

Until Seventy Times Seven

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Amid a life full of stumbling blocks and imperfection, we all are grateful for second chances.

Mistakes are a fact of life. Learning to skillfully play the piano is essentially impossible without making thousands of mistakes—maybe even a million. To learn a foreign language, one must face the embarrassment of making thousands of mistakes—maybe even a million. Even the world's greatest athletes never stop making mistakes.

“Success,” it has been said, “isn't the absence of failure, but going from failure to failure without any loss of enthusiasm.”¹

With his invention of the light bulb, Thomas Edison purportedly said, “I didn't fail 1,000 times. The light bulb was an invention with 1,000 steps.”² Charles F. Kettering called failures “finger posts on the road to achievement.”³ Hopefully, each mistake we make becomes a lesson in wisdom, turning stumbling blocks into stepping-stones.

Nephi's unwavering faith helped him go from failure to failure until he finally obtained the brass plates. It took Moses 10 attempts before he finally found success in fleeing Egypt with the Israelites.

We may wonder—if both Nephi and Moses were on the Lord's errand, why didn't the Lord intervene and help them achieve success on their first try? Why did He allow them—and why does He allow us—to flounder and fail in our attempts to succeed? Among many important answers to that question, here are a few:

- First, the Lord knows that “these things shall give [us] experience, and shall be for [our] good.”⁴
- Second, to allow us to “taste the bitter, that [we] may know to prize the good.”⁵
- Third, to prove that “the battle is the Lord's,”⁶ and it is only by His grace that we can accomplish His work and become like Him.⁷
- Fourth, to help us develop and hone scores of Christlike attributes that cannot be refined except through opposition⁸ and “in the furnace of affliction.”⁹

So, amid a life full of stumbling blocks and imperfection, we all are grateful for second chances.

In 1970, as a new freshman at BYU, I enrolled in a beginning course on the essentials of physics taught by Jae Ballif, an outstanding professor. After finishing each unit of the course, he would administer an exam. If a student received a C and wanted a better grade, Professor Ballif would

allow the student to take a modified exam covering the same material. If the student received a B on the second attempt and was still unsatisfied, he or she could take the test a third time and a fourth, and so on. By allowing me numerous second chances, he helped me excel and finally earn an A in his class.

He was an uncommonly wise professor who inspired his students to keep trying—to consider failure as a tutor, not as a tragedy, and to not fear failure but to learn from it.

Recently I telephoned this great man 47 years after taking his physics course. I asked him why he was willing to allow students unlimited attempts to improve their grade. His response: “I wanted to be on the same side as the students.”

While we are grateful for second chances following mistakes, or failures of the mind, we stand all amazed at the Savior’s grace in giving us second chances in overcoming sin, or failures of the heart.

No one is more on our side than the Savior. He allows us to take and keep retaking His exams. To become like Him will require countless *second chances* in our day-to-day struggles with the natural man, such as controlling appetites, learning patience and forgiveness, overcoming slothfulness, and avoiding sins of omission, just to name a few. If to err is human nature, how many failures will it take us until our nature is no longer human but divine? Thousands? More likely a million.

Knowing that the strait and narrow path would be strewn with trials and that failures would be a daily occurrence for us, the Savior paid an infinite price to give us as many chances as it would take to successfully pass our mortal probation. The opposition which He allows can often seem insurmountable and almost impossible to bear, yet He doesn’t leave us without hope.

To keep our hope resilient as we face life’s trials, the Savior’s grace is ever ready and ever present. His grace is a “divine means of help or strength, ... an enabling power that allows men and women to lay hold on eternal life and exaltation *after* they have expended their own best efforts.”¹⁰ His grace and His loving eye are upon us throughout our entire journey as He inspires, lightens burdens, strengthens, delivers, protects, heals, and otherwise “succor[s] his people,” even as they stumble along the strait and narrow path.¹¹

Repentance is God’s ever-accessible gift that allows and enables us to go from failure to failure without any loss of enthusiasm. Repentance isn’t His backup plan in the event we might fail. Repentance *is* His plan, knowing that we will. This is the gospel of repentance, and as President Russell M. Nelson has observed, it will be “a lifetime curriculum.”¹²

In this lifetime curriculum of repentance, the sacrament is the Lord’s designated way of providing continual access to His forgiveness. If we partake with a broken heart and a contrite spirit, He proffers us weekly pardon as we progress from failure to failure along the covenant path. For “notwithstanding their sins, my bowels are filled with compassion towards them.”¹³

But just how many times will He forgive us? How long is His long-suffering? On one occasion Peter asked the Savior, “Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times?”¹⁴

Presumably, Peter thought *seven* was a sufficiently high number to emphasize the folly of forgiving too many times and that benevolence should have its limits. In response, the Savior

essentially told Peter to not even count—to not establish limits on forgiveness.

“Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven.”¹⁵

Obviously, the Savior was not establishing an upper limit of 490. That would be analogous to saying that partaking of the sacrament has a limit of 490, and then on the 491st time, a heavenly auditor intercedes and says, “I’m so sorry, but your repentance card just expired—from this point forward, you’re on your own.”

The Lord used the math of seventy times seven as a metaphor of His infinite Atonement, His boundless love, and His limitless grace. “Yea, and *as often* as my people repent will I forgive them their trespasses against me.”¹⁶

That doesn’t mean that the sacrament becomes a license to sin. That’s one reason this phrase was included in the book of Moroni: “But as oft as they repented and sought forgiveness, *with real intent*, they were forgiven.”¹⁷

Real intent implies *with real effort* and real change. “Change” is the principal word the Guide to the Scriptures uses to define *repentance*: “A change of mind and heart that brings a fresh attitude toward God, oneself, and life in general.”¹⁸ That kind of change results in spiritual *growth*. Our success, then, isn’t *going* from failure to failure, but *growing* from failure to failure without any loss of enthusiasm.

Concerning *change*, consider this simple insight: “Things that don’t change remain the same.” This obvious truth isn’t meant to insult your intelligence but is the profound wisdom of President Boyd K. Packer, who then added, “And when we are through changing—we’re *through*.”¹⁹

Because we don’t want to be *through* until we become as our Savior is,²⁰ we need to continue getting up each time we fall, with a desire to keep growing and progressing despite our weaknesses. In our weakness, He reassures us, “My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness.”²¹

Only with time-lapse photography or growth charts can we discern our physical growth. Likewise, our spiritual growth is usually imperceptible except through the rearview lens of time. It would be wise to regularly take an introspective look through that lens to recognize our progress and inspire us to “press forward with a steadfastness in Christ, having a perfect brightness of hope.”²²

I am eternally grateful for the loving kindness, patience, and long-suffering of Heavenly Parents and the Savior, who allow us countless second chances on our journey back to Their presence. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.