



Main Idea: Everyone fails. The difference is whether failure pushes you away from Jesus or back toward Him.

Scriptures: Daniel 1:1-6

Welcome everyone! I'm so glad you're here. Today, we're kicking off a brand-new series called **School Survival Guide**. And honestly, wouldn't it be nice if something like that truly existed? Like, imagine there was a giant manual for surviving school. You could open the table of contents and find answers for everything. Feeling awkward at the lunch table? Boom. "Page 47: How to Stop Standing There Like You Forgot How Humans Work." Trying not to embarrass yourself during a class presentation? There's probably a chapter for that. How to survive group projects when one person does absolutely nothing? That deserves an entire section.

Now, this series isn't a complete guide to fixing every problem in your life this school year. But over the next few weeks, we are going to explore some real struggles students face and what God says about them. And even though most of you probably aren't thrilled that school is starting back up, I'm really excited you're here. Seriously. No matter how stressful, awkward, exhausting, or frustrating school gets this year, I want this place to be different. I want this to become one of the best parts of your week.

Let's be honest: school can be amazing one moment and brutal the next. At the start of every school year, everyone walks in with expectations. *"This is my year." "I'm finally going to get organized." "I'm getting straight A's." "I'm making the team." "I'm going to make a bunch of new friends." "Maybe this is finally the year somebody likes me back."* Nobody walks into school thinking: *You know what? I really hope I fail algebra this semester, or I can't wait to completely embarrass myself, or I hope I disappoint my parents, or I'd love to lose all my friends by October."*

Nobody starts with the goal of failing. Because deep down, we all want our lives to go well. But eventually, reality hits. At some point this year, you might fail a test, get rejected, lose a friendship, not make the team, experience disappointment, or have a moment you wish you could erase. And sometimes the hardest failures aren't even public. Sometimes it's silently realizing: *This year isn't turning out how I thought it would.* The truth

is every single person in this room is going to fail somehow. Not because you're worthless. Not because your life is ruined. But because failure is part of being human.

[Leader Note: Share a personal story about a failure or disappointment you experienced during your school years. You might also invite a student or leader to briefly share a moment when they failed, struggled, or faced disappointment and what they learned from it.]

Some of you already know exactly what failure feels like. Maybe you've already experienced rejection, embarrassment, family struggles, anxiety, disappointment, or consequences from bad decisions. Failure is part of life. **So, the important question is: What do you do when failure happens?** Because failure can push people in two directions. Either we turn away from God or back toward Him. And that's exactly where the book of Daniel begins. When most people think about Daniel, they think of the lions' den, courage, and standing strong. But Daniel's story began with disaster.

Before Daniel ever became famous in the Bible, everything around him fell apart. The people of God, Israel, had spent generations drifting away from God. God repeatedly warned them through prophets to stop worshipping idols, stop rebelling, and return to Him. But time and time again, the people ignored Him. Old Testament books like Judges, Jeremiah, Isaiah, and 2 Kings show this cycle happened again and again. The pattern looked like this: Israel drifted from God; they compromised; they worshipped idols; God warned them; they refused to listen; and eventually God's judgment came. And that judgment came through Babylon.

The Babylonian Empire invaded Jerusalem, destroyed the city, took treasures from the Temple, and carried many Israelites away from their homes into captivity. And that's where Daniel's story began; not in victory, or success. But in failure. Loss. And exile. Daniel was likely a teenager when all of this happened. Imagine that. One moment you're home. The next moment your world is gone. And yet, what looked like the end of the story turned out to be the beginning of God doing something deeper in Daniel's life. **And that's important for us to understand tonight: just because your life doesn't go according to plan doesn't mean God is finished with your story.**

Point #1: Your worst moment does not have to become your defining moment.

So now Daniel had to live with the consequences of a failure he wasn't even personally responsible for. The people of God had drifted from God for generations, and now Daniel was caught in the fallout of it all. He lost his home. He lost his normal life. He was taken to a foreign nation and forced into a completely different culture.

In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. ² And the Lord delivered Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, along with some of the articles from the temple of God. These he carried off to the temple of his god in Babylonia and put in the treasure house of his god. ³ Then the king ordered Ashpenaz, chief of his court officials, to bring into the king's service some of the Israelites from the royal family and the nobility — ⁴ young men without any physical defect, handsome, showing aptitude for every kind of learning, well informed, quick to understand, and qualified to serve in the king's palace. He was to teach them the language and literature of the Babylonians. ⁵ The king assigned them a daily amount of food and wine from the king's table. They were to be trained for three years, and after that they were to enter the king's service. ⁶ Among those who were chosen were some from Judah: Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. (Daniel 1:1-6, NIV)

Honestly, Daniel had every reason to give up. He could've said: "What's the point anymore?" "God abandoned us." "My life is ruined." "Everything I hoped for is gone." But he didn't quit. Even in the middle of disappointment and confusion, Daniel continued to follow God. And one of the biggest things we learn from Daniel is this: God still works through people whose lives did not go according to their plan.

That's important because most of us treat failure like it's final. We fail a test and suddenly it feels like our future is over. We get cut from the team and think, *I'm not good enough*. A friendship falls apart, and we think life will never get better. Someone rejects us, and we start questioning our worth. Failure feels permanent when you're standing in it. We're really good at catastrophizing things. We take one bad moment and turn it into: "I ruined everything." "Nothing's ever going to change." "God let me down." "My story is over." But what if failure isn't the end of the story? What if it's

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