

OVERCOMING THE FAILURES IN YOUR LIFE

By Rev. Will Nelken

Presented at Trinity Community Church, San Rafael, California, on Sunday, July 14, 2013

Failures are naturally defined by our culture and circumstance.

For instance, for you to run an eight-minute mile may be a “failure,” but for me it would be an achievement!

In Bible times, for a woman to remain unmarried was a failure; in our day, some would say, it is emancipation!

Today, we’re looking at “failures” as the Bible defines them, which always revolve around relationship with God, regardless of other circumstances.

The Bible reveals three compelling facts about failures:

- Every failure has a consequence.
(That is, a natural result of our behavior.)
- Every failure has a providence.
(That is, a divine purpose for our behavior.)
- Every failure has a sequel.
(That is, a further opportunity to make it right.)

We’re going to see how these played out in the life of Samson. And then, we’ll see what how it speaks to us for our day.

You may remember Samson as a strong man, a real-life Hercules, and a leader of the nation of Israel, and wonder, “How was he a failure?”

Well, I did not say *he* was a failure, because—now, get this—no human being is a failure who ends up on the right side with God.

In contrast, every human being who does *not* end up on the right side with God is definitely, and eternally, a failure, no matter how much she has achieved or amassed in this life.

That is how the Bible, and I, define failure.

Yet, I have failed—too many times to count—in many aspects of my life. You have, too. So, why are we still smiling?

Because even a thousand fails do not a failure make!

Soichiro Honda, the founder of the Honda Motor Company said, "Success is 99% failure."

American auto maker, Henry Ford, agreed: "Failure is simply the opportunity to begin again, this time more intelligently. Even a mistake may turn out to be the one thing necessary to a worthwhile achievement."

Winston Churchill echoed these thoughts when he said, "Success is not final, failure is not fatal: it is the courage to continue that counts."

Do you have the courage to continue? Good! Then, let's see what we can learn today.

Begin with a Miracle

Samson's story begins in Judges 13. He was born in miraculous circumstances to a woman previously unable to bear children. An angel appeared to her, announcing the birth of her son, and the object of his life: *"You will become pregnant and give birth to a son, and his hair must never be cut. For he will be dedicated to God as a Nazirite from birth. He will rescue Israel from the Philistines"* (Judges 13:5).

"When her son was born, they named him Samson. And the Lord blessed him as he grew up. And... the Spirit of the Lord began to take hold of him" (Judges 13:24-25).

Even with this promising beginning, Samson's life record is a series of mistakes. In the very next chapter, he becomes enthralled with a certain Philistine woman, and is determined to marry her, over his parents' objections: *"Isn't there one woman in our tribe or among all the Israelites you could marry? Why must you go to the pagan Philistines to find a wife?"* (Judges 14:3).

Proceed with Self-will

But Samson was insistent, *"Get her for me. She is the one I want"* (Judges 14:3).

His failure: Insisting on his own way (against parental guidance, social custom, and divine command).

The consequence: She betrayed him to her people. Her father gave her in marriage to another man of her own tribe.

The providence: *"His father and mother didn't realize the Lord was at work in this, creating an opportunity to disrupt the Philistines, who ruled over Israel at that time"* (Judges 14:4).

The sequel: Samson destroyed the Philistines' crops with fire, so the Philistines put the woman and her father to death. This turned Samson's heart to vengeance, who vowed, *"Because you did this, I will take my revenge on you, and I won't stop until I'm satisfied! So he attacked the Philistines with great fury and killed many of them"* (Judges 15:7-8).

This set the Philistines on edge. They sought to capture Samson, and his own people turned him over to them.

"But the Spirit of the Lord powerfully took control of Samson, and he snapped the ropes on his arms as if they were burnt strands of flax, and they fell from his wrists. Then he picked up a donkey's jawbone that was lying on the ground and killed a thousand Philistines with it" (Judges 15:14-15).

Samson became Israel's leader (judge) for the next 20 years.

So this initial failure led to great bitterness of heart and great cost of human life. Yet, it also led to a period of peace for Israel, even while they were under Philistine domination.

Unbridled Lust

But Samson couldn't leave the Philistine women alone. He was addicted.

He went to Gaza, the Philistine capital city, to spend the night with a prostitute. When the Philistines learned that he was there, they staged an ambush to kill him. But Samson escaped before dawn, carrying away the huge wooden gates of their city, leaving the city unsecured, and demonstrating that his physical strength was unmatched except by his moral weakness.

Later, Samson fell in love with another Philistine woman, whose name you may be familiar with: Delilah. Though her name means "devotee," she was anything but that.

When their relationship became known, the Philistine leaders bribed her with a great deal of money to betray Samson. She agreed.

Samson's failure: He persisted in doing his own thing, in contrast to the lifestyle God had prescribed for him. He did not guard his vow to God.

The consequence: Delilah agreed to betray Samson to her people. Samson yielded the secret of his strength and lost his power with God. The Philistines gouged out his eyes and captured him.

The providence: This put the dominant Philistines at greater risk than ever, ultimately dismantling their occupation of Israel.

The sequel: Samson finally revealed that the source of his strength was not a magical secret, as the Philistines had supposed, but a supernatural enablement from the Spirit of God. Mind you, his strength was not in his long hair, but in his persistent obedience to God with respect to not cutting his hair. *“My hair has never been cut,” he confessed, “for I was dedicated to God as a Nazirite from birth”* (Judges 16:17).

The Final Act

Samson became a prisoner and slave of the Philistines, grinding grain for them in prison. He was bound in chains of bronze (we learned last week about the unusual strength of bronze). But eventually, his hair began to grow back.

One day, during a great celebration of Philistine dominance, all of the leaders and many of the important Philistine people were gathered in their temple, drinking and partying. They asked for Samson to be brought out for sporting entertainment.

Aged and sightless, the prisoner was led to the center of the building, where two large pillars supported the great roof. Leaning against them, he uttered a final prayer: *““Sovereign Lord, remember me again. O God, please strengthen me just one more time. With one blow let me pay back the Philistines for the loss of my two eyes. Let me die with the Philistines”* (Judges 16:28-29).

Pushing against the two pillars with his hands, he brought down the roof on the entire assembly, killing more people in his death than during his entire lifetime.

The writer to the Hebrews ranked Samson among the heroes of the faith (Hebrews 11:32). Yet he failed to live up to his great gifts. Unable to conquer himself, he was ruined by his own lusts. He stands as a tragic example of a man of great potential who lacked stability of character. Still, our Sovereign God used him.

Keep the Book Open

The Apostle Paul reminded us, *“None of the trials which have come upon you is more than a human being can stand. You can trust that God will not let you be put to the test beyond your strength, but with any trial will also provide a way out by enabling you to put up with it”* (1 Corinthians 10:13; NJB).

Churchill’s words come again to mind: “Success is not final, failure is not fatal: it is the courage to continue that counts.” He reminds me that getting a big head due to success is premature; the final chapter has not yet been written. Failure is also a passing event.

The Concordant Literal Translation of 1 Corinthians 10:13 says that with every period of testing God also writes “the sequel.” The next chapter of your life is being written by the Spirit of God today, even as you sit here with me. Do you have the courage to continue?

Many have closed the book before reaching the end, concluding that what they have thus far experienced is the most there can be.

Incorrectly, they have assumed that for every event there is no providence (no higher purpose of God), but only consequence.

My friends, such a god is a demon of torture, not the God of grace. God is bigger than my mistakes! Bigger than my failures!

The future He is crafting for me is may be responsive to my errors, but it is not dependent on them or altogether determined by them.

Unless I ignore Him.

Unless I refuse His grace and mercy.

Unless I run from His love.

Unless I deny the Savior, Jesus Christ.

Unless I prefer my own way to His.

The story of Samson calls us to repentance. To turn from any lifestyle path that disregards the way of Christ.

The story of Samson calls us to renew our confidence in the Sovereign God, the Father of grace.

The story of Samson calls us to sing the praises of Him who loved us and gave Himself for us to rescue us from ourselves—from our self-centered habits.

The story of Samson calls us to pray for added strength to “continue on”—whether we have just completed a task successfully, or have failed miserably.

Wise King Solomon observed, *“The fastest runner doesn’t always win the race, and the strongest warrior doesn’t always win the battle. The wise sometimes go hungry, and the skillful are not necessarily wealthy. And those who are educated don’t always lead successful lives. It is all decided by chance, by being in the right place at the right time”* (Ecclesiastes 9:11).

And none of us can hope to be in “the right place at the right time” if we do not trust in the Sovereign God and let Him lead us.

Today, will you renew your vow to follow Christ?

Will you lay down your self-will at the foot of His cross?

Will you invite the Holy Spirit to come upon you again, to anoint you with fresh power?

Let's make an altar space today and call upon the name of the Lord!