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# Why I'm Thankful for Failure

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# Why I'm Thankful for Failure

## **Abstract**

"When we navigate failure, we can instructively reflect on our own experience to see how it has fostered growth."

Posting about God's plans vs. our plans from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/why-im-thankful-for-failure/>

## **Keywords**

In All Things, school failure, occupations, gratitude

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## **Comments**

*In All Things* is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt College](#).

# Why I'm Thankful for Failure

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 [all in allthings.org/why-im-thankful-for-failure/](http://allthings.org/why-im-thankful-for-failure/)

Donald Roth

November 21,  
2017

I was watching my legal career get flushed directly down the tubes.

I had worked harder than I'd ever worked in my life before during the first semester of law school, and I had excellent grades to show for it. During the spring semester, I had to be honest that I had backed off a bit. But then, who wants to sit in lectures all day, then pour over books all afternoon so that you can literally dream about being in class, discussing cases, every night (a recurring experience in the fall)? I thought I'd handled it okay, but somewhere I missed something. I ran down a weird path on my brief for Legal Research and Writing, and I messed it up. Since that one paper was 100% of my grade for that semester, I'd pulled a C+, which was lower than required by the school-imposed curve, so it was essentially the same as an F... and in the single most important class in law school. Oh, and I found this out during the summer of 2008 as America watched the bottom drop out of the economy, something that [gutted the legal market](#). In the following year, I would have partners literally stop interviews mid-sentence when they looked at my transcript. It didn't matter that I was an editor on the ABA's Tax Journal or that I was published in that journal. It didn't matter how I did in other writing classes. They needed someone who could write, and I, clearly, couldn't. I had failed.

Failure hurts; it gouges ragged tears in our psyche that often irreparably changes who we are. Because failure hurts, we fear it, and because we fear it, we lump it in with so many other things that cause fear and pain and label the whole box "BAD," then try to keep it hidden in a closet somewhere.

However, the premises of this equation are faulty. Yes, failure hurts, and yes, that pain absolutely reshapes who we are, but being shaped and molded isn't automatically bad. When my son runs so fast that he gets ahead of his feet and topples over, is his failure bad, or is it how he learns? To phrase this in terms of a common theological question, if children were born to Adam and Eve in the Garden, would we expect them to pop out of the womb walking and talking perfectly? Only in a sort of creepy version of paradise.

Being sinless or perfect doesn't equate to being omniscient. Even when there is no death in heaven, would we expect there to be no growth? Is our social imagination of heaven as sitting static in the clouds strumming a harp all day even really heaven? If we think that change and growth are good things, and if real growth involves failure, then failure *can't* belong in that big scary box labelled "BAD."

So, what do we do about this? Failure is still painful, and it's basic to our biology to want to flee from pain. We want so badly to imagine failure as a bad thing, so how can we shape our imagination around failure in a way that acknowledges that it can be a good thing, even something we might be thankful for? If failure is associated with pain, which is itself often paired with talking about death, can we learn to associate it instead with life, granting that failure may often entail pain in this fallen world, but it need not always be so?

## Life Through Failure

Moses was a failure. He had been favored by the royal house of Egypt, plucked from certain death, and educated to join the ruling elite of the premier empire of the ancient world. He may literally have had a silver spoon put in his mouth at some point.

But then, he couldn't control his temper.

He knew he was from the Hebrew people, so he got ticked off at a slave driver whipping one of the Hebrew slaves and beat the man to death. Now, he was living in the wilds of the Sinai Peninsula, herding sheep, which was an

[abomination](#) in the sight of Egyptian culture. How far the mighty had fallen. It's no wonder that Scripture calls him [one of the meekest people on earth](#).

But, what did God do with Moses? Moses was the chief of the prophets of God in the Old Testament. He was the mediator between God and man on Sinai. He spoke with boldness before Pharaoh himself. Yes, he still had issues with his temper, but where one might have called the man at the foot of Mount Horeb a failed advocate, Moses would become the ultimate advocate of the Israelite people in his lifetime.

I had always thought of myself as a good writer. It came easily to me in college, but then I found myself in law school failing exactly where I thought I was strong. Within 30 minutes of finding out my grade, the partner with whom I shared an office wall called me into his office. This man was a legend in certain circles in DC, an instrumental author of several provisions of the tax code, especially the creation of universal life insurance, and he led off our conversation by asking me, "Where did you learn to write?"

Here I was, a summer intern, still reeling from the implications of what looked to be the potential implosion of my legal career in a time when competition was only set to become more fierce, and a man referred to by the other associates in tones of reverence was about to tear me a new one.

But, that's not what happened. In what I can only take to be the voice of providence, this man went on to praise the quality of my writing, acknowledging that it differed from the norm, but praising its character and later encouraging other partners that they needed to have me write for them sometime because I was so good at it.

I didn't march back into Pharaoh's court from there. I ultimately didn't end up actively practicing law. My failure doubtlessly played a big role in limiting my employment options after law school so that I ended up in a research position I didn't particularly love, but those pressures were instrumental in putting me in a place where I was open to the words of a former professor asking me if I had ever thought of teaching, and I have no doubt that that failure was pivotal in bringing me to a deeply fulfilling career as a college professor.

Since you're over a thousand words in at this point, you know I got back around to writing. The process is more painful than it once was. I could compare writing before law school to the effortless artwork my four-year-old daughter produces, while writing now is more akin to the effort of experience my wife went through in giving birth to that daughter, but the result is similarly more meaningful to me, and I think I would call it one of my strengths again. Given the number of pieces I've written for [In All Things](#), among other places, I might even call myself a writer.

So, how does this tie together? I'm not saying that any of us is Moses; instead, when we navigate failure, we can instructively reflect on our own experience to see how it has fostered growth. We can reinforce this intellectual exercise by exploring the ways that our stories resonate with truths of the stories of Scripture, shaping our imagination around what God has done in our lives and the lives of so many before us. From this, we can move forward confidently, developing an intuitive orientation toward confidence in God's work and our growth through failure and ultimately resting in a habitual practice of thanksgiving even for the failure in our lives. Ultimately, I'm thankful I got a C+ in Legal Research and Writing.

What failure are you thankful for?