

## **Introduction**

In 1990, author Stephen Pile wrote a book titled *Cannibals in the Cafeteria and other Fabulous Failures*. Let me give you a sampling of the fabulous failures about whom he wrote. The fastest failure of a driving test: Helen Ireland of Auburn, California failed hers in 1 second. She mistook the accelerator for the brake and drove her car through the driving center wall. The fastest defeat in a chess game: in the 1959 U.S. Open Championship, a player named Trinka was checkmated in three moves. And finally, the least successful Kamikaze pilot: he flew 11 missions and lived to be 93.

You can see from this sampling that Pile used the word "**fabulous**" ironically. His book is about "**miserable**" failures in other words. Let me ask you two questions in that regard. First, is that what King David was, a miserable failure? Second, is that what you and I are? The answers are that King David wasn't a miserable failure and that you and I won't be either if we do what he did – fail forward – and that's what I'm going to preach about today. Turn to 1 Kings 15:1-5.

## **Failure Defined**

At this point in history, the 12 tribes of Israel were divided into two nations. One was called Israel and consisted of 10 tribes in the north. The other was called Judah and consisted of 2 tribes (Judah and Benjamin) in the south.

Verse 1 states that while Jeroboam was king of Israel, Abijam became king of Judah. All the kings in Judah's history were descendants of David including Abijam. Verse 2 records that Abijam reigned for three years and verse 3 that his reign and he were ungodly. Verse 4 then explains why God didn't punish him by cutting off his descendants from inheriting the throne. It was because that would have meant cutting off David's descendants from inheriting the throne and God would never do that. Verse 5 goes on to reveal why He wouldn't.

Now, notice a cryptic little phrase verse 5 uses to describe an incident in David's life, "**the case of Uriah the Hittite.**" Most of you know the story behind it. In a nutshell, David lusted after Uriah's wife, Bathsheba, and developed a long term adulterous relationship with her. He then tried to cover it up by having Uriah killed.

I'd analyze what David did this way. He needed to do what was morally right, keep the sixth and seventh of the Ten Commandments. But he didn't. He broke both of them instead and committed two of the most detestable sins a human being can commit – adultery and murder.

That helps us define what failure is. It's not achieving an intended outcome, a desired result. We try to do something that's practically good or morally right but, for one reason or another, don't.

David's failure was spiritual and moral but certainly not all failures are. A law school classmate of mine named Edward, for instance, flunked the bar exam. I talked to him the day after we got the results and he was devastated. He needed to pass it to begin practicing law but didn't and so couldn't. He failed not by sinning but by acting inadequately.

### **Fail Forward**

Yes, David and Edward failed, but they aren't the only ones. As J. Wallace Hamilton wrote in an article for *Leadership Magazine*: "**Many are training for success when they should be training for failure. Failure is far more common than success.**"

Let me ask you a question. How many times have you failed in your life? If you're like me, you can't answer that because you've failed far too many times to keep track. My point is this. Many people think failure is avoidable but it isn't. As Alexander Pope wrote 260 years ago, "**To err is human.**" Everybody errs. They fail or make mistakes.

That includes in our spiritual and moral lives. I've emphasized in my preaching that you and I can become so much like Jesus that goodness and rightness are normal for us and sin exceptional. But still, exceptional implies that we will occasionally sin. Our own denomination's

statement of faith assumes that. Paragraph 45 in our Book of Discipline states: **"We further believe that the fullness of the Holy Spirit does not make believers incapable of choosing to sin."** 2 Chronicles 6:36 concurs, **"There is no man who does not sin."** That includes David. He failed spiritually and morally - and so have we and so will we.

It's true then. Failure of one kind or another is an unavoidable part of life for us all. That means the issue isn't, **"Will we fail?"** because we will. It's, **"How should we fail?"** The answer is, **"as David did."**

I'd like to make a striking observation by linking the cryptic little phrase in verse 5 with how verses 3 and 5 describe David. **"In the case of Uriah the Hittite"** – David was an adulterer and murderer. How verses 3 and 5 describe him – **"wholly devoted to the LORD his God"** and **"did what was right in the sight of the LORD."** That demonstrates what David did? He failed forward.

I borrow that language from Charles Kettering, an acclaimed American inventor who held 186 patents. Kettering identified one of the keys to achieving what he did, **"One should fail forward – to success."** Read Psalm 51, which David wrote soon after Nathan exposed his adultery and murder. It's clear what he did. He failed forward to success.

And so should we. We should fail forward, which requires doing three things, each of which I want to identify and explain.

### **Put Feelings in their Place**

First, we put our feelings in their place.

Let's face it. Failure can be one of the most painful experiences in life. It can generate a range of emotions depending on its nature and context, including anger, grief, guilt, resentment, humiliation, and fear. Whatever the emotions are, they're usually intense and even exaggerated. By exaggerated, I mean that they aren't rooted in reality. They don't reflect the way things truly are. Things are not as we feel them to be.

Noted theologian and author J.I. Packer wrote one of the most valuable insights I've ever learned: **"A moment of conscious triumph**

**makes one feel that after this nothing will really matter; a moment of realized disaster makes one feel that this is the end of everything. But neither feeling is realistic; for neither event is really what it is felt to be.”** I know what he means by experience and so do most of you. Moments of success usually make me feel things are better than they really are. Moments of failure usually make me feel things are worse than they really are. When we fail, in other words, our emotions usually aren't reliable indicators of reality. The implications of our failure are rarely as bad as we feel them to be.

We must, therefore, put our feelings in their place. They can be good servants but are always poor masters. So we don't surrender our thoughts and wills to them and let them direct our actions. We don't allow anger, grief, guilt, resentment, humiliation, or fear dictate what we decide and do – especially when we've failed. We put those feelings in their place instead. We make them servants not masters.

A Christian I knew in Akron failed by marrying a woman he shouldn't have – against the advice of his family and friends. She was a self-consumed person, as everyone except him seemed to recognize, who eventually left him for another man. Feeling humiliated and foolish as a result, he vowed that he would never marry again – and hasn't.

He illustrates, by contrast, what we need to do when we fail. Put our feelings in their place. Make them servants, not masters. Don't allow them to dictate what we decide and do.

### **Think Straight about Failure**

Failing forward requires a second thing. We think straight about failure. Straight thinking always favors what is helpful or good. Crooked thinking always favors what is harmful or evil. It only makes sense, therefore, to think straight about failure – to see it for what it is and is not. In that regard, David's experience reveals one thing it isn't - fatal.

Consider his standing before God and Biblically literate Christians. How does God perceive him? How do they perceive him? It isn't as

adulterer and murderer. It's as one whose heart was "**wholly devoted to the LORD his God**" – verse 3.

Let's go back to what he did. He committed adultery and murder. Most people would write off someone who did that. They'd consider him or her to be an abject failure. But that isn't the case with David. God and we don't consider him an abject failure. He and we consider him one of the godliest men who ever lived instead.

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out what that teaches us. Failure isn't fatal. Think of the most significant failures in your personal life. If David's failures, adultery and murder, weren't fatal for him, then yours don't have to be for you either.

Erma Bombeck was one of the most influential women in America for three decades from the late 60's to the late 90's. She repeatedly claimed that her failures not her successes made her that. When she spoke at college commencements, she often rehearsed some of her failures - like a comedy record album that sold two copies, in Beirut and a book signing where only two people showed up, one who wanted directions to the restroom and the other who wanted to buy the desk at which she was sitting. She'd then say this to the graduates: "**What you have to tell yourself is, 'I'm not a failure. I failed at doing something.' There's a big difference.**"

She was exactly right. Failing and being a failure are two entirely different things. Every failure is just one step in the marathon we call life. It was for David and it is for us as well. Failing doesn't mean I'm a loser. It just means I haven't won yet.

That's the truth about failure and we need to think straight and believe it. It isn't fatal. It isn't final.

### **Bounce Back**

There's a third thing failing forward requires. Bounce back. Abraham Lincoln, whose many political failures are legendary, said it well: "**I am not concerned that you have fallen; I am concerned that**

**you arise.”** He was right. If you’ve failed, arise. Bounce back. Get up and go on. Pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and keep on trying.

That doesn’t mean though that *all we have to do* is to keep on trying. You know the motto, **“Try and try again.”** The better motto is, **“Try, stop and think, and try again.”** It isn’t enough to pick ourselves up and just work harder and faster. We usually have to change course as well. If we do what we’ve always done, we’ll likely get what we’ve always gotten. So, we keep on trying but in a smarter way. We think and analyze and learn two things: what we did do but should not have and what we did not do but should have. We then act accordingly by not doing and doing what we should.

Let’s go back to my classmate Edward. Yes, he failed the bar exam. But he bounced back. He thought about how he had prepared for it and realized that he needed to prepare differently and did. He got up and tried again – harder and *smarter*. He then passed it, after which he acquired an associate position in one of Akron’s top two law firms.

We also need to bounce back, especially in our spiritual and moral lives. When we sin and fail God, we need to get up and go on as David did in Psalm 51. Please listen to the counsel of Quaker author Richard Foster. In his book *Freedom of Simplicity*, he writes: **“But when we do fail, we do not need to give excessive time mourning the loss. We need to make confession, get up, and start again immediately. The issue in holy obedience is not whether we failed or succeeded yesterday or this morning, but whether we are obedient now.”** That is sound advice and we desperately need to heed it.

## **Conclusion**

In 1902, the poetry editor of *Atlantic Monthly* magazine returned a stack of poems with this note, **“Our magazine has no room for your vigorous verse.”** The poet who received that note was 28 year-old Robert Frost, who went on to become one of America’s finest poets. May and you and I do what David and Robert Frost did. Fail forward.