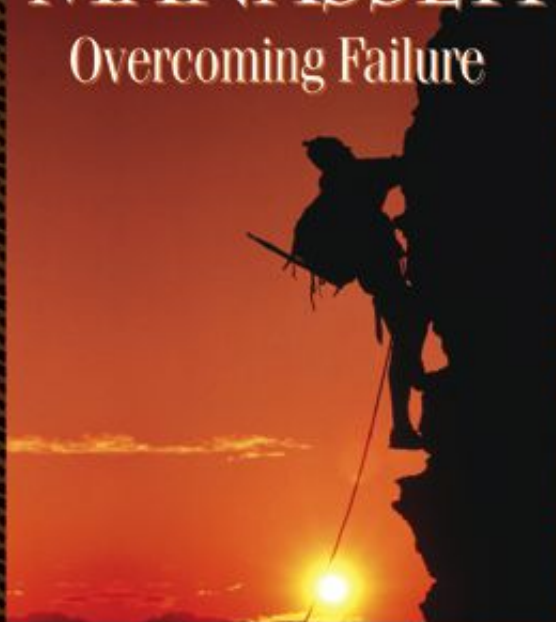


DISCOVERY SERIES

# *David &* MANASSEH

Overcoming Failure



David Roper

# DAVID & MANASSEH: *Overcoming Failure*

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Over the years I have learned that God has many ways to make us into the people He wants us to be. But it seems that His preferred method is through resistance. The greater the resistance, the greater the growth. What we see as obstacles to achievement, God sees as opportunities for growth. Disappointment, loss, criticism, failure, humiliation, temptation, depression, loneliness, and moral failure become the means by which we grow strong if we are “trained” by these forces, as the author of Hebrews would say (12:11).

This booklet is mainly about overcoming failure. We will examine two Old Testament men who failed miserably, David and Manasseh, and see how God used their failure to make them strong. We will discover that God wastes nothing in our lives—not even sin.

*David Roper*

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## MANASSEH: Overcoming A Bad Start

It was New Year's Day, 1929. The University of California at Berkeley was playing Georgia Tech in the Rose Bowl. Roy Riegels, a Cal defensive back recovered a Georgia Tech fumble, ran laterally across the field, turned, and then scampered 65 yards in the wrong direction—straight toward Cal's goal line. One of his own players tackled Riegels just before he would have scored for Georgia Tech. On the next play, Georgia Tech blocked the punt and scored.

From that day on, Riegels was saddled with the infamous name, "Wrong-way Riegels." For years afterward whenever he was introduced, people would exclaim, "Oh, yeah. I know who you are! You're the guy who ran the wrong

way in the Rose Bowl!"

It may be that our failures are not as conspicuous as Riegels' was, but we have our own alternate routes and wrong-way runs. And we have the memories that accompany them—recollections that rise up to taunt us and haunt us at 3 o'clock in the morning. There's so much of our past we wish we could undo or redo—so much we wish we could forget. If only we could begin again.

Louisa Fletcher Tarkington wrote for all of us when she mused:

I wish that there were  
some wonderful place  
called the Land of  
Beginning Again,  
Where all our mistakes,  
and all our heartaches,  
and all of our poor  
selfish griefs  
could be dropped like a  
shabby old coat at the door,  
and never be put on again.

There is such a place. It is found in the grace of God—a grace that not only completely forgives our past and puts it away, but uses it to make us better than ever before. “Even from sin,” Augustine said, “God can draw good.”

## **MANASSEH’S GODLY HERITAGE**

Manasseh was the son of Hezekiah, one of the few kings of Judah who “did what was right in the eyes of the Lord” (2 Ki. 18:3).

Israel’s historian tells us:

*[Hezekiah] removed the high places, smashed the sacred stones, and cut down the Asherah poles. He broke into pieces the bronze snake Moses had made, for up to that time the Israelites had been burning incense to it. (It was called Nehushtan.) Hezekiah trusted in the Lord, the God of Israel. There was no one like*

*him among all the kings of Judah, either before him or after him. He held fast to the Lord and did not cease to follow Him; he kept the commands the Lord had given Moses (2 Ki. 18:4-6).*

Hezekiah was responsible for a historic spiritual revival that rejuvenated Judah. He did away with the idols that his father, Ahaz, had worshiped, and he delivered his people from apostasy. He was helped greatly in his work of reformation by the prophetic ministries of Isaiah and Micah.

Hezekiah’s son Manasseh ascended to the throne when he was 12 years old and reigned for 10 years as co-regent with his father. When he was 22, his father died and the young king took over the reins of government. He reigned 55 years—from 697 to 642 BC—the longest rule in the history of both Judah and Israel.

Manasseh was blessed with a godly father. He lived through a time of spiritual vitality and prosperity. He was tutored by the prophets Isaiah and Micah. And he saw the Lord miraculously deliver Jerusalem while under siege by the Assyrians (2 Ki. 19:35). Yet, he didn't follow in his father's footsteps.

## **MANASSEH'S FAILURE OF LEADERSHIP**

Scripture tells us that Manasseh “did evil in the eyes of the Lord, following the detestable practices of the nations the Lord had driven out before the Israelites” (2 Ki. 21:2).

The “nations” of whom the author writes were the depraved and disgusting Canaanites. Manasseh outdid them in his insane frenzy to break every rule—a madness spelled out in the following verses:

*He rebuilt the high places his father Hezekiah had destroyed; he also erected altars to Baal and made an Asherah pole, as Ahab king of Israel had done. He bowed down to all the starry hosts and worshiped them. He built altars in the temple of the Lord, of which the Lord had said, “In Jerusalem I will put My Name.” In both courts of the temple of the Lord, he built altars to all the starry hosts. He sacrificed his own son in the fire, practiced sorcery and divination, and consulted mediums and spiritists. He did much evil in the eyes of the Lord, provoking Him to anger. He took the carved Asherah pole he had made and put it in the temple . . . . Manasseh led [Israel] astray, so that they did more evil than the nations the Lord had destroyed before the Israelites (2 Ki. 21:3-7,9).*

Manasseh's sins are recited here in an ascending order of deviance. First he "rebuilt the high places his father Hezekiah had destroyed." Ahaz, Manasseh's grandfather, had established "high places"—groves on the top of hills where the Asherah was worshiped. Hezekiah had torn them down (2 Ki. 18:4). Manasseh built them up again.

Then Manasseh "erected altars to Baal," the chief Canaanite deity, and made an Asherah pole as Ahab and Jezebel, Israel's diabolical duo, had done (1 Ki. 16:33). The Asherah were images of a female deity, the consort of Baal, who represented the Canaanite goddess of sex and fertility. The pillars erected in her honor were evidently some sort of phallic symbols.

Manasseh worshiped the hosts of heaven and served them. He practiced astrology,

giving his devotion to the sun, the moon, the planets, and the stars (see also Jer. 8:2; 19:13). He built altars to astral deities in the temple in Jerusalem, where God had said, "I will put My Name."

He made his sons pass through the fire—child sacrifice. According to the chronicler, "He sacrificed his sons in the fire in the Valley of Ben Hinnom." He also "practiced sorcery, divination, and witchcraft, and consulted mediums and spiritists" (2 Chr. 33:6). The Hebrew text suggests that he did more than consult them, he "appointed" them. In other words, he gave them court appointments and put them in his cabinet.

If this were not enough, this debauched monarch then "took the carved Asherah pole he had made and put it in the temple." He took the aforementioned pornographic post, dedicated to everything ugly and

obscene, and set it up in the Holy of Holies in the Lord's temple.

Nowhere is there the slightest hint of the worship of Yahweh. Manasseh selected his pantheon from the cultures surrounding Israel—from the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Philistines, the Phoenicians—but there is not one reference to the God who had revealed Himself to Israel.

The historian concluded, “Manasseh led [Israel] astray, so that they did more evil than the nations the Lord had destroyed before the Israelites” (2 Ki. 21:9).

Understand what's being said here: Manasseh alone bore the responsibility for bringing an entire nation down. What a legacy to leave behind!

And that's not all. There is a footnote that is terrible in its implications:

*Manasseh also shed so*

*much innocent blood that he filled Jerusalem from end to end—besides the sin that he had caused Judah to commit, so that they did evil in the eyes of the Lord (2 Ki. 21:16).*

Manasseh silenced the prophets with terrifying fury. Josephus, the Jewish historian, reports that Manasseh “slew all the righteous men that were among the Hebrews, nor would he spare the prophets, for he every day slew some of them until Jerusalem was overflowed with blood.”

There is a longstanding Jewish tradition reported in the Talmud that Manasseh put his old teacher, Isaiah, in a log and sawed it in two. This is almost certainly the background of the statement in the book of Hebrews that at least one of God's heroes was “sawn in two” (Heb. 11:37).

## THE REST OF THE STORY

*As for the other events of Manasseh's reign, and all he did, including the sin he committed, are they not written in the book of the annals of the kings of Judah? Manasseh rested with his fathers and was buried in his palace garden, the garden of Uzza. And Amon his son succeeded him as king (2 Ki. 21:17-18).*

Here is an odd thing: Manasseh thumbed his nose at God for 55 years, indulged himself in every lustful passion, corrupted and ruined an entire nation, and God sat on His hands.

Or did He?

Normally, we see only one side of God—His longsuffering patience: “He longs to be gracious” (Isa. 30:18). But there is another side: His “strange work” of judgment.

The whole story is not

told in the books of Kings. The purpose of 1 and 2 Kings is to trace the decline of Israel and Judah to the Babylonian exile and to supply the reasons for that exile. The stories are necessarily abridged. The writer dwells only on those facts that contribute to his theme. The account of Manasseh's reign is resumed and supplemented in 2 Chronicles 33. The purpose of the chronicler was different. His theme was the restoration of the Davidic throne. For this purpose he selected events that contributed to that motif and included a number of facts that are omitted in Kings.

The first nine verses of 2 Chronicles 33 are basically a rewrite of 2 Kings 21:1-9 with a few minor changes. Then a new story emerges:

*The Lord spoke to Manasseh and his people, but they paid no attention (2 Chr. 33:10).*



God's judgment did not fall precipitously. It never does. Theologian John Piper says, "[God's] anger must be released by a stiff safety lock, but His mercy has a hair trigger." God loves us too much to let us go. He pursues us—even into our sin and guilt—and pleads with us to turn back.

An old Turkish proverb says that God has "feet of wool and hands of steel." We may not hear Him coming, but when He gets His hands on us we cannot wriggle away. The flip side of the promise "I will never leave you nor forsake you" (Josh. 1:5) is the pledge that He will never leave us alone. He will hound us, badger us, bother us, pester us, and heckle us until we give in.

God has many ways to deliver us from sin: sometimes by a drawing we feel in our souls; sometimes by a word dropped by a friend; sometimes by an

incident related; or sometimes by a book, a sermon, a chance meeting. In these ways God appeals to us to come back to Him.

I remember a student I met at Stanford University years ago. He was sitting on a bench in front of Memorial Church reading a *Stanford Daily*. I sat down next to him, and we began to talk. The conversation went well until it turned to the subject of his relationship with God.

He leaped to his feet with a curse and stalked away. Then he stopped and turned around. "Forgive me," he said. "I was raised in a Christian home. My parents are Presbyterian missionaries in Taiwan, but I've been running away from God all my life. Yet wherever I go someone wants to talk to me about God."

More than anything, God wants us to give in to His love. "Love surrounds us," George MacDonald

said, “seeking the smallest crack by which it may enter in.” God waits tirelessly and loves relentlessly. But if we will not have Him, He will let us have our way and let us reap the consequences of our resistance. But even this is for our good. It is the redemptive judgment of God. God knows that when the cold wind blows it may turn our head around.

*So the Lord brought against them the army commanders of the king of Assyria, who took Manasseh prisoner, put a hook in his nose, bound him with bronze shackles and took him to Babylon. In his distress he sought the favor of the Lord his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers. And when he prayed to Him, the Lord was moved by his entreaty and listened to his plea; so He brought him back to Jerusalem and to his*

*kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the Lord is God (2 Chr. 33:11-12).*

The Assyrian king mentioned here was probably Esarhaddon, the son of Sennacherib. Esarhaddon put a ring in Manasseh’s nose, manacles on his hands and feet, and marched him off to Babylon, where for 12 years he languished in a dungeon. A ring in the nose was the Assyrian way of humiliating conquered kings, a custom clearly illustrated on Assyrian artifacts. What utter humiliation! What awful ruin! But all to bring Manasseh home to God.

## **THE WAY BACK**

Recovery begins with shame. MacDonald wrote, “To be ashamed is a holy and blessed thing. Shame is shame only to those who want to appear, not those who want to be. Shame is shame only to those who

want to pass their examination, not to those who would get to the heart of things. . . . To be humbly ashamed is to be plunged in the cleansing bath of truth.” Humility and contrition are the keys to the heart of God. Those are the keys Manasseh used.

*In his distress he sought the favor of the Lord his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers (2 Chr. 33:12).*

Josephus said that Manasseh “esteemed himself to be the cause of it all.” He accepted full responsibility for what he had done—no denial, no excuses, no justification, no blame-shifting, no special pleading. Then Manasseh “humbled himself greatly.”

Our tendency to make excuses for ourselves comes from thinking that God will never take us back unless we can minimize or explain away our wrongdoing. But,

as C. S. Lewis observed, “Real forgiveness means looking steadily at the sin, that sin that is left over without any excuse, after all allowances have been made, and seeing it in all its horror, dirt, meanness, and malice, and nevertheless being wholly reconciled to the one who has done it. That, and only that, is forgiveness; and that we can always have from [God].”

Manasseh was not forsaken. Despite his monstrous wickedness, the Lord was still Manasseh’s God. Although anger swept across God’s face, He never turned away His eyes.

## **UNDYING LOVE**

In Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Tom laments, “I’s wicked I is—mighty wicked. Anyhow I can’t help it!” Sin is our nature. It’s how we make our way through life—and

we can't help it. Yet our repeated failures do not change God's fundamental disposition toward us. If it's our nature to sin, it's His nature to save. Without that understanding we could never survive our sin. It would only terrorize us and drive us away from God.

We'd have grounds for that terror if God had chosen us in the beginning because we were so wonderful. But since our original acceptance did not depend on anything in us, it cannot be undone by anything in us now. Nothing in us deserved His favor before our conversion; nothing in us merits its continuation.

God saved us because He determined to do so. He created us for Himself, and without that fellowship His heart aches in loneliness. That's why Christ suffered for us—"the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring

[us] to God" (1 Pet. 3:18). He will never give up. He loves us too much to give up. "He who began a good work in [us] will carry it on to completion" (Phil. 1:6).

We must accept God's full and free forgiveness, and then forget ourselves. That we are sinners is undeniably true. That we are *forgiven* sinners is undeniable as well. We must not dwell on our sinfulness. God's heart is open to us. We must take what forgiveness we need and get on with life.

## **ENDING WELL**

There is more. God not only forgives our sin, He uses it to make us better than ever before. Consider Manasseh. He was released from prison after 12 years and restored to his throne. Then he set out to strengthen his defenses:

*When [Manasseh] prayed to Him, the Lord was moved by his entreaty and listened to his plea;*

so He brought him back to Jerusalem and to his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the Lord is God. Afterward he rebuilt the outer wall of the City of David, west of the Gihon spring in the valley, as far as the entrance of the Fish Gate and encircling the hill of Ophel; he also made it much higher. He stationed military commanders in all the fortified cities in Judah. He got rid of the foreign gods and removed the image from the temple of the Lord, as well as all the altars he had built on the temple hill and in Jerusalem; and he threw them out of the city. Then he restored the altar of the Lord and sacrificed fellowship offerings and thank offerings on it, and told Judah to serve the Lord, the God of Israel (2 Chr. 33:13-16).

Manasseh destroyed his pagan gods and removed the terrible idol he had set up in the house of the Lord. He hated his idols with as much fervor as he had loved them before.

He repaired the altar of the Lord, which he had broken down. He sacrificed on it peace offerings and thank offerings to praise God for His deliverance. He used his power now to reform his people rather than to corrupt them.

This is what John the Baptist described as “fruit in keeping with repentance” (Mt. 3:8). True repentance involves a fundamental change in our outlook and attitude. It is not mere sorrow over sin. It is a radical reversal of our thinking. It will manifest itself in a determined effort to strengthen ourselves in those areas where we are weak and where we have fallen before. There will be

a fierce determination to guard ourselves against sin.

True repentance will mean staying away from the company of a man or woman whose influence corrupts us. It will mean staying out of situations in

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*True repentance involves a fundamental change in our outlook and attitude. It is not mere sorrow over sin. It is a radical reversal of our thinking.*

---

which we're inclined to stumble and fall. It will mean staying away from polluting influences in movies, books, magazines, and cyberspace. It will mean finding another person to hold us accountable when

we travel, someone who will keep us honest when we're away from home. Whatever it means, our waywardness will have made us stronger and better than ever before. Even from our sin God can draw good.

God gave Manasseh 20 more years of rule. He got a fresh and better start, and he made the most of it. He became one of the greatest kings of Judah, and for 22 years was a glorious example to Israel of God's unimaginable grace. God will do the same for you.

### **WHAT'S IN A NAME?**

Manasseh's name is taken from a Hebrew verb that means "to forget." That's the word God writes over Manasseh's past and ours—*forgotten*. "I will forgive [your] wickedness and will remember [your] sins no more" (Jer. 31:34). Oswald Chambers says, "God forgets away our sins."

Jeffrey Dahmer comes to mind when sin of unforgivable proportion is considered. Dahmer confessed to murdering 17 young men, dismembering some, having sex with their corpses, and eating parts of their bodies.

The media exposure surrounding his crimes turned Dahmer into a national symbol of evil. After his bloody death at the Columbia Correctional Center in Wisconsin, everyone was convinced that he was going straight to hell. One columnist uttered a fervent plea to the powers of darkness: "Take Jeffrey Dahmer, please."

But as it turned out, Dahmer had begun attending Bible studies in prison. He subsequently made a public profession of faith in Jesus Christ and was baptized. He found forgiveness and peace. He was calm about his fate,

even after an inmate attempted to slit his throat during a chapel service. If he was sincere, and it appears that he was, we will see him one day in heaven.

Odd, isn't it? But such is the grace of God.

## **POSTSCRIPT**

During halftime of that Rose Bowl game in 1929, Riegels hid in a corner of the UCLA locker room with a towel over his head. His coach, Nibbs Price, said nothing to him and very little to the team.

Three minutes before the second half he said quietly, "The team that started the first half will start the second half." Riegels called out, "I can't, coach; I can't go back in. I've humiliated the team, the school, myself. I can't go back in." "Get back in the game, Riegels," Price replied. "It's only half over."

What a coach! What a God!

## DAVID: Overcoming Lies Of Self-Protection

**W**hen failing and succeeding are at issue, an incident in David's life comes to mind. It took place during a period when he and Saul were playing a deadly game of hide and seek. Saul, pursuing David and his band of men in the Judean wilderness, was bent on running him into the ground.

Saul was familiar with all David's haunts and hiding places. David could run but he knew he could not hide. He was weary and worn out. There seemed to be no end to his troubles.

The songs that are assigned to this period of David's life are sad songs. The overriding mood is one of dreary depression and despair.

*Why, O Lord, do You*

*stand far off? Why do You hide Yourself in times of trouble? (Ps. 10:1).*

*How long, O Lord? Will You forget me forever? How long will You hide Your face from me? (Ps. 13:1).*

*My God, my God, why have You forsaken me? Why are You so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning? (Ps. 22:1).*

### DAVID'S DANGEROUS DECISION

David had reached the end of his rope. He just couldn't take it anymore. So he thought to himself:

*One of these days I will be destroyed by the hand of Saul. The best thing I can do is to escape to the land of the Philistines. Then Saul will give up searching for me anywhere in Israel, and I will slip out of his hand (1 Sam. 27:1).*



In the past, David talked to Gad or to one of his other counselors. Or better yet, he “inquired of the Lord” (1 Sam. 23:2,4). But on this occasion, David didn’t ask the Lord or anyone else. He looked at his circumstances, took counsel of his fears, and fled to Philistia. Under the circumstances, he believed that was the best thing for him to do.

The phrase translated “The best thing I can do is to escape” is put in a way that suggests great haste: “I shall immediately escape. I will do it *now!*”

Decisions made when we’re down in the dumps or emotionally distraught are exceedingly perilous. We’re most vulnerable to bad choices when we’re in that state of mind—choices we would never make if we were on top of things. When we’re down, we inevitably stumble into bad judgment.

I wonder how many

single people have decided in a moment of weariness that they can’t handle the thought of perpetual loneliness, so they settle for a mate who makes life even more miserable for them? I wonder how many men have walked away from good jobs in a fit of momentary frustration and rage and now find themselves hopelessly out of work or working in situations far less desirable? I wonder how many have given up on their marriages when they are at low ebb and have lived to regret that decision? I wonder how many men have walked away from fruitful ministries because of weariness and discouragement?

Ignatius of Loyola, a 16th-century Basque Christian, wrote a book titled *The Spiritual Exercises*. He pointed out that there are two conditions in the Christian life. One is consolation, “When the

soul is aroused to a love for its Creator and Lord. When faith, hope, and charity, and interior joy inspire the soul to peace and quiet in our Lord.” The other is desolation, “When there is darkness of soul, turmoil of mind, a strong inclination to earthly things, restlessness resulting from disturbances, and temptations leading to loss of faith. We find ourselves apathetic, tepid, sad, and separated, as it were, from our Lord.”

“In time of desolation,” he wrote, “one should never make a change, but stand firm and constant in the resolution and decision which guided him the day before the desolation, or to the decision which he observed in the preceding consolation. For just as the good spirit guides and consoles us in consolation, so in desolation the evil spirit guides and counsels. Following the counsels of

this latter spirit, one can never find the correct way to a right decision.”

He continued:

“Although in desolation we should not change our earlier resolutions, it will be very advantageous to intensify our activity against desolation. This can be done by insisting more on prayer, meditation, examination, and confession.”

So we should wait and pray. David eventually learned to wait for God (Ps. 5:3; 27:14; 33:20; 37:7,34; 38:15). He should have waited on this occasion, but he had made up his mind. Given his circumstances, Philistia looked better than the shadow of God’s invisible wings.

*David and the six hundred men with him left and went over to Achish son of Maach king of Gath. David and his men settled in Gath with Achish. Each man had his*

family with him, and David had his two wives: Ahinoam of Jezreel and Abigail of Carmel, the widow of Nabal. When Saul was told that David had fled to Gath, he no longer searched for him (1 Sam. 27:2-4).

## **DAVID'S RESTLESSNESS**

David was safe in Gath, though increasingly uneasy. His movements were restricted. He had to give up his autonomy and independence. He felt the need to get away from the royal city, so he asked Achish for another place to live. It was a modest request:

*David said to Achish, "If I have found favor in your eyes, let a place be assigned to me in one of the country towns, that I may live there. Why should your servant live in the royal city with you?" So on that day*

*Achish gave him Ziklag, and it has belonged to the kings of Judah ever since. David lived in Philistine territory a year and four months (27:5-7).*

At last David and his band could settle down. For months their lives had been full of alarm and flight. Now they had a little corner of peace. Their children could play in safety. Old men and women could sit in the sun and chat. Men could work the fields instead of sustaining themselves by raiding and looting.

David and his people lived in Ziklag unmolested for a time, and everything seemed to be going well outwardly. But this was a barren time in David's walk with God. He wrote no poetry and sang no songs in Ziklag. Israel's sweet singer was mute. David drifted steadily away from the Lord.

But David's drifting did not result in personal failure

alone—he also placed his friends in spiritual jeopardy. Philistia lay outside the inheritance of the Lord, the abiding place of the Most High. It was full of idols (2 Sam. 5:21).

As David drifted away from God, he became increasingly restless—a state of mind that always gets us in deep trouble.

## **DAVID'S TERRORIZING RAIDS**

*Now David and his men went up and raided the Geshurites, the Girzites, and the Amalekites. (From ancient times these peoples had lived in the land extending to Shur and Egypt.) Whenever David attacked an area, he did not leave a man or woman alive, but took sheep and cattle, donkeys and camels, and clothes. Then he returned to Achish. When Achish*

*asked, “Where did you go raiding today?” David would say, “Against the Negev of Judah” or “Against the Negev of Jerahmeel” or “Against the Negev of the Kenites.” He did not leave a man or woman alive to be brought to Gath, for he thought, “They might inform on us and say, ‘This is what David did.’” And such was his practice as long as he lived in Philistine territory. Achish trusted David and said to himself, “He has become so odious to his people, the Israelites, that he will be my servant forever” (1 Sam. 27:8-12).*

David plundered and looted village after village and distributed the spoils to his kinsmen in Judah (1 Sam. 30:26). But there is a jarring note in the narrative. David adopted a policy of extermination—killing men, women, and children, lest they inform on him. The

verbs *attacked, leave, and took* are what grammarians call “frequentative verbs” describing habitual action. Extermination was his “policy,” as the Hebrew text described it, “as long as he lived in Philistine territory.” David ran in the fast lane for 1 year and 4 months.

## **DAVID’S DECEIT**

As the king’s liege, David was obliged to report on his battles and share some of the booty from his victories. Achish would ask him, “Where did you go raiding today?” David would lie, “I’ve been raiding Israelites and their allies—the Jerahmeelites and the Kenites.”

David embarked on a course that demanded perpetual deceit. He had to keep lying to Achish, a deception utterly unworthy of his character. Achish accepted David’s reports as evidence of his hatred for

Israel, thinking David had alienated himself from his countrymen and was now wholly in his service. “He has become so odious to his people,” he said, “that he will be my servant forever” (27:12).

That’s an interesting phrase: “He will be my servant forever.” David, God’s free spirit, had sold himself to serve a pagan king. “From wrong to wrong the exasperated spirit proceeds,” T. S. Eliot said, “unless restored by that refining fire.”

## **DAVID’S MOMENT OF TRUTH**

The Philistines gathered their forces at Aphek to go to war against Israel. They were aware of the disintegration of Saul’s kingdom and had noted with great satisfaction the growing number of mighty men who were abandoning Saul and identifying

themselves with David and, presumably, with the Philistine army.

The Philistines decided to strike a final blow. So they gathered all their forces—along with David and his mercenaries—with the intent of assaulting Israel across the plain of Esdraelon.

David was obliged to follow his king into battle, though he did so with a sinking heart. He knew he must go into battle against his own countrymen, against Saul his king, and against Jonathan his beloved friend.

It may be that at this point David's heart began to turn to God, asking Him to extricate him from the mess he had contrived for himself. If so, the Lord heard him.

F. B. Meyer has written, "If by your mistakes and sins you have reduced yourself into a false position like this, do not despair; hope still in God. Confess

and put away your sin, and humble yourself before Him and He will arise to deliver you. You may have destroyed yourself, but in Him will be your help."

A door of hope was opened. On the eve of the encounter God intervened. The Philistines themselves insisted that David and his men have no part in the battle, so they turned with relief to their homes in Ziklag.

*David and his men reached Ziklag on the third day. Now the Amalekites had raided the Negev and Ziklag. They had attacked Ziklag and burned it, and had taken captive the women and all who were in it, both young and old. They killed none of them, but carried them off as they went on their way. When David and his men came to Ziklag, they found it destroyed by fire and their*

*wives and sons and daughters taken captive. So David and his men wept aloud until they had no strength left to weep (30:1-4).*

David and his men had been on the road for 3 days and were exhausted, eagerly anticipating seeing their wives and children. As they neared Ziklag, they saw a plume of smoke on the horizon and ran the last few miles to Ziklag to find the city torched and their women and little ones kidnapped. Instead of happy reunion, there was eerie silence and desolation. There were only a few elderly men and women left to tell the story. David and his men wept until they could weep no more.

David's troops turned and glared at him in angry silence. There was talk of lynching him. David was personally responsible for their loss, and he knew it.

He should have left a few men to guard the city. He should have known. He had let his men down. You can imagine his terrible sense of isolation.

And then there was his own personal loss. There was no hope, no human prospect of redeeming the situation. He could never catch the Amalekites. They were mounted on camels and long gone. When we have hope, we can endure. When we are robbed of hope, life loses all its meaning.

David sensed the righteous judgment of God. His conscience awoke and began to speak. David had been leading a double life—betraying Achish and raiding Philistine allies. He had massacred whole villages and then had lied. Now his village and family were gone. This was one of the darkest moments in David's life.

## DAVID'S REPENTANCE

David wept in misery and despair. He wept until he could weep no more. A perfectly natural reaction. But the natural is fatal. “By sorrow of the heart the spirit is broken” the proverb says (Prov. 15:13 NKJV).

*David was greatly distressed because the men were talking of stoning him; each one was bitter in spirit because of his sons and daughters. But David found strength in the Lord his God (1 Sam. 30:6).*

“David was greatly distressed,” but he “found strength in the Lord his God.” The Hebrew text reads, “He strengthened himself in the Lord.” That is one of the greatest lines in the Bible.

Once again, David referred to God as *his* God! No doubt David’s men had heard him say repeatedly,

“The Lord is *my* shepherd, *my* rock, *my* salvation.” Although David had seriously compromised God’s name by his failure of faith and his torturous and treacherous policies, the Lord was still *his* God. And in the present crisis he could flee to the shelter of His wings.

God never refuses His help, even when we have brought ruin upon ourselves. Regardless of what we have done, we must run to Him and take His strong hand. The man who can come to God with the weight of failure on his mind and say to Him, “You are my refuge,” is the man who understands the gracious heart of God.

David “strengthened himself in the Lord.” He must have gone back to God’s promises of forgiveness and restoration, which so often cheered him at other dark periods of his life. He must have recalled



the poems he wrote on other dark days like this that reflected God's faithfulness. He must have remembered that he had been in worse situations than this and that God had greatly helped him in those times. Although his faith had been sorely tested, it had not been disappointed. In this way he encouraged himself.

All around David was frustration and fear. But God was at hand, "An ever-present help in trouble" (Ps. 46:1). David took strength from God and became a center of peace. Remember Paul's words, "Be men of courage; be strong" (1 Cor. 16:13).

## **DAVID'S RECOVERY**

David, in the end, recovered everything the Amalekites had stolen, including his family (1 Sam. 30:18-19). But not all our failures will turn out that

way. There are no guarantees in this life that we will get back the family, the business, the reputation we have lost through our foolishness.

We may reach the end of our years a long way from our goals. We may be known more for our failures than for our successes. We may not be powerful or prosperous. But if we accept the disappointment and let it draw us close to God, we will find in time that our failure has given us a deeper understanding of His love and grace. That is by far the better thing.

It requires enormous faith to believe that our failures are for the greater good. But it is true. We learn far more from disappointment than we do from success. We come to know God and His ways. The man who has never failed has never made that discovery.

## DAVID: Overcoming Moral Failure

I keep seeing my friends fall. I wonder why they do it. What causes a man to trash his marriage and all he's worked for, for a transient affair? Take David, for example—Israel's greatest king, the “man after God's own heart.” He fell for Uriah's pretty, young wife, Bathsheba.

It happened “in the spring, at the time when kings go off to war” (2 Sam. 11:1). That spring, however, in fatal lethargy, David's energies became focused elsewhere. “One evening David got up from his bed and walked around on the roof of the palace” (v.2).

From there, he had a commanding view of Jerusalem and could look down into neighboring courtyards. As he surveyed his city, his eyes fell upon a

young woman taking a bath. The text says she was very beautiful (v.2).

If the woman seems immodest, you must remember there was no indoor plumbing in those days. Baths were normally taken outdoors in enclosed courtyards.

David was entranced! He sent someone “to find out about her” (v.3), whereupon, one of his friends tried to discourage him. “Isn't this Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam and the wife of Uriah the Hittite?” (v.3) he asked. She was a married woman—married in fact to Uriah, one of David's mighty men, a member of David's exclusive bodyguard (23:39).

David, however, would not be denied. He “sent messengers to get her.” One wrong thing led to another and “he slept with her. . . . Then she went back home.” Later, we're told, She “sent word to David, saying, ‘I

am pregnant” (11:4-5).

David knew he was in big trouble! Bathsheba’s husband was engaged in the siege of the Ammonite city of Rabbah and would be away for several months. Anyone could count to nine. In other lands kings were the law, but not in Israel. No one was above God’s Word. Adultery was serious sin.

But David, always a man of action, devised a plan to avert the consequences of his affair. He sent word to Joab to release Uriah from his command and send him to Jerusalem, ostensibly to report on the war, but in reality to bring him home to Bathsheba. When the old warrior arrived, David listened to his briefing and then dismissed Uriah to his home: “Go down to your house and wash your feet” (v.8), he said with a twinkle in his eye.

But Uriah “slept at the entrance to the palace with

all his master’s servants and did not go down to his house” (v.9). When David asked why he did not go home, Uriah explained, “The ark and Israel and Judah are staying in tents, and my master Joab and my lord’s men are camping in the open fields. How could I go to my house to eat and drink and lie with my wife? As surely as you live, I will not do such a thing!” (v.11).

David replied, “‘Stay here one more day, and tomorrow I will send you back.’ So Uriah remained in Jerusalem that day and the next. At David’s invitation, he ate and drank with him, and David made him drunk. But in the evening Uriah went out to sleep on his mat among his master’s servants; he did not go home” (11:12-13).

Uriah would not go home while those under his command were separated from their wives and families. Despite David’s

repeated efforts to persuade Uriah, the stern old Hittite refused. Even getting him drunk failed. Each evening Uriah rolled out his sleeping bag on the floor of the palace guardroom and slept with the rest of the troops.

Time was running out. In desperation David put a contract on his life, ordering General Joab to “put Uriah in the front line where the fighting is fiercest. Then withdraw from him so he will be struck down and die” (v.15).

Joab, who was no fool, refused to follow David’s directive. The plan was so obviously treacherous that he altered it: “While Joab had the city under siege, he put Uriah at a place where he knew the strongest defenders were. When the men of the city came out and fought against Joab, some of the men in David’s army fell; moreover, Uriah the Hittite died” (vv.16-17).

Joab then sent a runner to David with a report on the battle. He knew David would be critical of his tactics and the resultant loss of life, but he hastened to report that Uriah had been killed (vv.18-22). David didn’t want Joab to be upset so he said, “The sword devours one as well as another” (v.25).

When Bathsheba heard that her husband was dead, she mourned for him. When her brief period of mourning was over, David “had her brought to his house, and she became his wife and bore him a son” (vv.26-27).

David moved with inappropriate haste, but marriage put a legal and final end to the sordid affair—or so David thought. But God knew, and “the thing David had done displeased the Lord” (v.27).

A year passed, during which time David deteriorated physically and emotionally. He later

described his feelings:

*When I kept silent,  
my bones wasted away  
through my groaning all  
day long. For day and  
night Your hand was  
heavy upon me; my  
strength was sapped as  
in the heat of summer  
(Ps. 32:3-4).*

His gnawing conscience kept him restless and melancholy. Every waking moment was filled with misery. At night he tossed and turned. Anxiety sapped his energy. His depression deepened with every passing day.

Eventually, David had to face the facts. To be more precise, he had to face the prophet Nathan, who knew the truth. Nathan trapped the shepherd-king with a story about a rich man who had vast flocks of sheep but who seized another man's pet lamb to serve to a traveling stranger (2 Sam. 12:4).

David was enraged, and

at first he overreacted out of moral outrage: "As surely as the Lord lives, the man who did this deserves to die!"

But sheepnapping was not a capital offense in Israel. According to Exodus 22:1, a thief was only required to make fourfold restitution to the victim. David then said, "He must pay for that lamb four times over, because he did such a thing and had no pity" (v.5).

Nathan drove his verdict home. "You are the man! This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: 'I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you from the hand of Saul. I gave your master's house to you, and your master's wives into your arms. I gave you the house of Israel and Judah. And if all this had been too little, I would have given you even more. Why did you despise the word of the Lord by doing what is evil in His eyes?' (12:7-9).

When he was brought face to face with his corruption, David's defenses crumbled. Burying his face in his hands, he cried, "I have sinned against the Lord." And Nathan replied, "The Lord has taken away your sin. You are not going to die" (v.13).

To David's credit, he did not try to justify himself. He acknowledged his sin, and God immediately canceled the handwriting that was against him. David could lift up his head. As he later wrote:

*I acknowledged my sin to You and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord"—and You forgave the guilt of my sin (Ps. 32:5).*

As the apostle John promised, "If we confess [acknowledge] our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness"

(1 Jn. 1:9). Happiness is knowing that our sins have been forgiven.

*Blessed [happy] is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed [happy] is the man whose sin the Lord does not count against him and in whose spirit is no deceit (Ps. 32:1-2).*

David bore terrible consequences for his sin. Nathan predicted that he would suffer:

*The sword will never depart from your house, because you despised Me and took the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your own. This is what the Lord says: "Out of your own household I am going to bring calamity upon you. Before your very eyes I will take your wives and give them to one who is close to you, and he will lie with your wives in broad daylight. You did it in*

*secret, but I will do this thing in broad daylight before all Israel. . . .*

*Because by doing this you have made the enemies of the Lord show utter contempt, the son born to you will die”*

*(2 Sam. 12:10-12,14).*

David paid dearly for his few moments of pleasure. His family life and political career came apart at the seams from that time on. All that Nathan had predicted came true.

*God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows (Gal. 6:7).*

But David could rise from his fall to walk with God. “No amount of falls will really undo us,” wrote C. S. Lewis, “if we keep picking ourselves up each time. We shall of course be very muddy and tattered children by the time we reach home. . . . The only fatal thing is to lose one’s temper and give up.”

## **THE LAW OF INEVITABLE SEQUENCE**

Reading David’s story and watching my friends fall has led me to one conclusion: Moral collapse is rarely a blowout; it’s more like a slow leak—the result of a thousand small indulgences. Very few people plan an adulterous affair; they transition into it.

It begins with attraction. It’s not lust as much as infatuation that brings us down. We’re drawn to someone sensitive and understanding, someone who listens and seems to care. We’re seduced by that attraction and led on by subtle degrees.

Attraction becomes fantasy: We imagine ourselves with that person and the feeling is good. Fictionalized affairs always seem so right. That’s their fundamental deception.

The fantasies soften us,

and our convictions erode. We're then in a frame of mind to listen to our longings, and having listened we have no will to resist. We cannot escape the realization of our predominant thoughts.

Then there are the meetings and the sharing of inner conflict, marital disappointment, and other deep hurts. And with that sharing, the relationship begins to shift. We're suddenly two lonely people in need of one another's love.

Then comes the inevitable yielding, and with that yielding the need to justify the affair. We can't live with the dissonance. We have to rationalize our behavior by blaming someone or something else—the pressures of our business or the limitations of our spouses. Others' wrongdoing becomes our reason. Everything must be made to look good.

But our hearts know. There are moments when our wills soften and we long to set things right. If we do not then listen to our hearts, there comes a metallic hardening, and then corruption. Our wrongdoing mutates, altering its form and quality, evolving into dark narcissism and horrifying cruelty. We don't care who gets hurt as long as we get what we want.

And finally there is inevitable disclosure. First we deny: "There's no one else!" Then we dissemble: "It's only platonic." And finally our deception is shouted from the housetops. There's no place to hide from the light.

When our seams have been opened and our evil deeds have been exposed, God reminds us of His cross, His forgiveness, and His incomparable grace. Then He begins to make us new. But there's only one way to



know that forgiveness: acknowledgment of the awfulness of one's sin and that old-fashioned word, *repentance*. We must hate what we've done, and turn from it in disgust.

That's what Paul calls "godly sorrow [that] brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret" (2 Cor. 7:10). Ungodly sorrow is the sorrow of being found out, or of suffering the consequences of being found out. The result is intensified guilt, anxiety, and hopelessness. Godly sorrow, on the other hand, is sorrow over sin itself and the harm that it's done to others. Godly sorrow asserts itself to set things right.

Here's the way Paul put it: "See what this godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness [to obey], what eagerness to clear yourselves [of wrongdoing], what indignation [against evil], what alarm [that we

might fall into sin again], what longing [for purity], what concern [for all those damaged by our sin], what readiness to see justice [righteousness] done" (2 Cor. 7:11).

As David himself learned, "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, You will not despise" (Ps. 51:17). God discerns the possibilities even in our defilement, forgives our sins, counteracts our mistakes, and sets out to make us better than we've ever been before.

Therefore, rather than mourn our humiliation, we must move on. Sin may have consequences with which we must live for the rest of our natural lives, but sin repented of can only work for ultimate good. God takes the worst that we can do and makes it part of the good He has promised. He's the God of fools and failures and the God of another chance.



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