

Reform the Line: Finding Purpose in Failure

Whether it's due to upbringing, past influences, or sensibilities developed over the years, I do my best to keep my eyes and ears open to truth that can help shape me into something better. That is not meant to be a pat on the back. From an early age, I have been blessed to learn from much wiser people the importance of examining everything I consume – whether literature, music, or movies. I was taught that everything I take into my mind needs to be filtered through the light of God's truth and grace.

It is that context that sets the stage for so many of my most valuable lessons. I've written about a few of them for Rambling Ever On already which you can read [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#). And while this particular moment of revelation was once again provided by Tolkien and his magnum opus, *The Lord of the Rings*, this time it was delivered through the film adaptation by Peter Jackson. To make any sense of this story, I must beg your indulgence for a few minutes as I do my best to provide context, and that will require a bit of storytelling and ground laying on my part. I promise it has to be done for any of this to make sense.

At the outset of *The Return of the King*, the third movie in Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, the people of Rohan are going to war against Mordor, the great evil of the world. Their spirits are high after a hard-fought battle at Helm's Deep. They had won the day through courage, determination, and the perfect timing of a wizard. The sun rose in the east and brought with it new life, new hope, and a complete routing of their enemy. Now, Gondor, their great ally to the southeast, has called for aid, and Rohan answers. The

Rohirrim – the great cavalry of the Rohan people – rides to fight in the great war of their time. With them ride Aragorn, the heir to the throne of Gondor and hero of Helm's Deep, along with Legolas Greenleaf and Gimli son of Gloin, elf and dwarf warriors of renown. The odds are not good but with these mighty warriors at their side and a little luck, perhaps they will win the day again.

That is the scene that Peter Jackson's epic conclusion to *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy presents to the audience. *The Return of the King* further stacks the deck against our heroes. On the eve of battle, Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli make the difficult decision to seek another road to Gondor, leaving the Rohirrim to ride to battle alone. It is a huge blow to the morale of the soldiers. Aragorn had given them hope. His presence inspired renewed courage. Just like that, he was gone and with him, their courage. They lose hope and they openly question the wisdom of riding to war.

Théoden, King of Rohan, has lived a long and mostly unfulfilled life. For too long, he was an ineffective leader. For too long, he sat by as his country and his people suffered. After Aragorn departs, one of Théoden's soldiers speaks aloud that which all others are thinking, "He (Aragorn) leaves because there is no hope...We cannot defeat the armies of Mordor." They know they cannot win this fight. It is at this moment of despair, that Théoden truly becomes the king he has always desired to be. He responds with such resolve that it calms the hearts of his soldiers and prepares them for what they must do. "No we cannot. But we will meet them in battle nonetheless." Théoden recognized the hopelessness of their situation, but he recognized something even more important: the absolute rightness of their task. The righteousness of it all. They would ride to war and die in war because it was the right thing to do.

In what is possibly the crowning cinematic achievement of the film, the Rohirrim arrive at the Fields of Pelennor, outside

the walls of Gondor's capital city, Minas Tirith, to find a host of enemy warriors swarming as far as the eye can see. It is a veritable ocean of orcs, trolls, and other creatures of darkness and evil. Théoden calls to his troops. He rallies them with his chant of "Death!" They charge, building speed as they take arrow after arrow, and finally, triumphantly, they break through the line of terrified orcs. They completely turn the tide of the battle. They rally the armies of Gondor. They bring hope and courage to the free peoples of Middle Earth. The orcs flee in fear knowing that they cannot stand against the righteous fury of the Rohirrim. It is a beautiful sight.

It is then that the Rohirrim realize that Mordor is stronger than they realized and another army had been held in reserve: an army of oliphaunts (giant elephants) prepared to lay waste to anyone still on the battlefield. Hope turns sour and despair sets in again.

It is easy to give up when faced with failure. It is not an uncommon thing to give our best and watch it fall apart in front of our eyes. This inevitably leaves us feeling dejected and discouraged. We have all been there. We have poured our hearts into something so important and so precious, only to see it blow away in the cold winds of failure. I would wager that most of us have experienced this in some form or fashion. Many of us are experiencing it right now.

Life can feel unfair. Things go wrong – many times in ways that leave us broken. Often, it goes bad due to our own failings or flaws, though that is a separate conversation for another day. The failure I am discussing now is a different thing altogether. We can diligently live out our purpose and calling and still see it crumble at our feet. We can know, without a doubt, that we are doing the right thing and still be crushed by disappointment. We can do the righteous thing and receive suffering, loss, and even death as our reward.

Take the real-life story of Jim Elliot and the Ecuadorian missionaries. On January 8, 1956, Jim Elliot, Peter Fleming, Ed McCully, Roger Youderian, and Nate Saint were brutally killed by warriors from the Waodani tribe in the jungles of Ecuador. This occurred after months of trying to connect with the tribe. In fact, a few days before they were martyred, they had met with a small group from the tribe and were thrilled that God had finally opened this door. They had been led to the Waodani tribe. They knew the risks, as their correspondence and writings would later attest, but they also knew that if this was the will of God, they had only one choice: obey. By any human standard, their mission was a total failure.

Their friends and family were heartbroken when they received news of the attack. Instead of hating the Waodani tribe for what they did, some of the remaining family members, Jim's wife Elizabeth in particular, chose to continue the mission. In place of fear, anger, and hatred, they went back to the Waodani and showed them courage, peace, and the love of Christ. Their ministry, and the memory of what the five young martyrs did change the Waodani people forever.

That is the lesson *The Rohirrim*, King Théoden, and *The Return of the King* had for me on my most recent viewing. Mordor was too strong and too powerful to defeat. Théoden and his soldiers knew this. They had done the unthinkable and broken the line on their first, desperate charge. For a few brief and glorious moments, they thought they had turned the tide of the battle and won the day. To the east, the line of oliphaunts and the second army from Mordor shattered that dream. Once again, they were faced with the futility of their task. They rode to Gondor's aid knowing that death would be their only reward. But they rode nonetheless. Théoden, having already found his courage, sees the new army approaching and the fear it inspires in the eyes of his men, and he stands resolute. He

quickly rallies his men and they respond as they have been trained to do from their youth. He yells the line that struck me with such force that I quietly gasped. "Reform the line! Reform the line!" The line reforms and the Rohirrim once again charge, courageously, hopelessly into the gaping maw of a much stronger army.

The outcome is irrelevant. They march because it is right. They march because it is the only honorable and noble choice left to them. I doubt we will be faced with such a choice – a life or death decision. But we are faced with difficulties throughout our lives. We serve in thankless and overlooked ministries. We sow the seed and never reap the harvest. Some of us deal with sickness and infirmity. Some of us deal with tragedy, more than it seems fair for one person to bear. We labor and sometimes, it feels in vain. That is our reality. We see this story play out in Scripture repeatedly. Moses not crossing into the Promised land. David not being allowed to build the Temple. Joseph and his continual setbacks and trials. Paul and his thorn in the flesh. All the martyrs throughout the pages of Scripture.

My takeaway from all of this is pretty simple. God does not promise us an easy road. He does not guarantee success, by any earthly definition. His plan is greater than all of that. He requires but one thing: obedience. That is a lesson I need to hear often. I need to see results. I need to see the Lord move in my church in a mighty way, but at times, it feels as if we are dying a slow and prolonged death. All of this even though I am convinced we are doing exactly what the Lord wants us to do. Perhaps it is His good will to let us serve out our days and never see tangible results. Faced with that possibility, what are our options? Do we seek greener pastures? Do we compromise in hopes that it will benefit us in the long run? Or do we "reform the line" and do exactly what we believe the Lord has for us to do?

Jim Elliot wrote this prior to his death, and though not as famous as his "He is no fool" quote, this speaks directly to the heart of what it means to be a faithful follower of Christ, "Rest in this: it is His business to lead, command, impel, send, call or whatever you want to call it. It is your business to obey, follow, move, respond, or what have you. I may no longer depend on pleasant impulses to bring me before the Lord. I must rather respond to principles I know to be right, whether I feel them to be enjoyable or not."

Failing is not enjoyable. Suffering is not enjoyable. Sometimes though, it is right and righteous. Sometimes, failure is exactly what is being asked of us. Théoden and the Rohirrim charge the new army and hope rekindles. The good guys win the day as Aragorn arrives at just the right moment with an army all his own. Théoden never sees that victory. In the midst of the battle, Théoden is mortally wounded and as he lies dying in the arms of his beloved niece, he is finally at peace. "I go to my fathers, in whose mighty company I shall not now feel ashamed." He did what was right, no matter the results. No matter the consequences. That is our calling. That is our purpose. Obey. To do the right thing no matter what. To "reform the line" as many times as it is necessary. This is no fairytale, where heroic deeds are rewarded with victory upon victory. We live in a broken and fallen world where oftentimes, God uses our brokenness and failures for His glory. We fail, but there is beauty and redemption in those failings if they flow from humble and obedient hearts.

As followers of the living God, we too will pass on from this life to the next and if we are faithful and obedient to our calling, we too will have nothing of which to be ashamed. No matter the earthly successes or failures of our lives, our ultimate reward is waiting for us in the arms of our Savior who will welcome us with the best words imaginable, "Well done my good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your

Lord!"

"He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose." – Jim Elliot