



FAILING UPWARD

The Trials of a King

Text: 2 Samuel 11-12; 18-19; 1 Chronicles 22, 29;
Psalm 23, 32, 51

When Down Goes Up

In recent years, the lexicon of leadership has come to include a new concept, popularly described as “failing upward.” Have you heard of this? The term originated as a way of describing the career paths of business executives who drive their companies into the ground, parachute out with eye-popping severance packages, and then manage to get hired to an even higher-level position by some other company. To most observers, these people have obviously failed in their leadership. Logic suggests that this should result in their being sent down the ladder of responsibility and influence. But, amazingly, some of these people move upward instead. What’s going on here?

Is there simply a cult of celebrity around some of these executives that gives them a Teflon reputation nothing can sully? Is there a cabal of corporate leadership that always makes room or excuses for someone in the fraternity, once they are in? Is there just such a small pool of people with the combination of gifts and experience needed to manage large organizations or athletic teams that it is necessary to recycle them, no matter how dented and dirty the recently canned leader may be? Is it some blend of amnesia or stupidity that leads our society to keep giving people further chances to do it right this time? Or is there something within our spirit that knows that, under the right conditions, sometimes failure can actually be the essential seed for the next season of success?

The Rise of David

If ever there was someone who appeared to “fail upward,” it is the man we meet at the center of the biblical Storyline today. David, son of Jesse was, in some sense, born a failure. He was born into a family of shepherds, arguably the lowest rung on the occupational ladder of ancient times – and in the region of Bethlehem, not even a one-horse town in those days. Making matters worse, David had NO logical prospects of escaping this condition. The Hebrew family system operated by a simple rule: The older you were, the more status you had. You ate earlier, inherited more, and got esteemed more highly. But David was at the very bottom of the pecking order, the youngest of Jesse’s seven sons.

And, yet, seemingly destined to be a failure from the start, David somehow moved up. Some of this upward movement can be credited to the remarkable range of gifts David had. 1 Samuel 16:12 says that he “**was ruddy, with a fine appearance and handsome features.**” Alongside good looks, David also had artistic gifts, ultimately earning him a place as a musician in the court of Israel’s King Saul. His ability to compose poetry that expresses the colors and passions of human life is, of course, legendary. We know from our study last week that David was also deadly accurate



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with a slingshot and possessed an almost reckless chutzpah that made him willing to take on lions, giant, and bears. Oh my!

Perhaps for these reasons and for one more I'll touch on in a moment, both human beings and God himself saw David as rare leadership material. But only God saw his potential at first. 1 Samuel 16 tells us that when Israel needed relief from the unraveling reign of King Saul, God sent the prophet Samuel to Jesse's house, called little David in from the fields, and then the Lord said, "**Rise and anoint him; he is the one.**" The story of David's stunning rise out of obscurity to national prominence as a warrior and then to the throne of Israel, is well told in the books of Samuel and Chronicles, but it is worth summarizing.

Under David's leadership, the corporate life of Israel blossomed as in no other period in all of its history. David led the armies of Israel to victory after victory against the many hostile peoples and kingdoms in and around the land of Canaan. In spite of a brief civil war, he managed to unite the twelve tribes of Israel as never before, extending the national borders to a breadth that the nation would never again enjoy after his passing. The amazing period of peace and prosperity that Israel enjoyed under David's son, Solomon, was only possible because of the foundation that his father laid.

What it is crucial to understand, however, is that this national strength and security came about not simply because David was the most brilliant military and political leader Israel ever had. It was also because David was such a phenomenal spiritual leader. After his great general, Joab, purged the famous city of Jerusalem of the Jebusites who'd held it for centuries, David moved the Ark of the Covenant from Hebron to the new capitol city of Jerusalem as a sign that this nation's life was to be centered on God. David then renewed and organized the ministry of the Levite priests. He revived the celebration of the great religious feasts of Israel. He composed or commissioned more than 150 worship songs and prayers.

The worship of Yahweh wasn't merely a convenient civil religion to David. It was the central energizing purpose of his life. The very name, "David," comes from the Aramaic word for "love," and David's heart beat with a love of God and a zeal for God's good name, and a passion to see God's good purpose thrive among the people of this earth that has been found in all too few leaders over time. This, I believe, is what God saw when he took that little shepherd boy from the pit of this world's definition of failure and destined him to move upward, saying: "**This is a man after my own heart.**"

The Fall of David



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But that doesn't mean that David wasn't capable of failure. On the contrary, one of the reasons why David's life is so worthy of our study is because – like many of us – David failed so miserably. If the record of his life was just this string of spectacular successes, we might admire him, but we'd never learn from him what – thank God – we *can* learn from him: How, with God's grace, you and I can fail upward too.

If you haven't had time to read your way through the passages assigned for this morning, I hope you'll read through them later today, because I won't do them justice in the brief time we have left. Suffice it to say that David failed spectacularly in two particular arenas of his life and succeeded in one crucial one that made all the difference in the direction his life ultimately had.

The first area had to do with how he managed temptation. I'll put a link in our website Media Library next today's sermon to another message I've preached that unpacks this theme in detail. But the basic idea is that one of the very big problems in David's life is that he failed to estimate the expanding consequences of little sins. In his case, he looked at a woman named Bathsheba who wasn't his wife. Then the look lingered into a leer, and the leer became an invitation, and the invitation became adultery. From there he lied, covered, manipulated, betrayed and used his friends, and ultimately murdered a very good man named Uriah. It led to the death of the innocent child he'd fathered, the broken heart of Bathsheba, and a devastating loss of relationship with God. All of this because David thought: What harm is there in a little sin?

But there was a second major arena in which David collapsed. He failed to recognize the impact that his hypocrisy would have on people close to him. The Bible made clear that, for a season, David nearly lost the confidence and allegiance of his man. But there were people even closer to him. David had a son named Absalom who was endowed with many of his father's gifts. He had the potential to be a great leader, maybe even the next king of Israel. But, in all likelihood, Absalom got largely forgotten while David was doing his great deeds for all of Israel. What about me, dad? Almost certainly, Absalom saw his father's duplicity. He heard his father talking a great game about God and about doing God's will, but then he saw dad just taking what he wanted, to heck with the people loyal to him. So Absalom became disloyal to his own dad. He tried to take what he wanted – the throne of Israel – and in the ensuing coup attempt, Absalom was slain. A dead son with only a lonely monument in the King's Valley to a boy who needed a dad. A ravaged family. A shattered father. **“Oh, Absalom, my son!”**

The Art of Failing Upward



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You know the Bible does such a good job of telling other people's stories that it's hard not to notice that it's also telling our story? On one level, that's really painful isn't? I haven't racked up anything like the spectacular successes that David has, but I've had some spectacular failures. I've let little sins into my life that multiplied and mounted up in devastating ways. I've often looked great to public, done marvelous deeds out on the battlefield of life, and left my family members lonely, confused and misled by my hypocrisy? Where can you find echoes of David's story in yours?

As painful as it is to look at the reality of what the sin in our lives sometimes yields, I want to proclaim to you today some good news that also flows out of this story, and this is the bottom line: Faced faithfully, our failures don't have to be final. They can even be fruitful. The really significant thing about the story of David is not that this gifted man failed; it is what he did when he did. Oh, he played the denial and blame game with the best of us, at first. But there are a few things he did after that can be important takeaways for you and me.

FIRST, David listened to the people who loved him. He was fortunate that he was loved. He had a friend named Nathan who loved him enough to confront him about his sin with Bathsheba and all its consequences. He had a friend named Joab who loved him enough to confront him about Absalom and demand that he step up and face the fall-out of that. When I say David listened to them, I don't mean he let them talk at him. We can look like we're listening when people try to point out our failings, and not hear a thing. We're too busy mounting our defense. But David had the humility and good sense to recognize that because these two people obviously loved him, he better let them speak not just at him but into him. Do you have a set of partners in life like that? A family, a small group, some best friends? Dare to ask them, what do I need to hear?

SECONDLY, David saw that his sin affected his primary relationships. The idea that the choices we make affect nobody but us is one of the biggest and most popular lies ever manufactured in the workshop of hell. Here's a scary news flash: People know when we're sinning, even when we're in denial about it ourselves. If they don't know it, they feel the consequences of it. God has made us relational beings and the first and worst thing that our sin does is hurt our relationship with Him and then cascades to others from there. Remarkably, David saw this. He says in Psalm 51: **"Against you only have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight."** I might be fooling others, but I know that I'm not fooling you, Lord. My choices are damaging our relationship, and if that linkage is clogged, it's going to overflow in a lot of other bad ways and places. Do you understand for yourself, that God is the one from whom no secrets are hidden and that he wants you to come clean with Him about them, so that he can bring something fruitful from failure?



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FINALLY, David came clean, went to God to get clean, and was made clean. David says in Psalm 51: **“Cleans me from my sin. Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit.”** There is no joy quite like knowing that as large as your failures have been, the grace of your Savior is even larger. It is a wonderful thing to wake up after a long season of not facing the reality of what’s been going on in your life, (and because of your life in others lives) only to discover that God is giving you a fresh start. Even if your flesh is weak and the past hasn’t been pretty, is your spirit willing to make that new beginning today? Can you fail upward?

David did. There were still scars, of course, from the failures of his past. But following this particularly painful period, God brought forth tremendous fruit from David’s life. To this day, he is esteemed as the greatest human King that Israel ever had – not only for the successful things that he did, but for the right things he finally did, when he had failed. Thus 1 Chronicles 29 concludes: ²⁶ **David son of Jesse was king over all Israel.** ²⁷ **He ruled over Israel forty years--seven in Hebron and thirty-three in Jerusalem.** ²⁸ **He died at a good old age, having enjoyed long life, wealth and honor. His son Solomon succeeded him as king.** It is with the work and wisdom of Solomon that we’ll pick up the Storyline next week.

Let’s pray together...