

# **Failed But Not Finished**

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## He Made It Again

### Jeremiah 18 Verses 1 to 4

It was a clear instruction from God. And it wasn't the usual one for the prophet, to take a message of hope or challenge or encouragement to the people of Israel. No! This was different! God told him very clearly and distinctly, "Go down to the potter's house, and there I will give you my message". Before Jeremiah could preach he had to listen...before he could give he had to receive. Perhaps that's a word for those of us who preach today; we cannot give a word for God until we receive a word from God. Oh, I know that the Bible is God's Word, and there's a sense in which any message based on the Bible is "a Word from God", but only God can search the human heart and meet its deepest needs. Only God can speak the word which will lift men and women out of depression and give them hope and peace and joy. Only God can really challenge our consciences and give us the desire to live for Him. So preachers today need to be tuned in to the clear guidance of God, so that what they say will meet the needs of the people to whom they minister.

And that's why I've been praying that these talks will be what God wants me to say! I believe the word from God for this series is "He hasn't finished with you yet", or if you like "Failed but not finished". We're inclined to write people off far too easily, but we have a God of patience and long-suffering... He doesn't write us off the moment we make a mistake. No! if we're prepared to listen to these "Discovery programmes" over these coming weeks we will indeed make a wonderful discovery. Our God is the God of Another Chance. So as we look at Jeremiah chapter 18, verses 1 to 4, we will take two simple headings: Reminding and Re-making.

#### *Reminding – Verses 1 and 2*

Jeremiah was a man of God, who had been raised up for a special purpose. He had seen the people of God ruled by an evil king; God had given him, Jeremiah, a powerful word for King Zedekiah, but the Second Book of Chronicles chapter 36 verse 12 tells us "He did evil in the eyes of the LORD his God and did not humble himself before Jeremiah the prophet, who spoke the word of the LORD". Now God reminds the prophet that He is still in control and although the king had refused to heed the warning which he, Jeremiah, had given so faithfully, God hadn't given up on His people: "You go down to the potter's house and I will give you my message". As Jeremiah went down to the potter's house he must have wondered just what kind of message he would receive in such an unusual place. What he didn't know was that God had already arranged a powerful visual aid which would remain with the prophet and the people for many years, and would be a blessing to millions of people right up to our day. Jeremiah little dreamt that men and women would be listening by radio to the events of that day, and would be blessed as a result of what they heard; which leads us to our second word:

#### *Remaking – Verses 3 and 4*

As Jeremiah looked through the open window of the workshop, he saw the potter busily

engaged in shaping a pot. The wheel was whirring around, the water was lubricating the operation, and the clay was like plastic in the skilful hand of the potter. The vessel began to take shape beautifully and perfectly; someone was going to be the proud owner of a hand-crafted pot of exquisite beauty and design. But no! The potter has stopped the wheel; what has gone wrong? There's a look of dissatisfaction on his face. Jeremiah asks the potter for an explanation and the skilful artist tells him that the first effort was marred! It was spoilt! It was defective! Whether a small stone or an insect was in the clay, we're not told, but if he went ahead with his work it would only be fit for the scrap-heap; it would never grace a table, it would never be an ornament of beauty...it was marred. I can hear the eager voice of the prophet asking the potter "What are you going to do?" He wonders what message God is giving him through this picture of the potter at his wheel, and a marred pot. "Oh, don't worry," says the potter, "I will take this same piece of clay, press it patiently in my hands until it is workable and pliable, and then make the vessel all over again". And as Jeremiah watched, so the skilful potter took the clay in his hands and gently, tenderly, almost lovingly, he formed it into another pot, shaping it as only he could do. "Now" says the LORD to Jeremiah, "that's what I am going to do with my people; they are resisting Me as I seek to mould them, but I will give them another chance ... I won't write them off".

And the wonder of it is that He hasn't changed throughout the centuries, and just as He took His earthly people, Israel, and "gave them another chance" so He will take men and women today. Perhaps you think God has written you off. You're feeling discouraged and disheartened, things haven't gone well. You feel that you've made a mess of your life! Well, I've good news for you. Christ died on the cross for people just like you. If you'll put yourself into the hands of the Lord, the Master Potter, He will make you again, shaping you as only He can do. He will give you a work to do for Him which will absolutely amaze you. He is still the One who takes broken vessels and makes them all over again, then fills them with His Holy Spirit and uses them for His glory.

Perhaps you're a Christian, but you've failed your Lord. Well, the story of the potter is for you, too! The Lord is ready and willing to take you and "make you all over again". Remember, He is the God of the Second Chance. We are only too ready to write people off when they slip up...even Christians do that! God doesn't! He picks them up gently, works on them patiently, taking them into His tender and loving hands. Remember, He is the Perfect Potter, give Him the opportunity of remaking you! Put your total trust in Him today.

Perhaps you think you have sunk too low, have sinned too badly for God to forgive you. Don't forget that He is the One who forgave a dying thief upon the cross. He is the One who forgave Peter who had denied Him with oaths. Someone has said that the only sin God cannot forgive is the one we are unwilling to forsake.

Think about it! You may be a failure but God hasn't finished with you yet!

## 2

### Wrong Choices

#### Genesis 12 and 13

It is now known that when Abraham was called by God to go from his home town of Ur in Mesopotamia, to an unknown land 1000 miles away, he was leaving behind a cultured and sophisticated life-style. It could not have been easy for him and his wife Sarah. God then made a covenant with him, promising him a land, a nation & a blessing. But how was he going to live up to the high calling of God? I wonder if you can recall the time when you trusted Christ as your Saviour. For some days you were on cloud nine, enjoying God's peace, and rejoicing in the joy of sins forgiven. Perhaps all of these were experienced by Abraham but his faith had not yet been thoroughly tested. Amy Carmichael, who served the Lord for many years in India, wrote "Life can be difficult, sometimes the enemy comes in like a flood, but then is the time to prove our faith and live our songs". Warren Wiersbe once said: "A faith that can't be tested can't be trusted".

In our study this week, under the heading of "Failed but not Finished", Abraham faces special tests, and as you and I are faithful to God we, too, will face similar tests. We will look at them in the three ways in which they came to Abraham, through Problems, People and Possessions. This is a very relevant message for us in our day!

#### *Problems – Genesis 12 Verse 10*

In Genesis 12:10 we read that there was a famine in the land of Canaan, and Abraham "went down into Egypt". Was this the start of his departure from God's will? The land where Abraham was living had abundant vegetation, but in the summer season it was almost desert. On this occasion the drought was particularly bad because we read "the famine was severe". So it was a very difficult problem for Abraham, feeding his flocks, herds and servants. He thought he was in the place God wanted him to be, yet a gigantic problem had hit him! Choices opened up to him; what should he do? Retrace his steps to the more fertile area to the north? Should he stay put and "brave it out"? His expert knowledge told him that certain death lay along that pathway and he was no fool! There seemed to be only one choice left open to him. He must go south to Egypt, with its bountiful supply of food. Perhaps it didn't occur to him that the God who had brought him into Canaan was the God who could meet his needs. He had cared for him over the 600 mile journey from Ur to Haran and the 400 miles from Haran to Canaan. Surely He could help him over a small problem such as a famine? Who controls the food supply anyway? Well might we ask Abraham why he had overlooked another choice open to him - he could have prayed! I wonder what problem you can't handle just now as you listen to my voice? Don't overlook the great value of prayer!

Next we see Abraham going down into Egypt. It is always dangerous to leave the place of God's appointment! Think of Naomi and her husband, who in a time of famine went into the country of Moab. Naomi survived but she lost her husband and two sons! In our study today we will see that Abraham made the wrong choice and he lived to regret it!

Never forget that we can safely leave the choice to God. We will now look at...

### *People – Genesis 12 Verses 11 to 20*

If Abraham failed God in making the wrong choice, he certainly failed after entering the land of Egypt. He started to look at his wife, Sarai, in a new light. Whilst in normal circumstances most wives would be very pleased for their husbands to tell them they were beautiful, this time it was different. Abraham told her how attractive she was, and then said "If we're not careful, the men will kill me so that they can have you, so tell them that you are my sister". This was a dreadful thing to do, for he was risking the moral safety of his wife to save his own skin! This was the man who had been called and blessed by God. This was the man who is held up to us in the New Testament as a man of faith, whose example we should follow. He was afraid of people, and was ready to put his wife in danger to save himself! It was fear instead of faith, lying and deceiving instead of taking God at His word. It was fantasy instead of fact. He certainly should have known better! I wonder if he said "God will take care of Sarai?"

We then read that Pharaoh, the Egyptian ruler, took Sarai into his own house, and he could so easily have taken her out of his harem, and used her for his own purpose if God had not protected her. The strange thing about it is, that although Abram was the guilty party, the Lord permitted him to prosper in Egypt, and He actually plagued Pharaoh and the Egyptians, so that the truth would come out. Once again, as so often in scripture, we see suffering through sin. How many times in the Bible and in real life today do we see that sin brings suffering upon us and others. The very man whom God had called to be a blessing to the nations brought them judgement! Warren Wiersbe writes "God forgave his sin, so what's the problem? The big problem is that everything Abram received in Egypt later caused trouble".

There is a clear principle coming through this incident; God can protect us from people who would do us harm if we are prepared to live in obedience to Him. Finally, we will look at Abram's ...

### *Property – Genesis 13*

We see Abram being sent out of Egypt, back to the land of Canaan, and the record runs "And Abram was very rich" (Gen.13:2). Abram had failed the first two tests miserably, but God hadn't finished with him, and he passed this next one with flying colours. Perhaps the secret lies in the fact that after leaving Egypt, he returned to Bethel, which means "The House of God". And we read that it was "the place of the altar". It was the place where he had met God, and worshipped Him. The altar was the place of repentance and forgiveness. It was the place of consecration and peace. Perhaps, as you listen to my voice today, you feel that you have let God down badly. May be, like Abram, you haven't been fair to your partner. Or you've lied and cheated, and like him you've even made money out of it. Will you come back to the best possible place for forgiveness, reconciliation and healing. Come back in faith to the cross of Christ. Realise again that you may have failed but God hasn't finished with you yet. The way back is always the way of repentance. Are you having problems with people? Remember that God made people, and He knows them. Will you trust Him to sort things out? Perhaps you are worried about what you need? God knows

and will provide. If you are too concerned about what you think you ought to have, then God says: "Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all the necessary things will be added to you" (Matthew 6:33). May God bless you.

### 3

## A Tough Wrestling Match

### Genesis 32

He was a cheat and a liar. In fact his name, Jacob, means ‘Supplanter’, and he came out of his mother’s womb grasping his twin brother’s heel. What a start in life, to be given a name meaning “one who tries to put it over other people”. Mind you, there are plenty of people about with many different names who also try to get the better of others by whatever means they have at their disposal, but here was a boy who started off with a name like that! And it wasn’t too long before those who lived with him could see how well his name had been chosen. Perhaps God chose it for the parents, because that was what happened in those days. But I’m jumping ahead of my story, which you will find in Genesis 32. We will look at the chapter under four headings, A Problem Expected (vs.1-8); A Prayer of Escape (vs.9-12); A Proposition for Esau (vs.13-21) and A Personal Encounter (vs.22-32).

#### A Problem Expected – Verses 1 to 8

Jacob was returning to his home land after many years absence, prior to which there had been a blazing row between him and his twin brother, Esau, over their father’s blessing. Their mother had overheard Esau plotting to kill Jacob, and she had arranged for him to leave home in a hurry. Now he is returning because God has told him to go back home, and he is very much afraid that Esau will not have forgotten their feud, and will still seek his life. Perhaps you’ve got a real fear gripping your heart; you’ve got a problem too big for you to handle. You know God personally; Christ is your Saviour and Friend, but somehow you find it hard to trust him. Well, the next step that Jacob took was the best one for you to take, for Jacob offers ...

#### A Prayer for Escape – Verses 9 to 12

We read that Jacob was “in great fear and distress”. Is that how you feel right now? The problem is so big and your faith seems so small. What can you possibly do in such circumstances? Well, Jacob prayed!

That’s not the only thing you ought to do, but it’s the best thing you can do! And Jacob’s prayer teaches us some valuable lessons. First of all He prayed to One who he acknowledged to be “the God of history”; One who had proved Himself faithful to his father and his grandfather. Then he told God that he was obeying Him, when He had said. “Go back to your relatives and I will make you prosper”. After that, Jacob did what didn’t come easy, he took a humble stand: “I am unworthy of all Your kindness and faithfulness”. I wonder, are we willing to take the lowly place when we come to God in prayer? There is no place for pride and bigotry in the prayer-room. Next we see Jacob making ...

#### A Proposition for Esau - Verses 13 to 21

He carefully laid his plans, selecting an expensive gift of donkeys, flocks and herds, and giving his servants explicit instructions as to what they were to say, and how they were to

act. It says “He thought, ‘I will pacify him with these gifts...and perhaps he will receive me”. We are not sure whether he was failing to trust his God, after taking the matter to Him in prayer, or simply doing what he could, as his part in the proceedings. Sometimes it is right for us to play our part after praying, as long as we’re not trying to “pull strings” which are not ours to pull! There is a verse in John’s Gospel chapter 11, which gives us some guidance on the matter. When Jesus was about to raise Lazarus from the grave, He told the people around Him to take away the stone, and when they had done so, He spoke the word of power which brought the dead man out of the tomb. It was as though Jesus was saying, “I’m not going to do for you what you are able to do for yourself, but if you play your part, you can trust Me to do mine”.

Finally, we see Jacob enter into an experience which would change his life for ever. It was ...

#### *A Personal Encounter – Verses 22 to 32*

Having taken his family to a place of safety, Jacob then crossed the ford of the River Jabbok, and as he meditated in the darkness, a man wrestled with him until daybreak. This unknown wrestler then touched Jacob’s hip, wrenching it out of its socket, as he asked Jacob to let him go. Jacob replied “I will not let you go unless you bless me”, and the man asked him what was his name. It would appear that he wanted Jacob, the supplanter, to understand that his life had been something of a failure. He had deceived his father, cheated his brother, and walked out on his father-in-law. Indeed, a great deal of his life had been spent in either defending his rights, as he saw it, or living by his wits.

So the unknown wrestler wanted him to see that he was a deceiver by name and a deceiver by nature. When Jacob admitted to the meaning of his name, the Stranger gave him a wonderful message: “Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, “A Wrestler with God” or “A Prince of God”. Suddenly, the whole picture became clear to the young man who had returned home; this Stranger, with whom he had wrestled, was God in human form, so he named the place Peniel, meaning “the face of God”.

Although Jacob did continue to make mistakes, his whole attitude seems to have changed. There was a meekness which had not been seen before. He had prayed about his problem in real humility, had sought to care for his family in the right spirit, had faced up to his responsibilities in relation to his brother, and now God had heard and answered his prayer. It was as though God was telling him “I know you have failed, but you’re not finished. In fact I’m going to do something quite astounding with you, because in 4000 years’ time, the nation Israel, which bears your name, will dwell in the land in the Middle East towards which the eyes of the whole world will be turned”.

Perhaps you’ve been a cheat. You’ve cheated your wife or your husband; you’ve cheated your parents or your children; you’ve cheated your business partner or your friend, and you just feel yourself to be one big failure. If you are a Christian and you know Jesus Christ as your personal Saviour, He is waiting for you to come back to Him in repentance and faith - and in humility. He will say to you “You may have failed, but I haven’t finished with you yet”.

There is forgiveness and the opportunity to start a new life for Christ. Don't let it pass you by.

## A Final Fling

### Judges 16

It's one of the many exciting stories of the Bible, with drama, intrigue and romance. Sadly not everything goes well for "the hero", but it seldom does in real life! His name was Samson, the woman who caused him so much heartache was Delilah, and the story is found in the 16th chapter of the book of Judges. It was a time of Israel's history of which they have no reason to be proud. The book of Judges commences about 1385 B.C. with the death of Joshua, the capable and God-fearing man who had led them into the Promised Land, and it finishes with the cryptic comment "In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did that which was right in his own eyes" (Judges 21:25). How up to date that is! What a description of the day in which we live. In the book of Judges there are seven cycles, each made up of four movements; the people's sin and disobedience, God's judgement, followed by the people's repentance and, finally, God's forgiveness and deliverance. Although they did not have kings, Israel was ruled by judges, of whom the best known were Deborah, Gideon and the character who is at the centre of today's study, Samson.

We will look at this story under four headings, Blessing, Baiting, Blinding and Believing.

*Blessing – Judges 13 Verses 24 and 25*

The birth of Samson followed a special promise made by God to the parents, that if their son became a Nazarite from birth, not partaking of alcohol nor using a razor on his head, then he would begin the deliverance of Israel from the hand of the Philistines. In due course the baby was born, named Samson, and we read "the Lord blessed him and the Spirit of the Lord began to stir him" (Judges 13:24-25). He had a wonderful start to life!

As he grew up we read of his great strength, but also of his self-will and dominating character. He fell in love with a Philistine woman, and told his father in no uncertain terms to get her for him to marry. Sadly that marriage ended in heartache, as Samson's wife went off with the so-called friend who had been best-man at the wedding. Sometime later Samson fell in love with another Philistine woman by the name of Delilah, which leads us to our next heading:-

*Baiting – Judges 16 Verses 4 to 19*

Delilah was obviously "hand in glove" with the leaders of her nation, and she did her best to discover the secret of Samson's great strength. He resisted the temptation to tell her that he was committed to no alcohol and no razor, giving her several false leads. Each time he tried to lead her along a blind alley, she told the Philistines what Samson had shared with her as the secret of his strength. This should have alerted Samson to the fact that she was being unfaithful to him, but they say "love is blind", and in the end he told her that if his head was shaved he would be "like any other man". Once again, Delilah had the Philistines lay in wait as she put him to sleep, and quickly called for a barber to shave off the seven braids of hair which singled him out from other men. Then follows one of the saddest verses in the whole of the Old Testament, for as Delilah called out to Samson that the

Philistines were coming to attack him, the man to whom God had given such super-human strength, awoke from his sleep and we read “He thought ‘I will go out as before and shake myself free’. But he did not know that the LORD had left him” (Judges 16:20).

Isn't that sad! Here's a man whom God has used powerfully in His service, whose borrowed strength has now been withdrawn, and he didn't know it. I wonder if I'm speaking to someone today who has been used by God in His service, perhaps as a worker amongst young people, or even as a preacher of the Gospel, and your witness and work has lost its cutting edge, and you don't even realise it. The people around you know, and of course the Lord knows, but it's passed you by. Let's open our hearts to the Holy Spirit today, and pray the words of Psalm 139:23 “Search me, O God, and see if there is any wicked way in me”. But thankfully Samson's story isn't quite finished, for our next heading is ...

#### *Blinding – Judges 15 Verse 21*

The Philistines had an easy task overcoming the weakened Samson, and he paid the penalty for sharing the secret of his strength with the fifth-column agent of the enemy, for they gouged out his eyes, and set him to work grinding in the prison. Here is the man who was once a champion of the people and powerful for God, now blinded by the enemy and reduced to grinding in the prison-house. What a sad picture of God's servant. I wonder, does this describe you? Your work for God lies in ruins, you are held by our enemy, the devil, and you feel utterly useless. Samson was indeed a failure, but take heart, for he wasn't finished, and the God who picked him up and used him against the enemy can do the same for you today. But I'm running ahead of my story, for our last heading is ...

#### *Believing – Judges 16 Verses 22 to 30*

Note verse 22 very carefully! What an encouragement, for we read “But the hair on his head began to grow again”. As the curtain is pulled up on the next scene, we see the Philistines holding a great celebration in a huge national arena, and the record reads “While they were in high spirits they shouted, ‘Bring out Samson to entertain us’”. The great stadium was packed with thousands of people, including all the rulers of the Philistines, and as Samson stood between the two central pillars, to be the sport of the crowd he prayed “O Sovereign LORD, remember me. O God, please strengthen me just once more” (verse 28).

Then, putting his trust and confidence in God, instead of in himself, he braced himself, pushed with all the God-given strength, and brought the whole stadium down upon the crowded arena. The record reads “Thus he killed many more when he died than while he lived”. The oppression of Israel's enemy had been broken, and the man who was written off by the people as a failure, was not finished in God's book.

Don't let the devil or the people around you write you off as a failure, and don't write yourself off, either, for the God who sent His Son to the cross is the same One about whom it is written “God works in you to will and to act according to His good purpose” (Phil.2:13). What He requires of us is repentance for past sin and failure, a total commitment to Him and His will, and a willingness to be and to do what He wants.

May God pick you up, and use you again in His own powerful way. You may be a failure but you're not finished!

## You Are the Man

### 2 Samuel 12 Verses 24 and 25

As we continue our series “Failed but not Finished” we are looking at the greatest king in the whole of Israel’s history! Born in a humble family, caring for the sheep on the hills surrounding Jerusalem as a lad, yet chosen of God and anointed as Israel’s king by the great prophet, Samuel. Surely he had a golden future opening up to him, and nothing could spoil his progress along the pathway to which God had so clearly called him. He had shown remarkable courage and skill in killing both a lion and a bear, as he cared for his father’s flock. He had stepped into the breach as Israel looked for a champion to challenge the Philistine giant, Goliath, and had won the hearts of the people as he delivered them from the hand of the enemy.

The day finally came when he was crowned king of the whole nation, and victory followed victory as God enabled him to set Israel on the map in a big way. He defeated the Philistines, who had been such a thorn in the side of his people for so many years and he set the ark in the city of Jerusalem, symbolising God’s

Presence in the midst of the nation. Then David told the prophet Nathan that he felt uncomfortable living in a palace, whilst the Almighty God was worshipped in a plain tent. Nathan quickly told him that God was not concerned about the type of dwelling; He was quite content to dwell in the midst of His people, whether in a tent or a permanent building, but He would allow David’s son, to build Him a house for His name.

In a wonderful prayer, David showed true humility, saying “Who am I, Sovereign LORD, and what is my family, that you have brought me thus far...How great You are, Sovereign LORD” (2 Sam.7:18-22). Surely, with a spirit so humble and open before God, nothing could possibly go wrong for King David, the man after God’s own heart? If we think that, we will find that we are very mistaken, for the whole story of David’s life changes in Samuel chapter 11, and we will see him Failing in His Duty, Falling to His Desires but, thankfully, finally accepting the glorious opportunity God offered to him, as he is seen Forsaking His Deceit.

#### *Failing in His Duty – 2 Samuel 11 Verse 1*

As so often happens, David’s sin followed his failure to carry out the work to which God had called him. In those days it was his normal duty, as king, to lead his army into battle, but the record tells us that “when it was the time for kings to go off to war, David sent Joab out with...the Israelite army”. There is an old saying “Satan finds mischief for idle hands to do”, and there is a great deal of truth in it. Will you take this warning seriously? If God has given you a task to do for Him, don’t forsake it for something which may seem to be more attractive. David sent his general off to the battle front in his place, whilst he relaxed at home to enjoy the city life of Jerusalem.

Next we see him ...

### *Failing to His Desires – 2 Samuel 11 Verses 2 to 5*

Notice the sequence of events. First of all David was casually walking around the roof of the palace, probably getting fresh air to give him some comfort in the heat of the day, when his eye alighted on a beautiful woman nearby who was taking a bath. Now that should have been the end of the matter, he was already married, and he soon discovered that the woman was married, too. The sinful desire grew within David, however, and in next to no time he commanded his servant to fetch the woman so that he could gratify his sexual longing. Again, the woman should have sent a message back telling him that she was already married, and that her husband was away at the battle front where David should have been. But perhaps it was too much to expect her to resist the attention of the king, and before long an act of adultery had taken place.

No doubt David hoped that he could carry on a secret affair whilst this woman's husband was out of sight, but before long she sent a message to say that she was pregnant. It has often been said that "one sin leads to another" and this story provides a graphic illustration of that fact. By a series of events David committed adultery, then schemed, lied, and finally actually planned her husband's murder at the battle front. After a suitable period of hypocritical mourning, he took the widow as his wife, expecting everyone to assume in due course that the baby was the outcome of a normal relationship.

At this stage God stepped in! His servant, Nathan, dramatically exposed King David's sin and hypocrisy. You can read the full story in 2 Samuel chapters 11 and 12. Thankfully, God is so gracious that although the baby died, He gave David an opportunity to repent and return to Him, which leads us to our final point ...

### *Forsaking His Deceit – 2 Samuel 12 Verses 24 and 25*

When David returned to the Lord in genuine repentance he might well have expected God to have told Him that He was finished with him. That never again could there be fellowship between a holy God and a man who had sinned so terribly. Never again would God accept the worship of the heart of a man who had acted so deceitfully and so shamefully. Never again could He use this man in His service. But the Lord is so gracious and the amazing thing is that the very son who was later born to David and his new wife Bathsheba was Solomon, who became successor to the throne. In fact, Solomon extended the kingdom of Israel to its greatest size in all history. That is a picture of the forgiveness of God, a confirmation of the powerful truth which we are looking at each week, that God doesn't write us off when we fail Him, but gives us another opportunity.

There are some important lessons you and I need to learn. First of all a warning to each one of us; David had been greatly used by God, but he still fell into deep sin. Then, after his sin, he didn't simply shrug his shoulders with a bland comment "Oh, there's nothing to worry about, God will forgive me...He'll give me another chance". If that had been his attitude, then he would never have known the forgiveness God was waiting to give. No! David knew he had sinned, and that his sin was a disgrace to the profession he made as a man of God, and he repented of his sin. That's exactly the way we must come, if we are to know God's forgiveness and renewal.

The Word of God is clear “If we confess our sin God is faithful and just to forgive us our sin, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). Will you come back to God like that...He will not turn you away. You may be a failure but God hasn't finished with you yet!

## A Terrible Rage

### 2 Kings 5 Verses 11 to 14

It was one of those strange stories that fiction is made of, but this time it really happened. Syria had come in from the North as they attacked the Israelites, and amongst the many prisoners they had taken, was a little Jewish girl. Thankfully she didn't fall into wrong hands, as she could so easily have done, but she finished up as the maid-servant of the wife of Captain Naaman, one of the leading Syrian officers. He was an outstanding soldier, with a brilliant military record, but we will soon see that there was something drastically wrong in this man's life. Our story for this week is found in 2 Kings 5 and we will look at it under four headings, Realisation, Remedy, Reaction and Repentance.

#### *Realisation – Verse 1*

Although Naaman was such an outstanding servant of his country, respected by all, from the king down to the soldiers under his command, the Bible account states his problem in three simple words "but he was a leper". He realised that there was one major problem in his life, and he had to do something about it. The leprosy was his first thought when he awoke each morning, and his last thought when he went to bed. At the time, leprosy was a dreaded skin disease, which many people thought to be a direct act of judgement from God. Captain Naaman, as a leading Syrian army officer, must have found it extremely hard to bear such an affliction. It was well known that he would give anything to be rid of the dread disease. And this is what brings us back to the little Jewish maid with whom we started our study. It says a great deal for the way in which she was treated, whilst in enemy hands, that as this little girl attended to the needs of Naaman's wife, she showed real concern for her master, and expressed this with the words "If only my master would see the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy" .(verse 3).

The interest of her mistress was instantly aroused, and in next to no time Naaman had an interview with the Syrian king. He proved most helpful, writing a personal letter to the King of Israel introducing Captain Naaman to him, and requesting his aid. Naaman duly arrived at the Israeli palace, complete with the introductory letter, and a suitable present of gold, silver and expensive clothing. The outcome was not what Naaman expected, however, for the king saw the approach as a military mission aimed at commencing hostilities between the two countries.

Thankfully, news of the visit and the king's reaction reached the ears of Elisha, the man of God, and he quickly sent a message to the king: "Have the man come to me and he will know that there is a prophet in Israel". Next we come to ...

#### *The Remedy – Verse 10*

As Naaman arrived at the prophet's house, Elisha sent a messenger to tell him to wash seven times in the River Jordan; his flesh would be restored and he would be cleansed. What an opportunity! What an easy remedy to take! Nothing complicated; no hard task to

perform; no payment to be made; no formula to follow. It was just a simple instruction to follow "Wash and be clean". There is a sense in which this is a picture of the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. In 1 John 1:9 we read "If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and will cleanse us from all unrighteousness". One of the problems is that we sometimes try to make the Gospel too complicated. The Biblical way is by repentance of sin, with a genuine desire to forsake that sin, then a simple faith in Christ who died for our sins upon the cross.

To return to our story. we can imagine Naaman being thrilled with the prospect of simply dipping in the local river seven times and being completely healed, but if so, our imagination has failed us, for next we will see ...

#### *His Reaction – Verses 11 to 13.*

Naaman instantly flew into a rage. He used the two words which so many people use when faced with the simple truth of the Gospel: "I thought". He thought the man of God would come out in impressive style, call on the name of the Lord his God, wave his hand over the spot and cure him of his leprosy. Isaiah had to remind the people of his day that "God's thoughts are not our thoughts, neither are His ways our ways".

We, in our day, cannot decide how we will receive cleansing from sin, and the salvation which we so badly need. God has determined the way, and its the only way in which we can come. Thankfully Naaman had men around him who really cared. They were quick to point out to him that if he failed to take God's remedy, he was refusing a wonderful opportunity. They challenged him "if the prophet had told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much more then, when he tells you 'wash and be cleansed?' (verse 13). This excellent advice was followed by a genuine ..

#### *Repentance – Verses 14 and 15*

This word "repentance" is an interesting one, which is often misunderstood. Basically it means "to change our mind for the better". Here was a man who was faced with a glorious opportunity to obtain the one thing in life which he longed for more than anything else, cleansing from leprosy. All he had to do was dip seven times in the river, and because it seemed too easy, he was prepared to pass it by. How often we react to the claims of Christ in a similar way. We often refuse God's offer of salvation because we think it sounds "too easy", or we have the idea that God requires us to do our best to earn it, instead of simply receiving the cleansing which Christ has obtained for us upon the cross. Sometimes as Christians we refuse to take the simple step of obedience which God has clearly pointed out to us, preferring to do our own thing. What a good thing it was that Naaman had real friends around him, who were prepared to tell him how foolishly he was reacting to God's message, for he repented, "changed his mind for the better", dipped in the Jordan seven times, and was instantly healed of his leprosy. The man who had failed to obey God was not finished; he was given another opportunity, and he took it.

There are lessons in this story for each one us. Perhaps I'm speaking to someone today who has repeatedly rejected God's offer of salvation, thinking it to be too simple. Well, God is

giving to you yet another opportunity. Why don't you follow the good example of Naaman, and receive the cleansing and forgiveness which can be yours today.

It may be that you are a Christian, but you have failed to obey God in some matter which He has made clear to you. You may have failed but you aren't finished yet. He is graciously giving you another chance to go along the pathway of obedience.

Perhaps you are a preacher of God's Word, and you are making the message so complicated that those to whom you minister are all confused. May you return to the "simple, plain truth of God's Word" and be a blessing to many, as the powerful Holy Spirit applies it to their lives. Then, like Naaman, give God the glory!

## Prayer Changes Things

2 Kings 20 Verses 1 to 11

He was only twenty-five years of age when he took Israel's throne, and he reigned for twenty-nine years.

His name, Hezekiah, would not be popular amongst boys today, although their friends might have a good laugh at his expense, and a great time making up suitable nick-names. Hezekiah, though, means "strengthened by Jehovah" or "God is my strength". What a wonderful start to give any boy, as he sets out in life. Names meant something in those days, too, and the parents must have been keen to see their son grow up to love and serve God, and to experience His power and strength day by day. The story of his life is found in 2 Kings chapters 18-20, and 2 Chronicles chapters 29-32. We will see that this king was Powerful and Prayerful, but sadly there came a time in his life when he was also Proud. A time when he failed, but thank God he was not finished. These studies over the past weeks have looked at many different Bible characters, in all kinds of circumstances and situations, yet they all had two things in common. In the first place they failed, but then in every instance they were not finished. Because they came back to God in the right way, He took them up again, and used them in His service. Failure may seem to spell disaster at the time, but we have a gracious and forgiving God, who is always waiting to receive us back, and give us the power to live for Him once again.

Let's look at the life of this king, Hezekiah, and see what lessons we can learn. First he was ...

### *Powerful*

When he commenced his reign he must have had all kinds of plans; things he would like to do for the good of his people, Israel. He had acted as vice-regent of his father, King Ahaz, for 14 years, and he must have longed for the opportunity to improve the lot of his people. Now the time had come. How would he commence his reign? Would all the good plans be forgotten? Would he simply have an easy life, living off the income provided for him, without doing anything positive to lift the conditions in which the people lived? Time alone would tell. Well, in the very first month of his reign, Hezekiah set to work to reform the nation's religious ways. He followed this up by gathering the priests together and commanding them to set themselves apart for God's service. He reminded them that they had been specially chosen to perform this important task for God. The priests responded magnificently, which proved Hezekiah's powerful influence. Temple worship was fully restored, and once again God's people were worshipping Him in the way He had planned. Hezekiah even sent letters out to all the people of Israel and Judah, inviting them to come to Jerusalem to keep the Passover feast. 2 Chronicles chapter 30 tells of the wonderful way in which the people responded, and there was obviously a time of great rejoicing. Hezekiah had made a marvellous start to his reign. Not only was this new king powerful in leading his people back to God, but he was also practical in the way he stood up to the Assyrian king,

and refused to surrender to him. He defeated the Philistines in battle, too, and his name was beginning to be well known throughout the area. In addition to leading the people back to true worship, and in military action against their enemies, he also proved to his people that he was ...

### *Prayerful*

We read in 2 Chronicles 30:19 that Hezekiah prayed for the people, asking God to pardon them, and the Lord heard him, and healed them. He seems to have become a man of real prayer, walking with the Lord and knowing His guidance in the affairs of state. When the Assyrians were preparing to attack them, they sent a message to Hezekiah telling him that if he depended on his god to deliver him, he would live to regret it. Hezekiah did what we should all do in such circumstances, he spread the letter out before the Lord and committed the whole matter to Him in prayer. He gave God glory for His greatness and then asked Him to help them in their hour of need. He then stood up before his people and told them “Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or discouraged because of the King of Assyria and the vast army with him, for there is a greater power with us than with him. He only has the arm of flesh, but with us is the Lord our God to help us and to fight our battles” (2 Chron.32:7). Surely such a king would enjoy a long and successful reign; nothing could go wrong! Perhaps he thought that, too, and once we think in that way, we are heading for trouble. From trusting in the Lord, Hezekiah started to show that the failure which has overtaken so many of God’s people down through the years was not far away, and we next see that he was ...

### *Proud*

Although God graciously delivered the nation of Israel from defeat and destruction at the hands of the Assyrians, which seemed certain to come, Hezekiah took the glory for himself. This has been the downfall of so many men and women of God down through the years. Satan was cast out of heaven because of his pride, and he is the one who cleverly leads God’s people along the same path. Humility is the way of blessing, and pride is the road that takes us away from God. Perhaps you have been doing a work for God, and have seen in His blessing in your life. You have rejoiced in the way that God has been using you, as you have witnessed for Him. Like King Hezekiah, you have seen God’s hand at work in quite remarkable ways, and at first you were quite ready to give God the glory. As time passed, however, and friends began to praise you for the way you are using your gifts, your head was turned away from God toward yourself. Now, you’ve lost the blessing; you have no keen sense of God’s presence, and you feel a total failure. With the hymn-writer, you cry out:

Where is the blessedness I knew, when first I saw the Lord,  
Where is the soul refreshing view of Jesus in His Word.  
What peaceful hours I once enjoyed, How sweet their memory still,  
But they have left an aching void, The world can never fill.

You just feel as though your life of work and witness for God is over...you’re finished. Well, I’ve good news for you! The Bible tells us that “Hezekiah repented of the pride of his heart...therefore the Lord’s wrath did not come upon them” (2 Chron.32:26).

God gave him another fifteen years in which to serve Him, and prove his gratitude for God's love and mercy. He had failed, but he wasn't finished! And that's the wonderful news I bring to you today! You may have failed God; you may have let your Lord down badly...and who hasn't? But He hasn't finished with you yet. If you and I are prepared to come back to Him in repentance and faith, He will take us up and use us again, in His service and for His glory

## 8

### A Second Chance

#### Jonah 1 and 2

We are continuing our series as we look at Bible characters who failed, but weren't finished. It's been both a challenge and an encouragement to us. Today's study is centred on one of the best known events in the Bible, but every time we hear about it there's a fresh call for us to examine our hearts to see if we, too, are guilty of disobeying God. The story is told in the book bearing the name of the main character, Jonah, and we will look at it under four main headings: The Commission, The Confusion, The Confession and The Conversion.

#### *The Commission – Jonah 1 Verses 1 and 2*

It is very interesting to note that the earlier prophecy which Jonah gave in 2 Kings 14:25, was fulfilled to the letter. So here was a prophet who had already been used by God to deliver His word, and he had done so faithfully and effectively. Now, having given him the simple duty, God was going to entrust a major task to the prophet from Galilee. This was his big opportunity to be used by God in a dramatic way. It was a clear commission from the Lord, and he told His servant to go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because of its wickedness.

What a wonderful call from God for a budding young preacher. Surely he will be honoured to be selected by God for such a mission. But no, for verse 3 of chapter 1 tells us that Jonah ran away from the Lord, and headed for Tarshish, which was in the opposite direction. When he arrived at the port of Joppa he even found a ship which was preparing to sail to his desired destination. Everything was working out as he wanted. He enquired the fare, and to his delight he was able to afford it. So we see the man of God, commissioned to do a task for His Master, going in the opposite direction, with all the circumstances slotting into place. Perhaps he was even prepared to believe that God was guiding him.

There is a clear lesson here for us in our day. However favourable our circumstances may appear to be, they are not being ordered by God if we are disobeying Him. There is only one course which pleases the Lord, and that is obedience. Jonah was soon to learn his lesson. For next we see ...

#### *The Confusion – Jonah 1 Verses 4 to 7*

One thing is certain, God was in control of the situation, for we read "The Lord sent a great wind...and a violent storm arose" (verse 4). Here is an ordinary ship, on an ordinary voyage, with an ordinary cargo, but an extraordinary passenger! And God had planned for the passenger to be going in the opposite direction.

The storm was so violent that even the seasoned sailors were afraid, for as they jettisoned the cargo it made no difference. They all seemed to be heading for a watery grave. Following the usual practice they drew lots to find out who was responsible for the calamity, and to the horror of Jonah, it fell on him. The truth was out, and we next come to ...

### *The Confession – Jonah 1 Verses 8 to 10*

It is to Jonah's credit that he didn't hide the truth from the crew, but made a clean breast of it, telling them of his refusal to obey the word of the Lord. When he also told them that his God was the maker of heaven and earth, they were terrified. They asked him in no uncertain terms why he should disobey the direct command of such a God.

There really was no answer to such a question, and with a remarkable show of honesty and courage, Jonah told the sailors that the only way to still the storm was for them to throw him into the sea. His repentance was honest and complete: "I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you" (verse 12).

The man who had failed was beginning to take the road back to recovery. He had failed, but God hadn't finished with him yet! I may well be speaking to someone who has served God faithfully, proclaiming God's Word to all who will listen. You have lived in a close relationship with the Lord, and even experienced His blessing upon your ministry for Him, but right now you are walking in disobedience. You have pitted your stubborn will against the plan and purpose of God for your life; perhaps sin has blunted your witness, or you have failed to make time for daily prayer and Bible reading in order to discover what God wants you to do for Him. Well, take a leaf out of Jonah's book today, and begin with honesty and courage. Go back to the point in your life where you failed the Lord and seek His forgiveness, then start all over again. Jonah had failed God, but He hadn't finished with him, and as the sailors reluctantly threw the prophet into the sea, God prepared a great fish to carry him back to land. Finally we see ...

### *The Conversion – Jonah 2 Verses 1 to 10*

There are three separate and distinct conversion stories in the book of Jonah.

First of all we see the conversion of the sailors through the witness of the disobedient prophet. Here is Jonah, running away from God, yet prepared to witness faithfully to foreign sailors; even risking his life to do so. And the Bible record is so powerful: "The men greatly feared the Lord, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows to Him" (Jonah 1:16).

Secondly, God was willing to give Jonah another opportunity, a second chance, so He prepared a great fish to swallow him, and the prophet was inside the fish three days and nights. What an incredible experience; particularly when he must have realised that it was his disobedience that had landed him in such peril. Three days and nights to go over his life again! Three days and nights to recognise his foolishness in disobeying God; and during this time he prayed to God. What a prayer it was. As he recounts it he says: "In my distress I called to the Lord, and He answered me" (Jonah 2:2), and finally he came to the position of saying to God "What I have vowed I will make good". So, first of all the sailors were converted, now the prophet, himself, is converted; he has "turned around from going his way to going God's way". He was now ready to do God's will. Although he had failed, God hadn't finished with him, and the reluctant prophet was now willing to go to the place where God had wanted him to go in the first place.

Then thirdly, we see the conversion of the great city of Nineveh! There is a sense in which the experience of being inside of the fish had given Jonah's mission to Nineveh a fresh urgency, and when he eventually reached that great city, his message was used by God to the conversion of thousands of men and women, from the king on his throne to the peasant in his cottage.

As I close this brief study may I ask you personally in what ways you have failed God? Just pause a moment to consider the question in the presence of God. Then receive all the encouragement that this message brings. Don't forget that despite Jonah's disobedience, God was prepared to take him up and use him again; and He will do the same for you. We must be honest and open before God! If you and I will come to Him in that spirit, even if we have failed Him badly, He will not have finished with us yet.

## Burdens or Blessings?

Matthew 11 Verses 28 to 30

Over these past weeks we've been looking at Bible characters who failed, but were not finished. This time it will be a little different, although the message will be the same...you may have failed but God hasn't finished with you yet! As I have prayed about this talk, God has led me to look at the last three verses of the eleventh chapter of Matthew's Gospel. Just listen as I read the words of Jesus to you, and let them sink deep into your mind and heart: "Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light". We're going to look at these verses under three headings, Problems, Promises and Partnership.

### *Problems*

As the Lord Jesus Christ spoke these powerful words He knew that there were many problems deep in the hearts of those people who were listening to Him. There were men and women all around Him who had failed! Some had tried their best to please God, but over and over again they had discovered that they didn't have the strength to resist the temptations which were pressing in upon them. No doubt there were some who had made a personal commitment, and seemed to go on well for a little while, then they had fallen into disobedience and sin. There were many who were longing to enjoy a better quality of life, but each time they turned over a new leaf they didn't have the inner power to keep it up. All around Jesus that day there were people with problems.

As I talk to you right now, the scene hasn't changed; I am speaking to men and women and young people whose hearts are heavy. You, too, have problems and burdens weighing you down, and there doesn't seem to be anything you can do about it. Many of you have made a personal commitment to Christ, but your Christian life has been one of failure and disappointment.

You feel as though each day is a struggle and you don't know which way to turn. Perhaps you have a guilty conscience; many of your friends think that you are going on with God, but in your heart you know the truth. There's no peace and joy in your life because of sin. Perhaps your sin has to do with sexual desires which you can't control, or strong drink which is getting the better of you. Perhaps you are playing with harmful drugs which you know should not form part of your behaviour; maybe its pornography which is fouling your mind, or it may be a temper you can't control. For some of you its marital strife which makes you feel a complete hypocrite in view of your profession as a Christian. For others, its a deep hatred against someone who has done you harm in your past, and you just don't feel able to forgive them.

Whatever it is that is pressing in upon your heart and mind, it's a problem too big for you to handle; a burden too heavy for you to bear. Well, I've great news for you! You may have

failed, but you're not finished! The same Lord Jesus Christ who looked into the faces of all the people around Him that day, is God's Son, and He looks into our faces, and indeed right into our hearts, today. He knows the problems we're facing and the burdens we're bearing even better than we know them ourselves, and He comes to us with His glorious ...

### *Promises*

Listen again to His words: "Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest"!

And as I have just reminded you, the One who says these words is God's Son, with all the power and authority of heaven at His command. There is no-one whose problem is too great for Him to solve, no-one who is beyond His love, no-one whose burden is too heavy for Him to lift.

Perhaps your heart cries out with the hymn-writer:

*My Saviour Thou hast promised rest, O give it then to me,  
The rest of ceasing from myself, to find my all in Thee.*

Well, just what is Christ promising to the burdened heart in the verse we are considering? Rest! That is a peace of heart and mind which will give us calm in the midst of storm, a quiet and inner strength in the face of oppression and persecution, and the sure knowledge of His Presence with us, just when we need Him the most!

Now, all this sounds too good to be true! We may well ask "Are there any conditions attached to this wonderful promise?", and the answer is "Yes". The condition is that we must "Come to Him". You may say "Well, that sounds very easy", but please don't forget that the Bible message is clear; when we come to Christ we must come in repentance and faith. There must be a genuine desire on our part to turn from our sin and failure. The words of the Apostle Peter are as true now as when they were first spoken: "Repent then and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord" (Acts 3:19). Confession of sin involves repentance; a real hatred of our sin and a determination to forsake it. If we come to Him in that state of heart and mind, then the promise is for us! He will forgive, He will purify, He will lift our burden, He will give us rest.

Perhaps you are not a Christian; you have never made that all-important first step of confession of sin, repentance and faith. Well, the promise is for you, too. In John 6:37 the Lord Jesus Himself said: "Whoever comes to Me I will never drive away". There is wonderful acceptance with Him. There may be others who are saying "Well, I'm only too ready to come, but I could never 'keep it up'. I would fall to the first temptation"!

Thank God, these verses have a message that will meet this problem, too, for finally we will look at ...

### *Partnership*

The last part of this text is very important. "Take my yoke upon you and learn from Me". The picture is of the Eastern oxen, yoked to each other so that they can work together. Once we've been cleansed from our sin, Jesus is inviting us to be yoked with Him in a wonderful partnership. He is the One who has lived down here, facing temptation, opposition and finally death upon a cross. He knows our difficulties, sympathises with us in our problems and is able to share our disappointments. He knows what it is like to be tired, hungry and homeless. He has experienced the heartache of seeing His own family turn against Him. Even His disciples, His close friends, all forsook Him and fled, just when He needed them the most! You can depend upon the Lord Jesus, but He does look for our trust and obedience.

Will you come to Him today, and experience His rest? Will you take His yoke of Partnership and walk in step with Him? Will you know His Friendship every day, as you trust Him to do what He has promised? May God bless you richly.

## Not Fit For the Scrap Heap

Matthew 12 Verse 20

As we continue our series we will look at the next message entitled “Failed but not Finished”. I wonder, do you remember that teacher at school who “wrote you off”. You could never do mathematics. Perhaps history dates seemed to make no sense at all. Or geography...you didn’t know where Kathmandu was, and it didn’t seem to matter very much either. But that teacher had no feeling or sympathy: “You’ll never make the grade!” was the favourite expression, and you went home feeling a total failure. Oh, your friends seemed able to handle it all right, but it was just beyond you. You didn’t get much encouragement from your father and mother, either...they knew that you had your problems, but they didn’t help much.

Perhaps it’s followed you through life...you’ve made a mess of your marriage, or being a parent just hasn’t worked out. Your job has proved too much for you, or you’re always falling out with your friends, and in your heart of hearts you know it’s your fault. You try not to think about it too much, but you just can’t help wondering if there’s any future in life at all. I mean, what hope is there for a man or woman who can’t handle a simple relationship! In fact, as you think about it, every-one seems to have written you off! Well, I’m here to tell you of One who hasn’t! God hasn’t written you off!

We have called our Discovery Series “Failed but not Finished”, but it could just as well be called “The God

who hasn’t written you off”! Can I remind you of the first talk in the series? It was of the potter who took the marred pot off the wheel, crumbled the clay into a ball, and started all over again, making a brand new pot, with wonderful care and skill, and The Great Potter of the Lives of Men and Women is still doing it!

Today I want to tell you about “the great potter”, the Lord Jesus Christ, the only Perfect Man who ever lived. And, of course, He was God as well as Man! In Matthew’s Gospel, chapter 12 and verse 20 He says that He “will not break a bruised reed, nor put out a smoking flax”. What do you think He meant? Listen carefully because it’s so encouraging. We will look at this verse under two headings, No Discarding and No Despising.

### *No Discarding*

The picture is of the Eastern boy or man, cutting a strong, but hollow reed from the water’s edge, shaping it and cutting it in just the right way, so that when the owner puts it to his lips it plays a clear and melodious tune. He takes it with him everywhere, he plays his tunes as he watches his sheep, or as he fishes at the water’s edge. As he walks over the fields and the hills, the little pipe is his constant companion; people passing by are quite amazed at the lovely tunes he gets out of a little reed. He has become quite attached to it. Then it happens...with no warning...it was by his side as he lay on the grassy slope, in the warm

after-noon sun, and he just put his hand out. It was quite a casual movement, one which he could have done a hundred times without any accident. This time it was different. His hand rested heavily on the little flute, and when he picked it up, it was all bruised. It looked quite forlorn...it was useless. Oh, he tried to blow through it, but nothing happened, there was no sound, no tune, no melody. "Now", says Jesus, in effect; "I know that in normal life the man or the boy will just throw it away and cut another one. This one is only fit for the scrap heap. No-one can do anything with a bruised reed, they just get rid of it. Well, I'm not going to do that. I'm going to take that reed in my powerful, yet gentle hand, and I'm going to make it again. I'm going to do what others wouldn't do; give it another chance". And as he looks at you with all your mistakes and problems, your failures and difficulties, your sins and short-comings, He says "I'm not throwing you on the scrap-heap of life; I will take you into My powerful hands, and with love and care I'll make you again. Your life will play sweet music for My glory. Will you hand yourself over to Me?" And that's not all, for as well as "No Discarding", there is also ...

### *No Despising*

The next illustration is similar, but there are differences. It's a picture of the old oil lamp, so familiar in Bible times, as it lights up the humble cottage. Suddenly the light flickers, splutters, and then it smokes! And it smells. There's only reasonable thing to do, that's put it out, throw the wick away and fit a new one. "Well" says Jesus "the smouldering wick I will not snuff out. I'll trim it, care for it, and get it going again so that it will give light to the darkened room".

Do you feel that the light of your life is just like that spluttering, smoking wick. It's not giving light and comfort to those around you. Quite the opposite, you feel that you're just a nuisance, and people would be glad to see the back of you. Well, again I've an encouraging message for you, because Christ says that He isn't in the business of despising those who have made a mess of their lives. He wants to take you with your smouldering wick, trim it, encourage it into a flame, fill you with the oil of His Holy Spirit and make you really useful for Him.

As you listen to this programme you may be saying "Oh, that sounds all right, but how is He going to do it?"

How do I know that He can do it? How do I know that He wants to do it?" The Bible answers just those questions, and many more like it. Paul talks about "the One who is able to do immeasurably more than all we can ask or imagine" (Eph.3:20) and he wrote to the Philippian Christians to tell them "it is God who works in you to will and to act according to His good purpose" (Phil.2:13). Are you prepared to put yourself into the hands of the One who is able to "give you another chance"; the One who has the power to fulfil every promise He makes. Don't pass up this opportunity, bring your broken reed to Him for repair, so that once again you can play a tune which will bring pleasure and joy to the people around you, and glory to the God who made you and saved you. Bring your smouldering lamp to the One who is willing and able to trim the wick, fill the bowl with the fullness of His Holy Spirit, and make you a bright light for Him.

Why should you be satisfied with the second best, when God is willing and able to do so much more in your Life? He told all of us who claim to know Him personally that we are to be “lights in the world”. He is waiting for you to turn to Him in your need, and allow Him to re-make your life, so that you can shine brightly for Him.

## Care For My Sheep

John 21 Verses 15 to 19

Let's listen to another message of hope and encouragement in the series "Failed but not Finished"!

Have you ever felt that you were a failure? You've handled a situation in a particularly bad way, and you just can't forget it! Or perhaps you have fallen to temptation, and the sense of guilt is constantly with you; you can't get away from it. Well, this message is for you. In this series we're studying Bible characters who went through a similar experience; they failed! The only difference is that they failed but they weren't finished! God tenderly picked them up, cleaned them up, and set them up. And many of them were able to serve God in even greater ways than before they failed.

This time we're going to look at Peter, a really well known disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ, who was used by God in special and powerful ways...but that was after he had failed. Our story is found in three passages in the Gospels, Mark 14:27-31 and 66-72, Luke 23:61-62 and in John 21:15-17.

We will divide it into three parts, The Claim, The Calamity and The Commission.

### *The Claim – Mark 14 Verses 27 to 31*

Jesus knew that "His hour had come", and the shadow of the cross was already falling upon His pathway.

The religious leaders had laid their plans for His crucifixion, and in a matter of hours He would be brutally executed, a totally innocent Man, dying as a sacrifice for sin. He was, of course, God in human form, but He was also a real man, and He would experience the suffering in all its horror, "tasting death for every man", as the writer to the Hebrews put it so graphically. If ever there was a time when He needed the support of His friends it was now. As He began to unfold a little of the coming events to His disciples, He told them that they would all fall away because of Him. Peter was quick to respond, claiming that he would never fail Christ "Even if all fall away, I will not...even if I have to die with You, I will never disown You" (Mark 14:29) - and he meant it! I'm sure that Jesus looked at him very tenderly, as He told him "today...before the cock crows twice, you will disown Me three times" (verse 30).

It may be that you can recall the time when you told the Lord that you were willing to do anything, go any-where, for Him. And you, too, meant it. In those days you would do anything for Christ, you would go anywhere He directed. Well, you can understand how Peter felt, as Jesus told him that whilst he might mean it, he didn't have the strength to fulfil it, which leads us on to our second point ...

### *The Calamity – Mark 14 Verses 66 to 72*

It was the worst day of Peter's life. He had seen His Lord and Master violently arrested. He had seen Him arraigned before a mock court, condemned as worthy of death, and then subjected to brutal treatment which no human being should ever have to endure. Peter was devastated; he didn't know which way to turn or what action to take.

And it was just at that moment in his life, a really low point, when the worst temptation hit him. It started when he was warming his hands by the fire, as Jesus was being blindfolded and struck by the guards. And it was a little servant girl who caught him out, as she looked at him and said "You also were with that Nazarene, Jesus" (verse 67). Before he knew what he was saying his answer was out "I don't know what you are talking about" (verse 68). Oh, if we could only recall words...if we could wipe the slate clean. Who hasn't at some time or other uttered words which they have wished a thousand times had never been said? Well, Peter was no exception. The trouble was, that he had the opportunity to "stand up for Jesus" on two subsequent occasions, as others around that little fire challenged him, but each time he denied his Lord. Finally, in order to make the point crystal clear "He began to call down curses on himself, and he swore to them 'I don't know this man you're talking about'" (Mark 14:71). What a calamity, to deny his Lord with oaths and curses, just when Jesus needed him the most!

Then it happened! "The cock crowed a second time and Peter remembered..." (Mark 14:72). Just put yourself in Peter's shoes for a moment and think how he must have felt. He had failed his best friend, and after all the claims he had made about standing by Him. Life was finished; he would never lift up his head again! The gospel writer concludes with the very telling words "The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter. Then Peter remembered...And he went outside and wept bitterly" (Luke 23:61-62). And this was the big fisherman! The man who had said he would die for Jesus fell at the first hurdle, as a little servant girl accused him of being a friend of the Master! Life could never be the same again ... he was finished! But no, just listen as we come to our last point ...

#### *The Commission – John 21 Verses 15 to 19*

A few days have passed since the sad events we've been recalling. Jesus has risen in power from the grave and has appeared to the disciples on several occasions. Peter has actually been present, although still feeling very uncomfortable; his position as one of the leaders of the little group seemed very uncertain.

He wasn't quite sure of his relationship with the Lord. Oh, the Lord smiled at him, included him in the conversation and never referred to his failure, but the thought was always there. Could he ever serve Jesus again, as he really desired. Surely the big cloud of his failure would for ever hang over him! Then, in wonderful grace and mercy, Jesus had a special, private meeting with him. A number of them had enjoyed an overnight fishing trip and then breakfasted with Jesus on the beach. Notice that Jesus didn't question Peter until he had eaten. Perhaps that's a lesson we need to learn!

Then, when the disciple who had failed his Master was comfortable, Jesus asked him three times if he loved him. Three times Peter had denied Him, and three times He gave Peter the opportunity of declaring his love for Him. The first time he asked Peter "Do you love Me more than these?". He may have been referring to the fishing boats and nets; in other

words are you prepared to give up your secular job in order to work for me? It's more likely that he was gently reminding Peter that he had said that if all the other disciples let Jesus down, he wouldn't, and he was now asking "Do you love me more than the other disciples?". Peter responded by telling Jesus that He knew that Peter loved Him. On each occasion, there was a gracious commission to shepherd His lambs and His sheep. There was work for Peter to do! He had failed but he wasn't finished!

If you have failed your Master, it isn't the end of the road. Just as the Lord took Peter up and used Him again, even more powerfully, in His service so He is willing to do for you. Come back to Him in repentance and faith, and He will restore you and use you for His glory!

## Make Me Your Servant

Luke 15 Verses 11 to 24

Over these past weeks we have seen a number of Bible characters who failed badly, but God hadn't finished with them. This week we have another message in the series "Failed but not Finished". There are very few stories as relevant to the day in which we live as the one told by Jesus, and recorded in the 15th chapter of Luke's Gospel. It touches the hearts of all but the hardest, and challenges all but the most insensitive. It is the all too familiar tale of the boy who left home to make his mark in the big wide world, and ended up homeless and friendless. We will look at the story under three headings, Wanting, Wondering and Welcoming.

### *Wanting – Luke 15 Verses 11 to 12*

The father is a well-to-do farmer and land-owner, with two sons and a good business. At first everything seems to be going well, until the younger son has itchy feet, longing for the lights and the big city life. As is so often the case, his whole life consisted of two words "Give me". As parents we have a great responsibility towards our children. Not only to love them and care for them, but to help them acquire a true sense of values. Giving them what they want isn't always the best course of action. It often encourages them along a path of selfish indulgence. Whether or not this father had given in to his younger son too easily in the past we are not told, but as he came of age his one desire was to have everything that was coming to him and enjoy the good time life. As he pressed his father for his share, perhaps he gave in to his demands too readily. In next to no time he had divided up his fortune between the two boys, and the younger one was off to the bright lights and sweet music of the big city. He had a great time! Friends were plentiful as long as the money held out. He had no shortage of company, and bought his popularity with his father's hard earned money. As Jesus told the story He said that the younger son "squandered his wealth in wild living". It doesn't need much imagination to picture the wine, women and song that made up his life. But as is so often the case, when the money ran out so did his friends, and we soon see him ...

### *Wondering – Luke 15 Verses 13 to 16*

What went wrong? Where did he slip up? Why didn't he stay at home with all the love, support and security that was always there? Well might he wonder, for he had a father who loved him, and a comfortable home where he need never be in real want. Whatever made him leave? These are the kind of questions that young people often ask, as they sink ever lower in the society which has rejected them. And, as hunger gripped this young man, with no money for food and no friends for support he didn't know which way to turn. It was just at that moment that a golden opportunity came his way. It was work! Now that hadn't been his favourite subject in the past. He had enjoyed an easy life at home, with his father taking the responsibility and the servants doing the menial tasks. But surely work meant wages, and enough money to buy a decent meal. Then he discovered what the job

entailed...feeding pigs. And the religion of his father and family despised such creatures and looked upon them as unclean animals. No, he couldn't stoop that low.

What a failure he was! But then the terrible longing for food hit him again, and as much as he hated the very idea of feeding pigs, it was an opportunity he couldn't let slip. So we see the young man from the prosperous farm feeding another man's pigs, and actually wishing that someone would give him permission to eat the pig-swill. Just how long this went on for we're not told, but as he sat by the pigs, wondering why they had food to eat and he didn't, the misery of the whole situation struck him with full force. Here he was, the son of a wealthy farmer, who had food enough and to spare back home, sitting by the pigs of a stranger, making sure that they were well fed, whilst he was starving to death. It just didn't make sense. Slowly but surely he came to his senses and a plan began to form in his mind. At last he plucked up courage and said "I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son, make me like one of your servants" (verses 18-19).

And so we see the young man, in his dirty and ragged clothes, making his way back to his father, truly repentant and ready to take the lowly place. Perhaps you are far away from home as you listen to this programme. Your family don't know where you are or how to get in touch with you. Why don't you make the first move? And make it now? You know they love you, despite all the rows and arguments. This man had failed but he wasn't finished and the next section at which we will look is ...

#### *Welcoming – Luke 15 Verses 17 to 20*

As Jesus continued to tell the story, it took a beautiful turn, for He said "But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him" (verse 20).

What a brilliant development to the story, as the loving, caring father, threw his arms around the boy who had taken his share of the family fortune and had spent it in wild living. This is a lovely picture of a God who really cares. A God who gave His Son to recover men and women from their sinful lives. If there is genuine repentance He, too, will give us a warm and loving welcome. I may be talking to someone who has wanted to return to God for a long time. You, too, feel as though you have sunk to the same level that this young man did, as he fed the pigs many miles from home. May I encourage you today by assuring you that if God is speaking to you, then He has a purpose in it. You may have failed but God hasn't finished with you yet. Will you come back to Him in repentance and faith, asking for His forgiveness and cleansing.

Then make sure you tell someone what you have done. And if there are family and friends who are worrying about you, why don't you get in touch with them, and share the good news of your return to God with them.

In my ministry I sometimes have the privilege of counselling men and women who other people see as those who are "walking with the Lord". As they tell me their sad story it is clear that they are just like this young man in our story for today. They are away from God. It may be that you are seen as a respectable Christian man or woman, but you know the

truth...and God knows! Why don't you return to Him today in genuine repentance for you will find Him waiting, with wide open arms! Then humbly take your place again amongst His people.

In the next Bible character in our series we will see a man who was counted a failure by the world, but who "made it" in the end.

## Not Fit to Serve God!

Acts 15 Verses 36 to 39

I feel a little sad as we come to the last of our series on “You may have failed but God hasn’t finished with you yet”! Today we’re looking at a keen Christian worker who failed and there’s always something pathetic about a Christian worker who doesn’t go on with God. There are hundreds of men and women who have faithfully prayed and worked to spread the good news of Jesus Christ and His saving work upon the cross, who are no longer walking with the Lord because of failure in their lives. This should never be! The God who saved them and kept them for so many years, and in some cases used them very powerfully in His service, does not want them to be thrown on the world’s scrap-heap.

Over these past programmes we have looked at some people in the Bible who passed through an experience like this, but came out of the long tunnel of failure and disappointment, and were used of God once again for His glory. Today’s character is one of the lesser known disciples of Jesus, and as you listen today you may say “Well, that’s me”! You may be thinking that you’ve never really done great things for God, but you can remember a time when you taught boys and girls in a Sunday School class, or stood up in front of a few people to witness for Jesus Christ. But that was in the past; you think those days have gone for ever! Well listen carefully today, because God may well be speaking to you! The young man we are looking at is named John Mark, and we will divide our talk up into four simple parts: His Mother, His Mission, His Mistake and His Ministry.

### *His Mother*

There is a beautiful tradition, that seems to have a fairly good foundation, that John Mark’s mother’s house was where Jesus and His disciples regularly met when in Jerusalem. It was here that they held the Last Supper. If this is so the young man probably sat and listened spell-bound as the Lord Jesus taught those who were gathered in the house. Certain it is, that it was in this house that the early church had gathered for prayer when Peter was imprisoned by King Herod (Acts 12:12). As they prayed, Peter was released in a most remarkable way, and this probably made a deep impression upon the young man. Next we see ...

It seems as though John Mark had a mother who loved the Lord, and this is a tremendous privilege.

### *His Mission – Acts 13 Verses 1 to 5*

What a thrill it was for the young man to be hand-picked to accompany his uncle Barnabas and the Apostle Paul as they set out on their first missionary journey. There is a lovely touch by the writer Dr. Luke, as he adds “They, that is Paul and Barnabas, had John as their minister”. No doubt he had to perform the menial tasks, but he was ministering to two men of God. He was playing a small but important part in spreading the good news about Jesus Christ amongst people who really needed the message. He accompanied the apostles on

the boat to Cyprus. There he witnessed the stirring events involving the sorcerer, Bar-Jesus, resulting in the conversion of the pro-consul, Sergius Paulus. This was followed by a further boat trip to Perga in Pamphylia where we read of ...

#### *His Mistake – Acts 13 Verse 13*

The Bible record tells us “John left them to return to Jerusalem”. Was the young man home-sick? Did he tire of the constant experience of “living out of a suitcase” after the ease and convenience of home-comforts? Did he feel that his task was relatively unimportant? We’re not told, and we don’t know, but we do know that he left the little group who were eagerly preaching the Good Word of God to people who needed the message. And we are left in no doubt as to what the Apostle Paul thought about his conduct.

When they were setting out on their second missionary journey sometime later, Barnabas wanted to take his young nephew with them again, but we read “Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work” (Acts 15:37). The young man had proved a great disappointment to Paul, and he considered him to be a failure...someone who couldn’t be trusted a second time. He had failed and it looks as if the great Apostle Paul was not willing to give him another chance. How do you think John Mark must have felt? I’m sure that he thought God had written him off. There couldn’t possibly be another chance for him.

Perhaps you feel that you’re a failure; you know you’ve let God’s people down; you feel as though you’ve let God down. You can recall all the things you’ve failed to do for God; you think of all the wrong things you have done which you shouldn’t have done. You just feel a total failure. Well, listen as the story unfolds! In a wonderfully encouraging way, we read that Mark’s uncle, Barnabas, was prepared to trust him again, and taking the young man with him he set sail for Cyprus once more. If that was the end of the story we would be left wondering if Barnabas should have given him that second opportunity after the way in which he had deserted them, and returned to his home in Jerusalem. We would have reasoned that Barnabas only took him because he was his uncle, and after all blood is thicker than water. We would probably have felt that Paul must have known best, and no doubt Barnabas would be let down once again. Thankfully that isn’t how the story ends, for finally, many years later, we read of ...

#### *His Ministry – 2 Timothy 4 Verse 11*

Paul is in prison, and is writing to his friend, Timothy. He fully expects that the time of his execution is near.

He actually writes “the time has come for my departure”; then he asks Timothy to come to him quickly, before it is too late. He says “only Luke is with me”. The Apostle Paul is obviously a lonely man; one who has served His Lord conscientiously and faithfully for many years, and now awaits the horror of being executed for his faith. He only has the doctor, Luke, as a companion, and he is longing for further Christian fellowship and friendship. He wants to see his good friend, Timothy, once more before he leaves this earth.

And who is the other man whose name is impressed upon his mind? Is it Silas, with whom he shared so many difficult experiences? Or Barnabas, who was at his side throughout that first missionary journey? Or perhaps Titus, who could minister the Word of God so effectively? No, it is none of these! As his pen pauses above the parchment, his mind is filled with thoughts of young John Mark, the man who had forsaken him in Pamphylia, the companion who had let him down, the very man who had failed God. His pen continues to write "Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry".

What an encouragement that word is for us! John Mark, the young man who gave up in his work for God may have failed but he wasn't finished. God had further work for him to do.

John Mark is not one of the best known disciples, yet he did a powerful work for God as he wrote the second gospel. All this was because he was given another chance! He failed but he wasn't finished!

Will you receive this message personally. In whatever way you have failed God in the past, He is willing to forgive. He is calling you back to Himself. My prayer is that you will return to Him in repentance and faith. God bless you and use you in His service.