

COULD JESUS HAVE FAILED?

Apparently some people (not in our fellowship, I am glad to add) have been saying that Jesus could have failed in His attempt to redeem lost humanity. Surely, we have to say, “No!”

Probably people who say that He could have failed begin from the point that He was a genuine human being, tempted in all respects as we are. So, like us, He could have given in to temptation, lost faith in God, become lost Himself, and failed to redeem us. In itself, it is right that we say that Jesus was a genuine human being. He was different from us in only two ways, that He had no human father, and that He was sinless. As a child, He went through genuine development, in wisdom, and bodily size. He increased in His knowledge of the things of God, and grew in His relationships with other human beings. As a human being He did not always use the abilities available to Him because He was at the same time very God. He did not, as man, use His ability to know when the end of the world would be: On the cross, He cried out that God had forsaken Him. He shrank back from the thought of suffering and death.

There was a person called Apollinarius who was condemned as a heretic in the fourth century. He argued that, if Jesus had a human mind and soul like us, He would have been unstable or changeable. Someone capable of change could not redeem us, because He himself would be open to change and failure. Therefore in the man Jesus the Word, the Son of God, replaced what is a human mind and soul in Jesus. His view was rejected, using the principle that He did not redeem whatever He did not assume. If He assumed a human being that did not have a human mind and soul, our human minds and soul, where sin lodges to an especial degree, would not have been redeemed.

We have to say “No” to the question, “Could Jesus have failed?” because it leaves out of consideration that fact that the same Jesus Christ was also very God, all knowing, and all powerful. He is above all failure, and He is also unable to know evil and sin in the sense of experience evil and sin. What James says of God is true of Him, too, because He is God, He “*cannot be tempted to do wrong*” (Jm 1:13). When James speaks about the Father, he says, that with Him “*there is no shifting or any suggestion of change.*” Remember that Jesus is of one substance with the Father.

Arius, also, the great heresiarch of the fourth century, said that theoretically Jesus was “naturally mutable and susceptible of change, as all other rational beings are.” That fitted Arius’ view of Christ, for he said that He was alien from the substance of the Father, and a creature. Arius put it down to an exercise of Jesus’ will that in practice He remained immutable. The bishop of Alexandria at the time, Alexander, reported that someone asked Arius and his supporters whether the Word of God was changeable, and they were not afraid to say, “Yes, he certainly could; for, being begotten and created, his nature is susceptible of change.” (Socrates, *Church History*, 1.6.10-12).

We have to say that the question, from one point of view, is a wrong question. It speculates where there is no need to speculate. It is another futile question like “What was God doing before He made the world?” It cries out for the answer “He went out to cut switches to punish those who ask questions like that.” The question, “Could Jesus have failed?” invites the answer: “Don’ t you treasure your salvation, that you turn away from clinging to the fact that Jesus has redeemed all people, you included, and begin to look for other possibilities? The Scriptures tell us that Jesus is both God and man. Why do you want to bring Him entirely down to our level and regard Him as one who is only a man?”

The question comes down to one that most of us learned in the Catechism, “Why was it necessary for our Saviour to be true God? The passages of Scripture quoted there are:

Ps 49: 7 “No man can redeem the life of another or give to God a ransom for him.”

Mk 10:45 “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.”

Rm 3:22-24 “There is no difference, for all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by His grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.”

Gl 3:13 “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law by becoming a curse for us.”

Gl 4:4-5 “When the time had fully come, God sent His Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons.”

1 Pt 1:18-19 “You know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a Lamb without blemish or defect.”

The first part of the Catechism’s answer, is, therefore, Christ had to be true God in order that His fulfilling

of the Law, His life, suffering, and death might be a sufficient ransom for all people.

Section two of the answer quotes the passages:

1 Cor 15: 57 “Thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

2 Tm 1:10 “Our Saviour, Christ Jesus... has destroyed death.”

Hb 2: 14 “Since the children have flesh and blood, He too shared in their humanity so that by His death He might destroy him who holds the power of death - that is, the devil.”

The Second part of the Catechism’s answer, is, therefore, Christ had to be true God in order that He might be able to overcome death and the devil for us.

Beyond that, the question “Could Jesus have failed?” also reveals a lamentable attitude to Scripture. If the Scriptures for hundreds of years had been foretelling that suffering, death, resurrection, and glorification of the Son of Man, and Jesus had failed, the Scriptures themselves would have failed to be God’s powerful and inerrant Word. In 1 Cor 15 Paul says that if Christ did not rise from the dead, the apostles were false witnesses when they said He did rise, and our faith and hope would be in vain. We would be the most pitiable of all people. We may as well make the most of this life, because there would be nothing beyond the grave. In short, it is blasphemous even to raise the possibility that Jesus could have failed. People who treasure the fact of their redemption should never ask that question, but humbly praise our Lord that His bitter suffering and death, and His resurrection from the dead on the third day according to the Scriptures have won salvation and life eternal.