

# Failure Redefined and Redeemed: A Fresh Perspective on Paul's Ministry and Ours

By Elliot Stephens

*Elliot Stephens (pseudonym) has served with Pioneers as a church planter, trainer, speaker, and global leader for 43 years. Elliot completed a PhD research project on the retention of overseas workers, has written articles on related topics, and is currently finishing his book about grace-empowered endurance, which is based on his research.*



When I arrived in our Southeast Asia Muslim context, a people group of nearly three million, there was no church. I was ready for the challenge. We had successfully planted churches in an animistic area in recent years and had relocated to this resistant people group who rejected any news of Jesus and the gospel.

I understood before I arrived that no church had ever been planted among this staunch Muslim group. But I was wrong. Soon after our arrival, one of the few believers in our area shared the story with us about church planters who had successfully planted a church. I was excited to hear of this breakthrough and wondered if we could meet some of the believers. But I soon learned that the only thing remaining of the church were the tombstones of those who had believed and died over the years. From what I could understand, it was a solid church plant with excellent teaching and a heart to see others come to faith. The church was planted by a missionary team sent out by an excellent agency. But today, there is nothing left from their work. No remnant of followers. Nothing.

Failure? Though there would be worshippers of God around the throne in heaven from this church planting effort, today nothing remains. No witness for the gospel left after a successful church plant. How do we define failure and true success in our church planting efforts?

As church planters, we don't arrive on the field to fail. We come to the field with high expectations of following the church planting manuals and setting records for planting churches rapidly in unreached contexts. We plan to write our books and share the stories of how God moved powerfully with dreams and visions, drawing people to Himself. Is there a place for failure in our stories? In ministry and life, have we understood failure correctly, or do we need to rethink our perspective on failure and success?

To answer these questions, we will look at the life and ministry of the most successful church planter in the New Testament – the apostle Paul – and discover how failure shaped his life and prepared him to impact his world (and ours) for the gospel in ways beyond human logic. Finally, we will consider how failure can be redefined and redeemed in our lives and in church planting.

## Did the Apostle Paul Experience Failure?

I have always loved the story of the Apostle Paul. A man full of conviction and zeal, on his way to Damascus to destroy the rising movement of people following Jesus. A bright light from heaven stops him dead in his tracks. He picks himself up, and *seemingly* overnight (after a few days in blindness), walks into the synagogue and appears to immediately become the mature missionary that turns his world upside down. And then he spends many years in an exciting church planting experience that marked the history of the church forever. What a story of success that we all wish would mark our journeys.

But then I began a deeper study into the life of the church planter Paul. What I learned surprised and encouraged me to stay the course, especially

when nothing makes sense and failure marks our lives and ministries. So, what really did mark the journey of this great church planter?

## ***The Zeal of the Persecutor-turned-Proclaimer***

It is true that Paul was a man of conviction, ambition, and unwavering zeal, ingredients that shape a potentially successful life. Before his conversion he was full of hatred towards the blasphemous Jesus followers and was out to destroy them (Gal. 1:13, 1 Tim. 1:13), leading a successful campaign with a sharp purpose. Then he encounters Jesus on the road to Damascus. Paul's purpose in life changes overnight. This is where my storybook version of Paul's life started to unravel. Though he did walk immediately into the synagogue in Damascus to proclaim Jesus, a careful reading of Acts 9 shows there is more to the story.

What we see in Damascus is a stunning demonstration of a man full of zeal, ready to argue and successfully show how "Jesus was the Christ" (Acts 9:22). Luke says that "Saul increased all the more in strength," a reference not to his physical recovery from his recent three days of fasting, but a growth in strength to argue his point for Christ as the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies.<sup>1</sup> Because of his instant change in direction and purpose from wreaking havoc on the followers of Jesus to preaching Christ, his message caused the Jews to be "confounded" rather than converted (Acts 9:22). The Greek word for "confound" actually means to throw into confusion or even consternation.<sup>2</sup> Though this Greek term could be translated with different nuances (positive or negative), the context implies that the Jews were shocked and agitated that the man who came to destroy the Jewish followers of Jesus was now one of them, which produced great confusion. Pollock, a historian, notes that "he reduced the Jews to confusion by proofs that Jesus was Christ," such that they "were amazed at his growth in understanding and conviction. Luke said he

---

1 Kistemaker 1990, 347

2 οὐνόχυρρον. Bauer's Definition, 775.

grew more and more forceful.”<sup>3</sup> Pollock continues by suggesting that Paul’s own words in 1 Corinthians 13 could be his reflection on his early years of arguing for Christ without love, making him a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.<sup>4</sup> That doesn’t exactly give us a picture of much success in his early attempts at sharing Christ.

There were those who believed his message. We know Paul had *some* disciples who helped him escape the Jews trying to kill him (Acts 9:24). But we don’t know how many decided to follow Jesus because of his teaching. At least he had enough disciples to lower him in a basket for his escape. Some suggest that Paul experienced “considerable success” with many coming to faith and house churches planted in Damascus.<sup>5</sup> If Luke, the careful historian of the early church did not mention churches planted in Damascus, I’d be hesitant to assume more than what is recorded. There is no mention of elders being appointed or churches established. We can agree that there was some fruit, but we do not know more than what is recorded by Luke.

Could it be that a more realistic reading of the Acts 9 account in Damascus leaves us wondering if Paul, in his great zeal and ambition to share Christ, had not learned love? A man breathing murder and threats only days before his conversion possibly needed to grow in love and humility. Was God at work preparing this great church planter for an impactful church planting ministry by first taking his apostle through a breaking experience that would teach Paul grace?

## Paul in Arabia: Fruitful Ministry or Consulting with God?

His escape from Damascus comes after he spends “many days” in Arabia, which we know is three years from what he shares in Galatians

---

3 Pollock 2012, 46

4 Ibid.

5 Schnabel 2008, 59

1:17. Paul spent those years in modern day Jordan, probably in the area of Petra. I've read fascinating books on Paul that assumed he went into Arabia for various reasons.

- The classic work by F.F. Bruce assumes that Paul went into Arabia primarily to satisfy his new call to preach Christ to the pagan Gentiles. Bruce argues that this was a necessary step in Paul's life and ministry so that he could "discharge this call before he went up to Jerusalem to see the apostles"<sup>6</sup> so that no one could say that his commission came from man and not God.
- Schnabel follows Bruce in this understanding as well and suggests that Paul went to Arabia "to engage in missionary work" as a direct application to Gal. 1:15-17 in obedience to proclaim Christ before "first conferring with the apostles in Jerusalem."<sup>7</sup> Thielman continues the same argument, suggesting that Paul's travel to Arabia "was in obedience to this new vocation."<sup>8</sup>
- N.T. Wright gives a quite different perspective. He suggests that to assume that Paul was launched immediately into missionary activity in Arabia may seem obvious but does not fully grasp the depth of what Paul was experiencing. He argues that Paul needed time to sort out his theology, so he journeyed back to the same places where his Old Testament fathers had met with God at Mt. Sinai. Paul's life and theology had been turned upside down. His entire theological foundation had been shaken to the core. Three days of blindness in Damascus would not have been enough time for him to work through all the ramifications of this new direction and purpose in life.

We discover from the Arabia journey something about Paul's own self-awareness, including at that point a perhaps welcome note of self-doubt in the midst of the zeal – the zeal of the persecutor and then the zeal of the proclaimer. Saul wanted to be clear that the shocking new thing that had been revealed to him really was the

---

6 Bruce 1977, 81

7 Schnabel 2008, 60

8 Thielman 2025, 33

fulfillment, the surprising but ultimately satisfying goal, of the ancient purposes of the One God, purposes that had been set out particularly in the law given to Moses on Mt. Sinai. Saul was starting to come to terms with the possibility that, if the divine purposes had been completed in Jesus, it might mean that a whole new phase of the divine plan, hitherto barely suspected, had now been launched ....<sup>9</sup>

- Pollock brings to us probably the most balanced perspective. “Preaching was incidental to his primary purpose. He went to Arabia to learn – from the risen Jesus. Just as he claimed to have seen the Lord on the Damascus Road, so he always claimed to have been taught by Him directly.”<sup>10</sup> This implies that Paul spent time in Arabia, as Wright suggests, to hear from God, to clarify and strengthen his understanding of what Jesus was asking him to do as the apostle to the Gentiles before “immediately consulting with anyone” (Gal. 1:16). The entire flow of Galatians 1 implies that Paul went to Arabia before Jerusalem for this very purpose, to hear from God before conferring with the other apostles. This would also give him time to grow in his faith, instead of assuming that after his conversion he experienced overnight transformation for stepping into ministry as God’s chosen one for reaching Gentiles. Pollock also demonstrates that Paul was zealous for the gospel in Arabia and shared his faith boldly, which probably brought the opposition to him as he left Arabia and then faced possible death in Damascus.

Paul was a man of deep conviction and intense zeal. He would have spoken to the Jews, the Gentile God-fearers, and the pagan Gentiles in Arabia. But we are left with no historical evidence of what Paul did in Arabia, especially any church planting among the pagan Gentiles in Arabia. It was not Paul’s custom to first preach to the pagan Gentiles.<sup>11</sup> We know from later accounts in Acts that Paul’s custom was to go first to

---

9 Wright 2018, 64–65

10 Pollock 2012, 45

11 Bruce 1977, 167

the synagogues (Acts 17:2) and find the Gentile God-fearers rather than go immediately to the pagan Gentiles. He always started where he could find God at work. Even in Athens, he sought to find the common spiritual ground by pointing to the altar of the unknown god (Acts 17:23). No doubt Paul lived his faith out loud and preached Christ to the Jews, including the Greek speaking Hellenist Jews, to the Gentile God-fearers, and to the pagan Gentiles where possible. In Arabia, he grew in strength and conviction and would not be silent about Jesus. But it seems a stretch to conclude that Paul went straight to the pagan Gentiles. It is also worth noting that the assumption Paul was ready for a church planting ministry immediately after his conversion is probably our attempt to read into the text an unrealistic perspective. Was Paul in need of growing in his new faith in Christ and a deeper understanding of his theology? Perhaps so.

After his three years in Arabia, he heads back to Damascus to learn of the plot by the Jews to kill him. He describes his escape as a picture of weakness in 2 Cor. 11:30–33. “I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall and escaped his hands.” His three years in Damascus and Arabia ended with him running away. That doesn’t have the ring of amazing success.

## Paul the Debater in Jerusalem

It is also interesting to see what happens when Paul moves on to Jerusalem and preaches Christ to the Greek-speaking Jews. Read the story carefully. “He spoke and disputed against the Hellenists” (Acts 9:29). The Greek term for “disputed” in this verse can be translated as “dispute, debate, argue with someone.”<sup>12</sup> Paul was trained in the diatribe debate style by his mentor Gamaliel.<sup>13</sup> It was a style of confident argumentation or debate where the debater would ask rhetorical questions and trap his opponent (sometimes an imaginary opponent as we see in Romans)

---

<sup>12</sup> Bauer 1979, 775. Definition of συζητέω

<sup>13</sup> Pollock 2012, 19

with a logic that was perfect and left no gaps for escape. This verb form is used in the book of Acts to mean dispute or debate and only used with Stephen in Acts 8 and with Paul in Acts 9. All ten references to Paul disputing or reasoning with the Jews after he is sent out from Antioch in Acts 15 use a different Greek term,<sup>14</sup> where our English term “dialogue” originates. This Greek term is used to better describe how Paul would reason and converse with the Jews in future encounters, rather than debating with them as he did in Jerusalem in a style that did not encourage much conversation or dialogue.

The only fruit we find in Acts 9 from Paul’s debating is that the Jews “were seeking to kill him” (Acts 9:29). When the brothers (note, no mention of any disciples from his time there) found this out, they put Paul on a boat to Tarsus. After Paul was off the scene, the church “throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria” (Acts 9:31) was built up and continued to multiply. Paul would spend the next decade of his life in Tarsus.<sup>15</sup> We then find Paul again in Acts 11:25 when Barnabas seeks Paul out and brings him to Antioch to help with the teaching of new Gentile followers of Jesus. It is implied that Barnabas had a significant search on his hands to find Paul.<sup>16</sup> This would seem to indicate that he was not well known among the followers of Jesus in Tarsus. His year in Antioch is a significant time of ministry, as Christ planted his church among the Gentiles. This happened 13 years after Paul’s Damascus Road experience. He would be sent out as the apostle to the Gentiles a year later, 14 years after his conversion.<sup>17</sup>

I find it interesting that Luke, writing about the history of the beginning of the early church through the book of Acts, mentions very little about the apostle Paul’s church planting fruit during these silent

---

14 διαλέγομαι

15 Wright 2018, 92; Schnabel 2008, 75; Pollock 2012, 65

16 Pollock 2012, 63

17 Schnabel 2008, 75; Pollock 2012, 67

years. Acts never mentions converts in Tarsus from Paul's time.<sup>18</sup> We know that Paul would visit young churches in Cilicia (Acts 15:41), which shows his relationship with churches planted before he was sent out from Antioch. If indeed Paul was the apostle to the Gentiles, then it would seem that Luke would have recorded the planting of churches throughout these 14 years by Paul if there had been significant success. When Peter defended the Gentiles coming to faith at the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, if Paul had successfully planted churches among the Gentiles in Damascus, Arabia, and Tarsus, this would have been the perfect opportunity to share about that success. But Luke records nothing for us. Also, the movement of Gentiles coming to faith in Antioch had so unnerved the apostles in Jerusalem they sent Barnabas to oversee what was happening. Wright observes that "In Antioch a wall had been breached. A crack had appeared in an age-old dam. Should it be mended at once? Or was this a sign that the One God was doing a new thing?"<sup>19</sup> If there had been other significant numbers of Gentiles coming to faith through Paul's ministry before the Antioch movement, then why did the apostles in Jerusalem not take notice before this time? Even after Antioch, Bruce shows how the apostles received the news of the "expansion of Gentile Christianity" through Paul's ministry with mixed feelings.<sup>20</sup> So how could Paul have experienced much fruit before Antioch without the apostles in Jerusalem showing concern? Though these are arguments from silence, it is worth noting.

How would you describe the life of Paul during his 14 years in Damascus, Arabia, Jerusalem, and Tarsus? Were those successful years of ministry? Pollock concludes, "Though at forty-four he had little to show and might almost be counted a failure, the years ahead would be glorious, if arduous."<sup>21</sup>

---

18 Pollock 2012, 63

19 Wright 2018, 85

20 Bruce 1977, 173

21 Pollock 2012, 68

Commenting on these years, Kistemaker also concludes, “Humanly speaking, Paul was a failure who, because of his rash approach in preaching the gospel, created enmity wherever he went. He did little to advance Christ’s church and kingdom. What he needed was a period of maturation and reflection in Tarsus to gain confidence and learn patience. From a divine perspective, we say that Jesus removed Paul from the scene of conflict and confrontation in Damascus and Jerusalem. In due time, Jesus called Paul as his chosen instrument to proclaim the gospel to the Gentiles.”<sup>22</sup>

After studying Paul’s journey, my storybook version of this man’s life was destroyed. It was not an overnight transformation story. Yes, he went from prosecutor to proclaimer overnight. But it took years for the apostle of grace to walk through failure to become an effective church planter.

## Paul’s Journey of Transformation through Failure

We find hints of God’s early transforming work in this man’s life as we read his epistles. This refining process of grace started during his years in Damascus, Arabia, and Tarsus, during those silent years. Might a theology of failure have a place in preparing us for successful church planting? Can failure be redefined and redeemed as a part of God’s process in transforming us to become men and women of grace who are then used in His Kingdom work?

There are lessons from Paul’s life to demonstrate how failure can be redeemed as a tool that God uses for His purposes in our lives.

### *From Dependence on Self to Reliance on Jesus*

The first major hint I find in Paul’s life is in 2 Cor. 1:8–9. “For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced

---

<sup>22</sup> Kistemaker 1990, 354

in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. **But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God...**"

I would suggest that the affliction Paul experienced, that brought him from reliance on self to God, started back in Tarsus during the silent years. The Paul we see in Acts 9 is the man who depended upon himself. He leaned upon his own strength and skills ("he increased all the more in strength and confused the Jews," Acts 9:22). He reverted to his solid skills in the diatribe debate style, as he was trained by Gamaliel, to win arguments and debates (Acts 9:29). We don't see a man in Damascus and Jerusalem who has yet learned desperate dependence on God as Paul himself describes for us in 2 Cor. 1:9. But, 23 years later, as Paul pens the second epistle to the church at Corinth we find a man relying on the Lord.

### *From Pride to Humility*

Later in 2 Cor. 11:23–12:10, we read of the persecution that Paul faced during the earlier days of his ministry. Much of the persecution that he describes in this passage is not recorded in Acts by Luke, causing scholars to suggest that it probably happened during the silent years and Paul's earlier missionary journeys.<sup>23</sup> Paul would obviously face more suffering and persecution, as Jesus told him, in his calling to the Gentiles (Acts 9:16). When you read these verses from 2 Cor. 11:23–12:10, you find a man who moved from strength to weakness, from pride to humility.

We need to remember how Paul himself described his own proud position in life before coming to Christ in Phil. 3:4–6. He was head and shoulders above all others, as a self-proclaimed blameless Pharisee, the "Hebrew of Hebrews," the zealous persecutor of the church. And then 9 years after his conversion, he experiences the visions and revelations during his silent years in Tarsus (2 Cor. 12:1–7). He immediately says that

---

23 Thielman 2025, 61–62; Kistemaker 2001, 338–339; Pollock 2012, 55–57; Jamieson 1997, 318

“on my own behalf I will not boast” (v. 5) and speaks of the “thorn (stake)<sup>24</sup> in the flesh” that plagued his life for one purpose: to keep him humble (“not conceited”). It was such a powerful and personal lesson that he says it twice in the same verse (“to keep me from becoming conceited,” v. 7). This apostle of grace had to learn humility. It started with the fish basket in Damascus (2 Cor. 11:30–33), and the lesson was solidified by the stake in his flesh that kept him humble. This is an incredible picture of a proud man learning humility that led to reliance on Christ and a successful church planting ministry.

### ***From Self-confidence to a Deep Understanding of Grace***

The next hint that demonstrates this transformation in Paul’s life comes from 1 Cor. 2:1–5. “And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.”

In Acts 9 we see a man who leaned on his “plausible words of wisdom” in his debates. You see a man who “grew in strength” not in weakness. You see a man who comes in much zeal and confidence, but here in 1 Corinthians you see a man “trembling” in fear. Paul now shared his message so that those who believed would have their faith “not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.” The Damascus Road experience was 20 years earlier. Paul was not the same man. His entire life and ministry had shifted from depending on himself to finding Jesus as enough, from a man of pride to a humble proclaimer of the Gospel.

---

24 σκόλοψ, Greek word normally translated as “thorn” is also translated as “stake,” as noted in the Enhanced Strong’s Lexicon. Also see Pollock, 2012, p. 58.

He had experienced the super-abounding work of grace in the depth of his soul. He learned grace.

After pleading with God three times to take away the stake in his flesh, he writes of receiving grace in the face of weakness. He actually boasts in his weaknesses, not his strengths, because that is where he learned grace. “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor. 12:9-10).”

This happened during the silent years. He learned grace, so much that one of the strongest themes that would mark his life as a church planter is grace. Every epistle starts and finishes with grace. He went from strength to weakness to learn grace, and it became the very foundation for his whole ministry. He learned grace through what we would deem as failure.

If we can get the story right, it helps us feel the impact of God’s grace at work to transform this apostle. Paul walked through failure first. In his attempts to become all things to all men, both to the Jews and the Gentiles, he had to learn weakness. He had to learn grace. So do we. This kind of deep transforming work prepares the church planter for whatever we will face in life and ministry. Because God’s grace is always enough.

## Application Points about Failure and Success in Ministry

I would suggest a few points of application as we consider the part that failure plays in our journey to become effective church planters.

### ***Called to be God’s Under-rowers***

First, remember our place in God’s kingdom work. We are called to be “under-rowers.” When Paul was sharing his testimony before King Agrippa

in Acts 26, he said that God had appointed him to be His “servant” or “helper” (Acts 26:16) in the work of the ministry. Instead of the normal Greek term used for servant or helper<sup>25</sup> he uses a different term<sup>26</sup> that means “under-rower.” It is a concrete picture of what kind of helper God uses in His Kingdom work. The helper is pictured as a person under the deck of a ship, as one on the team of rowers who takes his command from the captain of the ship. The rower is never in charge but plays a significant role in making the ship move through the water. As church planters, like the Apostle Paul, we are the “under-rowers,” under the deck, taking our orders from the captain, Jesus. It’s a picture of complete humility and allegiance.

God does not need us. We cannot move one heart among the unreached to believe the gospel. Only God can. He is God and He will accomplish His purposes. Somehow in this mystery of Christ planting His church, He chooses to use us. But He can use us best when we remember where we fit best. In complete absolute surrender to His will. He may use us to see one person come to faith, like Philip with the eunuch, or like Peter, who was used to seeing thousands come to faith. Or Paul who is seen as the greatest missionary in church history. God used and redeemed the failure in Paul’s life to make him fit for his calling.

## ***Jesus is Lord of the Harvest***

Second, we need to remember the part that Jesus plays. He is the Lord of His harvest. We are not. He said HE would build His church. And He will. His purposes will never be thwarted. We may not understand at times, but in the end that’s okay. He is still the head of His church.

Our days among a Muslim people never saw a church planted. We did everything right. We even had the church planting gurus come to our

---

25 δούλος or διάκονος

26 υπηρέτας

teams and train them. Thousands of Muslims probably heard the Gospel. But we never saw success. We instead experienced setbacks, riots, death on our team, team implosions, and evacuations. We pressed through, but we never reached our goal.

I can still remember the one evening when we drove up to our house and there was a man waiting to greet us. He pulled out his ID card, showing that he was a national evangelist. He had led Muslims to faith and was there to ask me how the ministry was going. He wanted to know if we were seeing any fruit in the ministry. His questions were pointed.

I was cautious. We were doing ministry under the radar but living our faith out loud and sharing Christ wherever we could. At one point we even had a team of nearly 30 workers, sharing their faith and pressing the boundaries in proclaiming Christ. However, I shared none of these details with him and only acknowledged that we were followers of Jesus.

The next morning I found out the man was a spy. He indeed had been a national evangelist and had led Muslims to Jesus. But he had converted to Islam and his mission in life was to travel around and expose workers. That was his goal when he met me and the Islamic leaders listened to whatever he said. He told them lies about us, that we were hypnotizing people to believe our message and that we were paying for some peoples kids' education, to bribe them to believe. Overnight, all our friends immediately stopped coming to our house. Ten years of ministry shut down in one night.

One spy. One night. One conversation.

How could God redefine and redeem what was a picture of ultimate ministry failure? I had no answers and no way forward. To this day I still have no way to grasp why it happened and how God would use it.

## ***Pressing into God's Character***

Let us fulfill the work He has given us, remaining zealous, but with the maturity of faith that longs to do just one thing...the will of the Father.

Leave the results with God. Press into His character when nothing makes sense. If we can remember first, that we are the under-rowers and second, that He is the Lord of His harvest and the head of His church, then we can faithfully live our faith out loud, long and pray for a church planting movement and do everything to see His Kingdom come, but in the end, we leave the results with God. We press into His character when we face what appears to be failure. Let Him redeem our failures for His purposes in and through our lives.

At the beginning of our ministry years, we spent 10 years in an animistic tribe and watched God plant His church. Then we spent 16 years in a Muslim context, convinced we would see it again. Instead, we personally saw only one person come to faith. We faced intense opposition and resistance. There were other accomplishments, but our main goal was never reached.

That one person who did come to faith watched our lives for over 10 years before she decided to follow Jesus. She has now joined the church planting efforts to see her own people one day embrace Christ. She has led other Muslims to faith and is a great disciple-maker. But even in the face of that little success, the team today is facing even more opposition to the goal of church planting. A recent convert recanted his new faith in Christ and exposed the team. Workers are being deported. While Bible study groups are meeting, at the time of this writing, a healthy church plant does not yet exist.

This was not the story we had hoped to write, but it's not our story to write. That's why we press into God's character.

## **Conclusion: Let Jesus Redefine and Redeem your Failures**

I'd like to suggest that we need to redefine our understanding of failure and success in God's Kingdom work. Success may not be defined by our metrics in church planting. For some, or even many of us, success might

be defined by what Jesus said. He came to do the Father's will. Period. I now look back over our years of "success" in the animistic tribe where we saw God plant his church, and over our years of "failure" in never seeing God plant his church in the Muslim people group, and I now see both experiences as God's will. This new perspective changes everything.

We were the harvesters in the animistic tribe, but we were the waterers in the Muslim people group (1 Cor. 3:6-9). Well... more like rock removal workers! But we did the Father's will, even if we felt failure because we never saw the church planted.

It is His harvest. We are the under-rowers. He is in charge. He will build His church and the gates of hell will not prevail. That is our hope as church planters. Let failure be used of God. He is the master redeemer of our stories. He is just as much in the process of transforming us (and at times that may mean through failure) as He is in the process of planting His church through us. Let Him write your story. There can be nothing better.

Let us grow in our dependence on God, learn to walk in humility, and learn grace as we welcome the hardships and weaknesses in life. Let us press into His character and let our theology of failure be Christ-centric as He plants His church through us. And may we say with Paul, "For me to live is Christ, to die is gain" (Phil. 1:21).

Let Jesus redefine and redeem your failures. That is where true success begins.

## Questions for Conversation

1. To what extent does the author's personal experience resonate (or not) with your own?
2. Besides the apostle Paul, can you think of other biblical characters whose ministry might be considered a "failure" by the standards of our time?

3. What definitions of “success” and “failure” are influential in your home culture and your host culture? How do you believe “success” and “failure” needs to be redefined for yourself, your coworkers, and your local friends?

## Bibliography

Bauer, Walter. 1979. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. University of Chicago Press.

Bruce, F.F. 1977. *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free*. Eerdmans.

Jamieson, R., Fausset, A. R., Brown, D. 1997. *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*. Logos Research Systems Inc.

Kistemaker, S. J., Hendriksen, W. 2001. *Exposition of the Second Epistle to the Corinthians*. Baker Book House.

Kistemaker, S. J., Hendriksen, W. 1990. *Exposition of the Acts of the Apostles*. Baker Book House.

Pollock, John. 2012. *The Apostle: A Life of Paul*. David C Cook.

Schnabel, Eckhard J. 2008. *Paul the Missionary: Realities, Strategies and Methods*. Intervarsity Press, USA.

Thielman, Frank. 2025. *Paul: Apostle of Grace*. Eerdmans.

Wright, N.T. 2018. *Paul: A Biography*. HarperOne.