

Jesus: The Teacher Who Failed

BY GEORGE R. KNIGHT

Picture
Removed

Not only did the disciples fail to understand Jesus' repeated predictions of His death and resurrection, but up to the time of His crucifixion, not even one of them appears to have been converted.

Picture
Removed

It had been a terribly hard day in my small multigrade classroom in San Marcos, Texas. The students were noisy and rather belligerent, I was tired and cross, and an irate parent had nearly “strangled” me.

Maybe I was in the wrong business. Maybe I wasn't cut out to be a teacher. Perhaps, I thought, I ought to just hang up my gloves and call it quits. Maybe I should just face the fact that I had failed.

The Failure of Jesus

That's where the good news comes in. The good news is that Jesus, the greatest Teacher who ever lived, also failed.

Jesus failed! How, you may be thinking, can that be good news? Stick with me and we will see—but first we need to look at the dismal depths of His failure.

Just think about it for a moment. Jesus had only 12 students. They not only heard His lessons, they also lived with Him nearly constantly for three years. Yet not one of them grasped the message He had so earnestly and repeatedly sought to teach.

Not only did the disciples fail to understand Jesus' repeated predictions of His death and resurrection, but up to the time of His crucifixion, not even one of them appears to have been converted.

One betrayed Him, His chief disciple cursed and swore that he didn't know Him, and all of them disputed about “which of them was to be regarded as the greatest” when He told them He would die for them. Self-glorification is the core problem of sin, yet Christ's disciples were hung up even on that topic as He

trod the path to Gethsemane (Matthew 26:69-75; Luke 22:14-53; cf. Matthew 20:17-28). They hadn't even made it to first base. Yet it was to these very disciples that Jesus willed the leadership of His church.

Talk about failure! Let's face it, when Jesus came to the end of His teaching ministry, it didn't appear that any of His disciples had heard Him. Three years of intensive teaching, with no converts in the inner circle. Three years of preaching, and His audience had failed to respond. And now He was going to lay down His life for those kinds of people.

How Would You Have Reacted?

How would you have felt in such a situation? Would you die for such people? And yet the unconverted disciples were just the tip of Jesus' iceberg of failure. As He hung on the cross, passersby “derided him, wagging their heads and saying, ‘You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.’” In a similar fashion, the leaders of the Jews “mocked him, saying, ‘He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he desires him, for he said, ‘I am the Son of God.’” Even “the robbers who were crucified with him also reviled him in the same way” (Matthew 27:39-44, RSV).

Would you have died for such belligerent students? I wouldn't. If I were Jesus, I would have got off my cross and showed them exactly who I was. With a flick of my finger, I could have obliterated such a wayward class with a local nuclear demonstration—but that would have been too quick for my liking. I think roasting them at a slow sizzle would have been more effective in getting my message across. None of them would forget that object lesson!

In short, I don't think I would have died for either the deaf disciples or the wayward crowds. But Jesus did.

And yet He went to His grave as an apparent failure. If He had gone by merely outward appearances of imme-

With a flick of my finger, I could have obliterated such a wayward class with a local nuclear demonstration—but that would have been too quick for my liking.

Picture
Removed

diate success, Jesus would have folded up His lecture notes and turned in His credentials.

I Don't Want to Be Like Jesus

Christians hear repeatedly that they ought to be like Jesus. But I don't want to be like Jesus in some ways. I don't want to be a teacher who fails. I don't do well with discouraging days or unruly, thick-headed students. I get depressed and begin to wonder if the world (or at least the teaching profession) wouldn't be better off without me.

To put it mildly, I like success. In fact, I thrive on it. And I don't mean success in the by-and-by. I mean success *today* where I can see it, smell it, savor it, grasp it, touch it, and, best of all, report it to the conference office or the local school constituency. "Look at me," I want to shout as I exhibit my accomplishments.

I don't want to be like Jesus. I don't want to be like the teacher who failed. I want to be greater than Jesus. I want everything I touch to be a shining success. The only problem with that desire is that it hasn't come true. I have to face the same problems and the same kinds of people that Jesus faced, and the sad truth is that often I have had the same kind of results. I am not greater than Jesus. I also fail.

Success Beyond Failure

Yet, I have discovered, apparent failure and ultimate failure are not the same thing. I still remember my first evangelistic series. It took place in Corsicana, Texas, a town of 26,000 people with an Adventist church of 12 members. And of those

12, nearly all were in their 70s and only one was a male. I was 26 at the time. Now, I have nothing against females. After all, my mother is one. And I have nothing against old people. In fact, I am becoming one. But I desperately desired to have young Adventists of both sexes in my meetings to serve as contact points for my hoped-for converts.

To my joy, there was a young Adventist student at the local community college. I visited his dormitory room, prayed with him, and pled with him to attend my meetings. He never did. I failed.

In fact, by that time I had managed to fail at quite a few things. The result: In the spring of 1969, I turned in my ministerial credentials. Unlike Jesus, I quit. I even decided to give up Adventism and Christianity.

A couple of years later, I was driving across north-central Texas and detoured off the interstate to buy something for my wife at the grocery store in Keene, the location of an Adventist college. While going through the front door, I was stopped by a young man.

"Aren't you George Knight?" he queried.

I admitted to that fact.

"Do you remember me?" he shot back.

Now at that point I usually try to fake it, but I was so discouraged that I just told him the truth.

"You visited me in my dorm room in Corsicana. That visit was the turning point in my life. I am now studying to be a Seventh-day Adventist minister."

I didn't tell him what I was doing.

You see, I had been successful and didn't know it. I had planted seeds that had germinated underground where I couldn't see them.

My problem was (and still is) that I not only want to plant, but also to water and harvest those seeds—all in one school term. I can't tolerate failure or even delay that appears to be failure. I want immediate success. I don't want to be like Jesus. I want to be greater than Jesus.

What I had to learn is that even though one may plant, it is others who water, and still others who harvest. Meanwhile, the Holy Spirit is quietly working in hearts at each stage of their development.

It was the same way in Christ's teach-

Picture
Removed

reach and knowledge! Parents and teachers lie down in their last sleep, their life-work seeming to have been wrought in vain; they know not that their faithfulness has unsealed springs of blessing that can never cease to flow; only by faith they see the children they have trained become a benediction and an inspiration to their fellow men, and the influence repeat itself a thousandfold. Many a worker sends out into the world messages of strength and hope and courage, words that carry blessing to hearts in every land; but of the results he, toiling in loneliness and obscurity, knows little. So gifts are bestowed, burdens are borne, labor is done. Men sow the seed from which, above their graves, others reap blessed harvests. They plant trees, that others may eat the fruit. They are content here to know that they have set in motion agencies for good. In the hereafter the action and reaction of all these will be seen" (*Education*, pp. 305, 306).

What a promise! What a reality!

We need to remember that Jesus was not only an apparent failure as a teacher, He was also the world's greatest success. He was able to persevere in the face of discouragement because He saw beyond outward appearances.

A Day With Jesus

We need to do the same thing, remembering that we see the Gospel record through the eyes of the Holy Spirit. As a result, given the purposes of the Gospels, it often seems to us that the three years Jesus spent with the disciples were packed with miracles and great teachings.

But I suspect that it looked quite different from inside the disciples' sandals. To them, a day with Jesus was merely another day of heat, dust, and sweat. They must have wondered: "Why does Jesus always have to walk so far? Doesn't He know we are hungry? And to top it all off, we have to walk with that loud and boisterous Peter, and James and John who had the gall to bring their mother [Jesus' aunt] to try to get them the right- and left-hand places in the kingdom. Who wants to spend every day with pushy Judas and the rest of these grippers and whiners?"

From the inside, their days may not have looked all that different from ours.

***I [want] success today
where I can see it,
smell it, savor it,
grasp it, touch it, and,
best of all, report it to
the conference office
or the local school
constituency.***

Similarly, we—like Jesus—need to look beyond the daily discouragements and problems we find in the school, the church, and in our lives to the God who is working behind the scenes in spite of human failings and weaknesses.

Our Responsibility

Our responsibility is not to worry about ultimate victory, but to do our part today. I remember more than 20 years ago when I was just beginning as a young professor at Andrews University. As a rosy-eyed young educational philosopher with revolutionary views, it had been my hope to get the whole place reformed and straightened out in short order. But the reformation wasn't progressing as rapidly as I had hoped. In fact, not much had changed since my arrival. I was ready to resign and do "something useful."

But by that time, I had learned a few things from the "failures" of Jesus. I finally went to God on my knees and committed myself to staying "in the work" if He would just let me touch one soul a year with His gospel of truth and love.

He has kept His end of the bargain. In fact, some years I have been able to touch more than one through God's grace. Over the years, the greatest inspiration in my teaching ministry has been the example of Jesus, the Teacher who failed but also succeeded. ✍

Dr. George R. Knight is Professor of Church History at Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan. He has authored or edited a number of books and articles on Adventist education.

ing ministry. By all standards, He was an outward failure. Even though He had planted and watered, it wasn't until after His resurrection and Pentecost that fruit came to maturity on every hand. That same experience is to be ours.

A Special Promise for Teachers

One of the most meaningful promises in Ellen White's writings is on this very topic. Speaking of the resurrection morning, she notes that the angel who watched over us in life will then inform us on the "history of divine interposition" in our "individual life, of heavenly co-operation in every work for humanity!"

"All the perplexities of life's experience will then be made plain. Where to us have appeared only confusion and disappointment, broken purposes and thwarted plans, will be seen a grand, overruling, victorious purpose, a divine harmony.

"There all who have wrought with unselfish spirit will behold the fruit of their labors. . . . Something of this we see here. But how little of the result of the world's noblest work is in this life manifest to the doer! How many toil unselfishly and unwearyedly for those who pass beyond their