What should we do when we fail? – Psalm 51

In a culture where "success" is everything, it is hard to be a failure. The media loves winners. Losers are lonely people.

The life of a disciple is supposed to be a life of joy – ***"He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God"***. (Ps. 40:3) Joy is a fruit of the Holy Spirit's work in our lives. (Gal. 5:22) But we frequently lose our joy. Remember that we can always have our joy restored by God. This happened to King David. He failed big time! But failure is never final. See the example in 2 Chron. 29:27.

But God loves failures! We divide people into the winners and the losers. But God doesn't limit himself to just loving winners – a very small percentage of people. He loves winners and losers alike. But there is much more than this to His love. The real reason God loves losers is that there is nobody else to love! **We are all losers.**

We set up our own standards of success. We establish our own criteria. We look over the fence at others and happily evaluate each other. Occasionally the thought hits us that the criteria we have chosen to calibrate success may be the wrong criteria! Faulty criteria produces faulty evaluation.

God refuses to be terribly impressed with our statistics. But supporters are impressed by such criteria and insist on evaluating the success of the various ministries we are involved in.

God has other standards that He has used consistently since He made mankind. His criteria need to be carefully examined. It is clear that, by God's standards, we have all failed. God is very unimpressed with our failure **but** He still has a great deal of love for us who have failed.

If you have failed, you are in good company!

John Mark, a young "worker" got "cold feet" and ran away on that first trip with Paul and Barnabas. But later he became the author of the second Gospel. So God was willing to use a failure!

- ✓ Noah got drunk
- ✓ Moses got angry and murdered a man
- ✓ Gideon got really scared
- ✓ Peter was inconsistent
- ✓ Thomas doubted
- ✓ Martha pouted and complained

God dealt with them and used every one of them for His glory and our blessing.

This is part of the story of a **king-sized failure**! David's failure is given in all its sordid detail. (2 Sam. 11) He coveted, stole, committed adultery and murder and in so doing broke four of the last five commandments. But we are also given an account in Psalm 51 of David's steps back from failure. It starts with very great anguish of heart and ends with great hope and worship.

Notice the word "spirit":

v. 10 ***"Renew a right spirit within me,"***

v. 11 ***"And take not your Holy Spirit from me."***

v. 12 ***"Uphold me with a willing spirit."***

v. 17 ***"The sacrifices of God are broken spirit."***

Clearly David realised that his failure had a spiritual cause and the answer for healing and correction had to be a spiritual answer. This is true of most of our failure.

What was wrong with David's spirit?

David admitted that his actions were motivated by a **wrong spirit**. He also knew that before God can bless anyone and use that person, the person must have a "broken spirit".

The story is told in 2 Samuel 11.

v. 1 At the time when kings go out to battle, David sent Joab (v. 1). Something had gone wrong here. It is an example of, "Here I am Lord, send him!"

v. 2 ***"Late one afternoon … David rose from his bed"***! So something of a wrong spirit is exposed – a spirit of laziness.

Isaac Watts wrote a hymn that has the following verse:

"In works of labour or of skill
I would be busy too.
For Satan finds some mischief still
For idle hands to do."

But it got worse! As David got out of bed, he saw Bathsheba on the roof near the palace. A wrong spirit took over David completely. He desired her. He wanted her. He sent for her and he had her.

But it got even worse! Bathsheba became pregnant and David found himself in deep potential trouble. Uriah was on active duty. David made a plan to get himself off the hook. He brought Uriah home from the front for a time of leave hoping he would get his wife pregnant. But Uriah wouldn't go home. David got him drunk, but he still wouldn't go. He was a better man drunk than the King was sober! So David resorted to having him murdered – actually deliberately killed in action.

God sent Nathan on a very difficult assignment. Nathan told a story and trapped David, ***"… you are the man!"*** (2 Sam. 12:7) David broke into little pieces as he was confronted with the enormity of his shame. Nathan must have wondered if he was to be killed!

David must have been overcome with shame! Any comeback from failure necessitates confrontation with sin and a plan to deal with it. The terrible danger for David was that he might condone his sin or cover it up again. Sin has terrible consequences:

v. 1, 2, 7, 10: it pollutes the soul – makes it foul and dirty.

v. 3: it fills the mind. We read that David's sin was prominent in his thoughts all the time.

v. 4: it stings the conscience.

v. 8: it depresses our hearts and we lose our joy.

v. 8: it affects our bodies.

v. 10: it sours our spirits.

v. 14, 15: it seals our lips.

David's sin was a **big sin**! But sin always kills joy in our hearts. A very small bit of grit in the eye causes great distress. A very small stone in your shoe causes great discomfort.

A "broken" spirit is prepared to think about how God thinks about such actions. It calls sin, sin and deals with it in the only possible way – with repentance and cleansing. ***"Wash me thoroughly from my***

iniquity and cleanse me from my sin." (v. 2) ***"Purge me with hyssop and I shall be clean, wash me and I shall be whiter than snow."*** (v. 7)

Often it is hard to get to the point of open repentance and it is made harder when we fail to realise it is hard, because we don't understand that it is God's goodness that is **encouraging us to repent**. David knew this and so he writes about God's ***"steadfast love"*** and ***"abundant mercy"***. (v. 1) Even when he was conscious of his sin, he knew and sensed that God still loved him and wanted to recover him by His grace. David didn't forget that God deals with ***"truth in the inward being"***. (v. 6) David knew that God, acting as judge, is justified when He judges with the utmost severity. (v. 4) He knows he deserves none of God's love.

This is the wonderful thing about failure! God can't do a lot with successful people! People praise them and they have no time to see themselves realistically as God sees them. So they don't feel any need of repentance. But failures have a great time being honest and realistic with God. They love being forgiven! One of the good things about failure is that one discovers so much about oneself. Such self-discovery is a severe disappointment. But it brings a sense of relief as well! Why? Because I know that God knows the real me and has always known the real me and this has not altered His love for me one little bit. God, in His grace, loves me as I am and wants to work with me and change me. He wants to renew a ***"right spirit within me"***. (v. 10) And for us, He wants to fill us with the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit will help us to change from being lazy to being more disciplined and from being a 'Scrooge' to having a giving spirit.

In the Old Testament we read of the Holy Spirit ***"clothing Himself with Gideon"***. This happened to David's predecessor King Saul (1 Sam. 16:14), but Saul failed and the Holy Spirit left him. This must have worried David. He didn't want to be what Paul called ***"a castaway"***. (1 Cor. 9:27)

As New Testament believers, we don't ever have this fear. The Lord Jesus said, ***"And I will pray the Father and He will give you another comforter that He may abide with you for ever"***. (Jn. 14:16)

So this means that as a failing believer I can make it a habit to maintain a "broken spirit" in order to know the freshness and the beauty of the "right spirit" – the Holy Spirit. I can reject the old spirit of self-dependence and allow the Holy Spirit to direct me. Paul put it this way, ***"For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the*** (Holy) ***Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body you will live"***. (Rom. 8:13) Once we confess our sins and they are forgiven, the remembrance of it will be to our good!

This is wonderfully liberating! **Freedom!** Guilt forgiven, brokenness healed, despair banished all replaced by wonderful peace and joy. This liberation from self-centredness is called ***"your salvation"***. We need to talk of "your salvation" rather than about when we were saved. Now it's not **my** house but **"Yours"**. It's not **my** time but **"Yours"**. Now it is glad stewardship of what is not mine rather than constantly 'stewing with worry'.

Liberty from self-trust

We live in the West in a culture that teaches you to "be your own man" – "do your own thing" and to be self-sufficient. This deeply ingrained self-trust is a disaster. One part of this culture is that one must never admit weakness and failure in the same way that King David was able to confess his inadequacy.

So many people are not free to be honest. They must 'save face'. In England you must 'keep a stiff upper lip'. This was not a problem for David. It is not a problem for all liberated failures! We have

nothing to hide, we can openly share our needs and we know the One who is the answer to all our needs! This is wonderfully liberating!

Freedom from self-interest

"Then I will teach transgressors Your ways and sinners will return to You." (v. 13) This is the goal of all we do! This is our supreme purpose.

When you are free of your own troubles, then you are free to help others and especially to help sinners to return to God. So failure is never final! It is wonderful to be set free from the bondage of a spiritual concern that is all about me, so that I can be concerned about others and it is even more wonderful that I can do something that will bring delight to the Lord who loves me.

Freedom from self-pity

"Deliver me from blood-guiltiness, O God, O God of my salvation and my tongue will sing aloud of Your righteousness."

David had plenty of grounds for self-pity and so do we when we fail. But David had no intention of hiding the truth or pretending anything. He was free because he was forgiven. ***"My tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness … my mouth will declare your praise."*** (v. 14-15)

If you try to live with the "myth" of perpetual success, you have to constantly maintain this image. So you are in bondage to your own myth. Self-confessing failures with the enabling, liberating Holy Spirit driving them have much more freedom because of the ring of reality of what He does.

So the way to success is failure! Never fail to admit your failure if you want to succeed!

"Beloved, I pray that all may go well with your soul." (3 Jn. 2)