

Lesson 4: Skip the Dip

In the first three sessions, we looked at the various kinds of real-time dying that we experience as we follow the path of Christ. We experience death and suffering through repentance and the sacrificial love of others. In this session, I want to focus on what we do instead of receiving the J-Curve.

Many years ago, I served as an associate pastor at a large church in Southern California. After moving to a new house further east, we felt God's call to plant a new church. This was our launch team. Here's me and my wife in the back, and our two little kids at the time, a daughter and a son. You can't see it, but right here is our youngest, he was in the womb. We started our worship gatherings at the school. At my daughter's local school. And I was obviously really excited and hopeful. In my mind, I had an idea of this great vision for a great church that would impact the community. If I were to chart some of them... Here's Jon, the church planter. We would have a big dynamic team and powerful preaching, and we would launch big and impact the community. We then send missionaries, numerically grow, plant new churches. These are all wonderful things, but if we hold on to them too tightly, like I was, it prevented me from receiving what God really wanted to do.

In Philippians 3:3-4, the Apostle Paul says, "For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh—though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more." So Paul says, if you want to compare qualifications in the flesh, I have a great list of accomplishments. And so, he goes on to list them in verses 5 and 6. He says, "Circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless."

You can kind of get a sense of Paul's emotions as he recalls this list. And we can put it on this chart here. There's a sense of increase, a greater boast. Paul was not just an Israelite; he was from the special tribe of Benjamin. And Paul was not just a Pharisee; he was a teacher at the church, and he was a persecutor of the church, and he was blameless. Paul was boasting, puffing out his chest.

We call this chart here the "Failure-Boasting Chart" because, obviously, the higher you go, you're boasting bigger, and the lower you are down here, you're a greatest failure. And so the word that Paul uses in Philippians 3 to describe this entire chart is the word "flesh." This is what he refers to in verse

9 when he says, "I had a righteousness of my own that comes from the flesh." What he was referring to is all of these things.

Now, this was not a Jewish problem, it's a universal human problem. All of us try to root ourselves in something other than God. We are universally tempted to have something outside of ourselves that forms the basis of who we are. Our flesh can take many different forms, but at its base it's an alternative life source apart from Christ. It's something that we seek to secure our purpose and our identity. For Paul here, it was Judaism. It's the knowledge and the works of the law. Paul was seeking his identity in these things.

But now, he is saying, "I'm in Christ." So for us, it may not be Judaism, it might be something like family, education, sports, or even ministry. None of these things are bad; in fact, they're good. But they become detrimental when we place them on a pedestal, hoping that somehow these things will give us ultimate satisfaction, purpose, and identity. And this is exhausting because we're in this continual battle to try to move ourselves up the failure-boasting chart, for whatever way we would measure it. Inevitably, we end up sliding down. There's always someone who's going to be higher on the scale, someone we're envious of or judging because we feel like we could do better. How do we get off the slide of the Judaizers who are trying to work their way to God? We heed the message of John the Baptist: repent and believe.

We turn away from our sin, abandon our flesh, and in many ways, we get off the failure-boasting chart. We die to ourselves and we are then in Christ. When it comes to the J-Curve, the greatest temptation is to do this. Here's the J-Curve again. There's life, death and resurrection. And if you're like me, our greatest temptation is to do this, it's to move from life directly to resurrection. We like to skip the dip. And so interestingly enough, this movement right here is pretty much the same shape and the same trajectory as the failure-boasting chart. To move from life to resurrection without dying in Christ is really to try to move ourselves up through various forms of the flesh, to skip the death and go straight to resurrection.

When I think back to our church planting days, I remember there was another plant that started in the same denomination only a few months after we did. I realised over time that their church grew rapidly and numerically, and multiplied quickly. I realised there was this envy of the outward fruit of what was happening in this other church plant. There was judging in my heart, assuming that they must not have been using biblical methods. Eventually, when I met the pastor and talked to him, I

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realised I was on the failure-boasting chart. I was trying to raise myself up and, in some ways, lower him and that church in my own mind. As soon as I discovered that, by the conviction of the Spirit, I repented, and I discovered it was a freeing thing. The only way to get off that scale of going up and down, sliding up and down, is to put to death and die in repentance that we might receive the J-Curve that God is bringing. That happened for me, and it continues to happen, and I pray that it will continue to happen for you as well. See you next time.