

Forecasting Failure and what comes after

Intro

- theme this fall series, of "strangers and pilgrims" - a way of looking at our lives that is distinctive to the Christian religion
- "strangers and pilgrims" are those travelling in hope of a blessing first promised by God to Abraham
- today we talk about one of the most painful and difficult aspects of this journey to this destination
- what happens if we don't get there?
- Topic is that of failure of one's plans, hopes, and dreams;
- Failure that may happen because of circumstances beyond your control, decisions that you did not make but which affected you
- Failure that is result of your own decisions - moral or spiritual failure
- Today we consider how Moses experienced the first kind of failure, and foresaw the second kind of failure
- What he teaches us about failure – and what comes after it
- Moses and the prophets - strangers and pilgrims all - important teaching about this - witnesses to Israel's failure to be the people of God, and the ruin it brings upon itself - witnesses also to the hope that remains for Israel even, or perhaps especially, in the aftermath of its failure
- searingly honest in warning of failure - astonishingly hopeful about what might lie on the far side of failure
- this is wisdom important for us to know - one way or another, we all encounter finitude, the limits of what is possible for us in this world - how do we deal with it?

Moses and Israel

- Moses is the leader called by God to lead Israel out of Egyptian slavery, and into the promised land
- three stages of redemption: (1) liberation from slavery in Egypt (2) adoption by God as his own people in the covenant of Mount Sinai (3) entrance into the promised land
- (1) goes rather well.
- (2) crisis in the midst of the covenant-making: golden calf Exodus 32-34
- first of many a time when they rebelled they against the Lord in the desert –
- you can take a man out of slavery – but it is harder to take the slave out of the man – inner slavery of the children of Israel – they are not ready for freedom to which God brings them
- forgetting what he had already done, they did not trust him in the present, and succumbed to fear for the future
- at that time God proposes to wipe them out - but Moses intercedes for them
- and so though God chastises them, he does not disown them
- (3) final crisis is reached Numbers 13-14 - when Israel daunted by the evil reports of difficulties involved, refuse to go up and take possession of the land, and proposes to return to Egypt

- in punishment, Israel is condemned to wander in the wilderness forty years - until the rebellious generation has all died - it is their children who will possess the land
- sadness, is that Moses must share their punishment – he too is excluded from the promised land
- Moses will see the promised land from the top of Mount Nebo or Pisgah - but he will die there - seeing but not entering into the land God promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob
- Dt 3:26, 27, God was wroth with Moses for Israel's sake -
- Moses is caught up in the failure of his community he leads - must suffer the consequences of their actions which they resisted
- might have expected an embittered or reproachful response from Moses, who is thus disappointed of his hope - yet no trace of that
- he understands this is part of his calling as their leader - to take responsibility for a community is to live and die with it
- yet Moses not despairing either - he knows that Israel will enter the promised land led by Joshua, his successor
- so like all the saints of the OT, there is a profound sense of future hope - as we heard in Hebrews 11:13-16

These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. ¹⁴For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country. ¹⁵And truly, if they had been mindful of that country from whence they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned. ¹⁶But now they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city.

- NT counterpart to Moses, which perhaps helps us understand this attitude, this acceptance of finitude, is Simeon (Luke 2)
- Simeon – a kind of latter day Abraham – living long in hope of the decisive fulfillment of promises – righteous, longing for consolation of Israel, and has received special revelation – he will not die before he sees the Lord’s Christ –
- He has grown old, when Mary and Joseph bring Jesus at forty days old into temple
- By Spirit Simeon recognizes this child is the Christ, he takes him up in his arms, and gives thanks to God in words that have entered into the church’s own worship
- He praises God for fulfillment of promise: Nunc Dimittis: ‘Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word’ –
- like Moses, Simeon is ready to die, having seen the promise of God, though not seeing its fullness
- In this life, we are going to glimpse the greatness of the salvation that will only be fully ours in the resurrection
- Leaf by Niggle – Tolkien’s story of an artist, not a great artist, but consumed by passion for a painting of a tree – never finished before Niggle has to go on his last journey – one leaf only is preserved, no one looks at it, it burns down

- But Niggle's journey finished – an image of death – he discovers at last his tree – not the painting of the tree, but the tree itself –
- In this life we set a trajectory, whose completion and fulfillment lies beyond us – but that is okay, it is enough, it is not failure, it is enough to be on the trajectory.
- there is another dimension to failure which Moses addresses before his death in a series of sermons given on the plains of Moab, just outside the promised land
- this collection of sermons is Deuteronomy
- Moses begins by looking back to Israel's history with God - recalling his faithfulness in past ch 1-4
- in ch 5-28, he teaches them the law to guide action in present and future with blessings and curses for obedience/disobedience - a pattern of righteousness in faithfulness to the covenant
- finally, he looks forward, to distant future of a "new covenant" ch 29-32
- this final section is the one we look at today
- not for the first time, Moses foresees the possibility or likelihood that Israel will fail to keep the covenant - will not be able to abide by God's law, and will bring upon itself judgment and go into exile from the land of promise (see also 4:25-28)
- yet this catastrophic failure does not mean the end of Israel (see also 4:29ff) :

30 And it shall come to pass, when all these things are come upon thee, the blessing and the curse, which I have set before thee, and thou shalt call them to mind among all the nations, whither the LORD thy God hath driven thee, ²And shalt return unto the LORD thy God, and shalt obey his voice according to all that I command thee this day, thou and thy children, with all thine heart, and with all thy soul; ³That then the LORD thy God will turn thy captivity, and have compassion upon thee, and will return and gather thee from all the nations, whither the LORD thy God hath scattered thee. ⁴If any of thine be driven out unto the outmost parts of heaven, from thence will the LORD thy God gather thee, and from thence will he fetch thee: ⁵And the LORD thy God will bring thee into the land which thy fathers possessed, and thou shalt possess it; and he will do thee good, and multiply thee above thy fathers. ⁶And the LORD thy God will circumcise thine heart, and the heart of thy seed, to love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, that thou mayest live. ⁷And the LORD thy God will put all these curses upon thine enemies, and on them that hate thee, which persecuted thee. ⁸And thou shalt return and obey the voice of the LORD, and do all his commandments which I command thee this day. ⁹And the LORD thy God will make thee plenteous in every work of thine hand, in the fruit of thy body, and in the fruit of thy cattle, and in the fruit of thy land, for good: for the LORD will again rejoice over thee for good, as he rejoiced over thy fathers: ¹⁰If thou shalt hearken unto the voice of the LORD thy God, to keep his commandments and his statutes which are written in this book of the law, and if thou turn unto the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul.

- on the far side of catastrophic failure, Moses foresees the possibility of repentance, restoration, return, redemption which also represents a hardwon advance of great importance
- what he sees beyond this is a new covenant based not so much on human abilities and faithfulness as upon God's faithfulness and his active transformation of human hearts
- illustration of this newness: Dt 10:16 - God commands Israel to "circumcise the foreskin of your heart and be no more stiffnecked"
- circumcision - the external sign - is to be internalized - made a matter of heart, will, intention, thought, character, bearing the mark of God
- but in 30:6 Moses says, "the Lord thy God will circumcise thine heart, and the heart of thy seed, to love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thys oul, that thou mayest live"
- command has become promise - divine gift makes possible human obedience -
- Pattern of man's obedience remains – this is not cheap grace, moral responsibility not abolished
- But center of gravity has shifted – from man's work to God's – and this shift of gravity is the gospel,
- yet God forgives and loves even when men do not love in return -
- by doing so, God creates love and empowers an obedience which man on his own cannot attain
- though the law's authority as a guide for human action remains, more and more you realize that it is not man's capacity for faithfulness that is its ground, but God's
- what Moses foresees here is the whole trajectory or arc of Israel's history - above all in the failure of the kingdom, and the exile in Babylon
- the promise of the circumcised heart is one that is echoed and expanded in the promises of the prophets who witnessed the end of the kingdom and the return from exile
- new heart and new spirit Ezekiel 3:16-
 - Son of man, when the house of Israel dwelt in their own land, they defiled it by their own way and by their doings: their way was before me as the uncleanness of a removed woman.
 - ¹⁸Wherefore I poured my fury upon them for the blood that they had shed upon the land, and for their idols wherewith they had polluted it: ¹⁹And I scattered them among the heathen, and they were dispersed through the countries: according to their way and according to their doings I judged them. ²⁰And when they entered unto the heathen, whither they went, they profaned my holy name, when they said to them, These are the people of the LORD, and are gone forth out of his land. ²¹But I had pity for mine holy name, which the house of Israel had profaned among the heathen, whither they went. ²²Therefore say unto the house of Israel, thus saith the Lord GOD; I do not this for your sakes, O house of Israel, but for mine holy name's sake, which ye have profaned among the heathen, whither ye went. ²³And I will sanctify my great name, which was profaned among the heathen, which ye have profaned in the midst of them; and the heathen shall know that I am the LORD, saith the Lord GOD, when I shall be sanctified in you before their eyes. ²⁴*For I will take you from among the heathen, and gather you out of all countries, and will bring you into your own land.* ²⁵*Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean: from all your filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you.* ²⁶*A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh.* ²⁷*And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them.*

²⁸ And ye shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers; and ye shall be my people, and I will be your God.

- Moses and Ezekiel a prophet here of the New Testament, of the new covenant inaugurated in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ - a new life to be found only through death
- Another way of saying this – a new life that may be found through catastrophic failure
- the man who has made shipwreck of his hopes - has suffered some kind of disastrous moral failure, and may well find himself in despair - the damage cannot be undone, he can't go back, the old paths are now closed – what will he do?
- huge danger here of self-justification - throwing up the defences, shifting the blame, retreating into bitterness, self-pity, recrimination, etc. -
- yet if what Moses is saying is true, it is also a hugely hopeful opportunity
- the idols of one's pride are shattered - the perspective and purpose and plan that led you to disaster is unmasked as folly - you see they did not work
- that is the moment when you realize you need a new heart, a new hope, and a new perspective, a mind set on things above, on the wisdom of God
- catastrophic failure can leave us in total darkness and desolation - we may feel that the very possibility of redemption is closed to us
- yet this is precisely the moment when the idols of our own self-sufficiency are shattered, when our own plans and perspectives are shown to be empty, that we can begin to learn a new wisdom in honesty, humility and prayer
- what does it look like when someone has repented and received that new spirit?
 - recognition that the old plan and perspective was folly – does not work
 - Hunger and longing for something better and
 - Ruthless honesty about decisions made, not self-dramatizing melodrama
 - Humility and willingness to learn and to be trained in elementary things
 - Prayer, readiness to ask for help knowing you cannot do it yourself – also from others
 - Not right at start, but only after you have been helped and trained and made serviceable to others, a willingness to serve them and help them