear the ascended Christ praying for us surely we would re-dedicate our lives to the cause of Christ, confident that God will protect us from ultimate failure.

How many great things never happen because we fear failure? Some people hesitate to dedicate their lives to Christ whole-heartedly because they're afraid they'll fail and make a fool of themselves or of Christ. But

*you turn down a job...  
you settle for less than God  
wants you to be...*

what if you couldn't fail ultimately? Of course you'll have set-backs. The economy might take a turn for the worse and you could lose your job. You could lose your shirt on the stock-market. You could lose your wife or husband or a child. You could lose your health. But Christ's *final* victory, and ours, is assured. All injustice will come to an end. Every tear shall be wiped away. Death shall be swallowed up in victory. Ultimate victory is assured.

What if we approached every area of life from this perspective? Ultimate victory has been assured. Ultimately what's done for Christ cannot fail. <sup>when you go to work tomorrow... school... have that argument with your spouse...</sup> What if a united church throughout the world worked for <sup>For, in a wider context,</sup> world peace the way the church fought to end the slave trade 200 years ago. Back then cynical people, aware of the power of evil in the world (but not so aware of the power of Christ) said that slavery couldn't be wiped out. They acquiesced to evil. But people like John Newton and William Wilburforce believed that Christ is king and that the church was to complete his mission. Because of their untiring labors slavery was outlawed. What if we were to put our energies as Christians into stopping the weapons race with the confidence that our efforts cannot ultimately fail? What if we were to say that Christ is king and these dangerous toys have no place in his kingdom?

One hundred and fifty years ago William Carey spoke of sharing Christ with the heathen, and the church rocked with laughter at so crazy a scheme. "When God is pleased to save the heathen he will do it without our help!" They mocked Carey. They were convinced that his efforts would come to nothing because the heathen darkness was so deep. But William Carey has had the last laugh. For the first time in its history, the Church has become a truly global religion. The people who walked in darkness, on

when you're change one diaper too many... you're discouraged... ready to throw in the towel...  
~~remember if you~~  
 praying for you... that you remain united...  
 that you not fail... that you not give into no evil one.

them has light shine. What if some of the confidence that inspired Carey were to energise us <sup>as a church</sup> even on a small neighborhood scale. What if we would break out of our narrow Christian ghettos and begin to invite our unchurched neighbors to our homes for desert in order to develop trusting relationships that would open doors for the sharing of the gospel? Why not have START dinners to which at least half of those invited were non-churched? We couldn't fail to see Christ's kingdom grow.

G.K. Chesterton once asserted that "every real Christian who believes in his faith must do two things, he will dance, and he will fight; dance, for sheer happiness; make war because he has discovered something that is irresistible, and opens a sure path to triumph." Today, risk something for God that you've never risked before knowing that Christ has opened a sure path to triumph. ~~You can't ultimately fail. All of our failures are~~ temporary failures if God is their watching us, keeping us, sanctifying us. If you've tried and failed to live daily for Christ, try again knowing that, ultimately, you will see victory. If you've failed as a parent, husband or wife then pick up the pieces and move on in the knowledge that God will keep and protect you as you daily dedicate yourself to his service. If you've failed in your faith and are full of doubts, don't give up. Christ has promised that those who seek shall find. Don't give up on the means of grace and the basic Christian disciplines of daily prayer, daily reading of Scripture and the gathering together every Sunday for the service of Word and Sacrament. Don't give up fighting for peace, honesty and decency in society. Don't give up striving to be more like Christ. And above all, rejoice-- the Lord is King! Your Lord and King adore! Rejoice, give thanks, and sing and triumph evermore.

"Now unto him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the

presence of his glory with exceeding joy, to the only wise God our Savior, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen.

Let us pray: O God, the King of glory, you have exalted your only Son Jesus Christ with great triumph to your kingdom in heaven: Do not leave us comfortless, but send us your Holy Spirit to strengthen us, and exalt us to that place where our Savior Christ has gone before; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, in glory everlasting. *Amen.*

(A sermon preached at Knox Presbyterian Church, Kenmore, NY, by the revd. Theodore S. Atkinson on 18 May 1985, the Sunday after Ascension Day, on the Gospel text, St. John 17:11b-19)