

Place: Lurgan Baptist 25:2:2003

Reading: Judges 16:15-31

HEARTS OF IRON, FEET OF CLAY

14. THE RESTORATION OF A FAILURE !

Some years ago the British navy was involved in some peacetime manoeuvres at sea involving a column of cruisers. They were steaming along in formation, when a signal was given to execute a 90 degree turn. The manoeuvre went off flawlessly, except for one cruiser, whose captain missed the signal. The ship almost collided with the one on front, and when it served to avoid a collision, the whole convoy was thrown into confusion. Only some very skilful seamanship by the other captains prevented a serious accident. When some order had been regained, the admiral on the flagship sent a message to the captain who had caused all the trouble. “ *Captain, what are your intentions ?* ” Immediately the reply came back, “ *Sir, I plan to buy a farm.* ” He knew without being told that one missed signal had terminated his naval career. Failure meant dry-dock.

Failure is one of the realities of life, especially the Christian life. There is not a single Christian, even the most mature and saintly, who does not experience significant failure in his walk with the Lord. There is a bumper sticker that puts it beautifully, “ *Christians are not perfect, but they are forgiven.* ” But what happens

when we do fail ? Does God sentence us to a kind of spiritual dry-dock, where we spent the rest of our lives rusting away, while we observe others doing what we no longer can do ? The best answer to that question is found in the Word of God, written in the lives of people who knew what it was to fail. You do not have to look very far for examples. In fact (Heb Ch 11) often called “ *God’s Hall of Faith,* ” could equally be entitled “ *God’s Hall of Reclaimed Failures.* ” For there is scarcely an individual in that chapter without a serious blemish in his life which by human standards could have landed him in dry-dock. But then God is in the business of restoring failures.

Human failures become God’s heroes of faith. The spiritually successful Christian is not the person who never fails, but the believer who learns how to accept God’s remedy for the failure. Now one of the gems of God’s restoring grace is Samson. Few have fallen so far, but he did not fall outside the grace of God. There’s wonderful encouragement for us as we examine God’s restoration of Samson at the end of his life. Now there are three words that seem to summarise the closing days of Samson’s life. **(1) Hardship:** (16:20-21) **(2) Fellowship:** 16:22 **(3) Worship:** (16:23-31)

(1) HARDSHIP IS REVEALED

Do you recall the words of Proverbs ? “ *The way of the transgressor is hard.* ” (13:15) Samson was now experiencing the blinding, binding, grinding results of sin. Samson had failed over and over and over again, but he had never learned from his failures. When

Thomas Edison was working on one of his inventions, he would try experiment after experiment. He reputedly performed 50,000 experiments before he developed the storage battery. But inevitably, after one of his failures, he would come to the dinner table and say, with great enthusiasm, “ *I had good results today. Now I know one more way it can't be done.* ” The crucial issue in life is not whether we fail but how we fail. There is such a thing as “ *failing forward,* ” learning from what we have done wrong and laying hold on the forgiveness of God.

On the other hand, if, in the midst of our failure we wallow in guilt and remorse, or we turn to self-pity, excuse making and accusations, we will be overwhelmed by failure. Now Samson never seemed to have learned from his failures. Here he was, he had broken the law of God, he had toyed with temptation, he had dissipated his enormous God-given potential. Judged by what he could have been and by what God wanted him to be, Samson was a desperate failure. And he was now reaping what he had sowed. Paul says, “ *Be not deceived God is not mocked, for whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap. For he that soweth to the flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption, but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting.* ” (Gal 6:7-8) (1) Lets analyse that a little further. Notice that:

(a) THE POWER OF GOD WAS DEPARTED:

Look at (16:20) When Samson awoke, his hair was gone, his strength had vanished and his fellowship with

God was broken. What makes it even sadder is that Samson had no idea that he had lost his spiritual power. Its bad to be weak because of sin, but it is tragic not even to know it. Do you see what Samson says ? “ *I will go out as at other times.* ” (16:20) So he went through the old performance, he goes through the old way of doing things, but he does not know that spiritual power is gone. For God is not patient forever with sinful living. There comes a time when God removes us from the action, when the Lord sets us on the shelf. Was this not Paul's great fear ? “ *Lest when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway.* ” (1 Cor 9:27)

That is, disapproved or disqualified. The picture is that of the athletic games. A contestant who failed to meet basic training requirements could not participate at all, much less have an opportunity to win. My is this not what the Devil is aiming at ? To put us all on the shelf, to render us useless for future service for Christ ? Poor Samson, the power of God was gone and he did not even know it. (a)

(b) THE SERVANT OF GOD WAS DISCIPLINED:

Now the Lord never punishes the believer, He always disciplines him. The difference is very important. Punishment is designed to satisfy justice, but discipline is designed to produce maturity and to restore to usefulness. Now God disciplined His servant. *Did you notice how Samson's sins boomerang upon him ?* Samson had done what was right in his own eyes, and followed the lusts of his eyes(21:25) now the

Philistines gouged them out. He had refused to discipline his own life, now he became a slave and prisoner of his enemies. He had visited a prostitute in Gaza and escaped without harm, now he was a prisoner in Gaza. He had pursued Philistine women, now the strong man was reduced to doing a women's work for the Philistines. My Samson was learning the reality of God's discipline and so will every wayward son as (Heb 12:4-11) promises.

You see, God's purpose is not to destroy us but to build us up and teach us to trust in him. Is this not where Samson failed ? The fall of Samson can be traced to two things.

1. Samson did not know his WEAKNESS:

2. Samson did not know his STRENGTH:

He did not recognise God as the real source of his strength, he saw only himself. (15:14-17)
Consequently, the Lord allows strength to be taken from him so that in painful circumstances Samson will learn that without the Omnipotent God he is weak. You see, Samson had grown to depend on his own strength instead of God's, the result ? God pulled away the crutches from under him. My is this not how God deal with us ? The Lord removes our crutches often gently but sometimes suddenly and without warning. You see, all of us are more leaners than we are learners. We are leaners in the sense that we lean on a wife or husband. We lean on our children or grandchildren. We lean on our appearance, vocation, talents, or gifts.

We lean on things on people, but the Lord wants us to, lean on Him alone ! In order to do that, he pulls away the props. Is the Lord doing this with you ? Is He pulling away the props from underneath you ? Oh, its painful but its purposeful, for He kicks away the props that we might lean on Him alone ! And Samson was brought there wasn't he ? To the place where he leaned on the Lord alone. But there is Hardship here, for (a)
(b)

(c) THE NAME OF GOD WAS DISHONOURED:

What happens when a Christian fails ?

What happens when a preacher falls ? The world rejoices and the name of the Lord is dishonoured. Did you notice (16:23) ? This was a service of national thanksgiving to Dagon their god and they were all proclaiming, “ *Our god hath delivered Samson our enemy into our hand.* ” (16:23) Instead of bringing glory to the God of Israel, Samson gave the enemy opportunity to honour their false gods. What we need to remember is this. Both the Israelites and the Philistines looked upon the struggle between them as a struggle between deities. To the Philistines then Israel's God had been defeated, because His champion had fallen. Samson's capture was Dagon's glory. My is this not still true today ? For if some renowned Christian falls into sin, the sky is rent with shouts of gladness ! Worldly men become paragon's of virtue overnight.

The conclusion is drawn that all believers are alike and not one of them is any better than the non- Christian

world. My is it not true that more harm is caused by one flaw than all the good which a lifetime of service has done ? And God's name is dishonoured ! What a sad picture Samson presents to us in the prison house at Gaza. (a) (b) (c) *Hardship is Revealed !* But bless God, even in the darkest hour God had not abandoned Samson. Even in the midst of the worst kind of failure God was present working to restore Samson for look at (16:22) “ *Howbeit the hair of his head began to grow again* ” The Lord refused to give up on Samson so Hardship gave way to Fellowship.

(2) FELLOWSHIP IS RESTORED

Look at (16:22) again ! *That verse fascinates those of you whose foreheads are growing higher every year, but unfortunately, the text gives us no clues on how to cure baldness.* Actually, the verse is not so much concerned with what was happening naturally on Samson's head as with what was occurring spiritually in his relationship with God because his growing hair was a visible indicator that his fellowship with God was restored and growing ! My have you failed spiritually ? Have you dishonoured the Lord ? Listen, there is room for recovery, the hair of your head can grow again. For there is no situation that God cannot redeem if repentance and faith are exercised. Now (16:22) is a small verse with great implications. Let me outline three of them. Samson:

(a) *WAS REPRIEVED IMMEDIATELY:*

“ *Howbeit shaven.* ” (16:22) Think of it, in that dark cell in Gaza. In Gaza, the scene of some of Samson's greatest sins, that sinful cell became the very house of God, the place of prayer and repentance for Samson. I believe that Samson talked to the Lord as he turned the millstone, confessing his sins and asking God for one last opportunity to defeat the enemy and glorify His name. “ *Howbeit shaven.* ” (16:22) The evidences of his separation to God began to reappear. Samson in his absolute weakness began to reach out to the Lord and the Lord forgive him immediately. Do you recall that it happened to David ? A man who not only committed adultery but had Bathsheba's husband Uriah killed in the process. (2 Sam 11:4) It was a horrible act of sin but when David called on the Lord for forgiveness and restoration immediately he knew the bliss of God's forgiveness.

He says in (Ps 32:1) “ *Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.* ” Peter knew the joy of God's forgiveness. He denied the Lord Jesus three times right after he had trumpeted that others might fail the Lord but he never would. (Matt 26:33) But the Lord Jesus not only forgive Peter but he established him as an apostle and a leading evangelist in the early church. My though we all fall we never fall beyond the possibility of God's forgiveness. Several years ago there was a very capable evangelist whom God used in a significant way in the British Isles. But he lost his interest in spiritual things and drifted into a life of sin, for a number of months. Some of his sin was done in secret, but ultimately it became public knowledge and even made the headlines. At

first, all he could think of was that he had been ruined for life.

But finally, he realised what a fool he had been, and he came back to God like the prodigal from the pigpen.

He found exactly the same thing, that the prodigal found. The Lord welcomed him with open arms and began to strengthen him and bless him. Finally, after a period of waiting, he felt pressed into a public ministry for the Lord. He was afraid that his sin would be found out and brought up all over again, but after he felt sure it was hidden and tucked away in the past, he went back to preaching rejoicing in the forgiveness of God. One night, when he was in Aberdeen he was given a sealed letter. Just before the service began, he read the unsigned letter. It described a series of events he had been engaged in. His stomach churned as he read it. The letter said, “*If you have the gall to preach tonight, I’ll stand and expose you.*”

He took that letter and went to his knees. A few minutes later, he was in the pulpit. He began his message by reading the letter, from start to finish. Then he said, “*I want to make it clear that this letter is perfectly true. I’m ashamed of what I have read and what I have done. I come tonight, not as one who is perfect, but as one who I forgiven.*” God used that letter and the rest of his ministry as a magnet to draw people to Jesus Christ. Like Samson have you failed the Lord? Like David, have you broken His commands? Well, our God is in the business of restoring failures who trust Him. My forgiveness is not just a nice word it is a blessed reality for those who claim the

promise of (1 John 1:9) “*If we confess our sins unrighteousness.*” (a)

(b) WAS RESTORED GRADUALLY:

“*Howbeit the hair of his head began to grow again.*” While forgiveness is immediate, restoration is gradual. It took time to grow the hair. Now the very instant I turn to the Lord on the basis of (1 John 1:9) I am forgiven, but the process of restoration takes time. Now there is an important reason for that. When a significant failure occurs in our life, it is not the product of a moment. Nearly always it is the result of sinful habits in our life which are the accumulation of years of disobedience. Those habits must not only be unlearned, but new habits must replace them and that process takes time. You see, the Lord’s purpose is not just to forgive our past, but to guarantee our future, and that kind of restoration does not occur overnight. (a) (b) But Samson:

(c) WAS REMINDED CONTINUALLY:

That he could never be what he once was. Did you notice this, Samson grew new hair, but he did not receive new eyes. The consequences of his sin was not erased. You see, when we repent of our sin God does not automatically obliterate the past. David repented but that did not do away with an illegitimate child. My David’s repentance did not bring Uriah back to life. Oh, his guilt was gone but he dealt with the consequences of his sin until his death. It’s a great truth of Scriptures that God restores failures. But we are not necessarily restored to our original usefulness for the

Lord. Samson was blind. He would never again be able to do what he could have done if he had not sinned.. But he was truly and completely forgiven, and the Lord had a great ministry for him. Let's try and hit the balance here. On the one hand we must not minimise the seriousness of sin and its consequences. On the other hand we must not miss the reality of God's forgiveness. God did not give Samson his eyes back, but He did use Samson's blindness to enable him to do what he could never have done if he were sighted. Is that not amazing ? Our God is able to turn the consequences of our sin into instruments for His glory !
(1) (2)

(3) WORSHIP IS RENEWED

In (16:28) we get an insight into Samson's heart. This is only the second time that we hear him pray. The first time do you recall, was when Samson slew a 1,000 Philistines with the jawbone of an ass. (15:18) This time it is a prayer of faith from a man who had been through God's refining fire. (Heb 11:32) Can you picture the scene ? This was a great occasion for the Philistines as they gathered together to honour Dagon their god, and to rejoice over the capture of their enemy Samson. They probably held it in the stadium at Gaza, and from we can tell, this was a massive building. There was a covered portion, supported by pillars set on stone bases, looking on a courtyard, with the dignitaries sitting under cover, and the general public up on the roof. The mob numbered over 3,000 men and women including the five lords of the Philistines. No doubt Delilah their heroine was also present. And it was while Samson was surrounded by 3000 drunken

Philistines that he prayed. Notice:

(a) HIS PRAYER TO GOD:

What a prayer it was ! Incidentally, you will never get back to the Lord until you start praying again. Notice some things about this prayer.

1. There was an Acceptance of God's Forgiveness:

Samson was not remorseful over the past, saying, " *Oh Lord, I know I blew it before. I know I am not worthy.* " Now he did pray like that, but not now. He had accepted God's forgiveness. Someone has well said, " *Christians are notorious for forgetting what they should remember and remembering what they should forget.* " My do we not find it hard to accept God's forgiveness ? We keep digging up the past over and over, replaying our sins in slow motion. We think that we must punish ourselves for our sin if we want to please God. My do not forget what you should remember. Your sin has not just been forgiven, it has been dealt with, for all eternity by the blood of Jesus Christ. (1 John 1:7) Don't keep remembering and replaying your sin. Forget what God tells you to forget and remember what He calls you to remember. 1.

2. There was a Dependence on God's Faithfulness:

Samson did not say, " *If I try hard I can do it.* " He did not rely on the fact that his hair was growing. No ! Samson had become totally dependent upon the Lord. Do you hear his prayer, " *Remember me.* " Incidentally, if you are unsaved you can pray with the thief on the cross, " *Remember me,* " and be assured that you will

be with Christ in heaven. If you are a Christian with a burden, you can pray with barren Hannah “ *Remember me,*” and be assured of God’s compassionate intervention in your domestic circumstances. (1 Sam 1:11 Lk 23:42) And if you are a believer who has blown it you can pray with Samson, “ *Remember me,*” and be assured that God’s strength can help you overcome your defeated past. For notice not only (a) but

(b) HIS POWER FROM GOD:

Can you picture this scene ? The liquor is flowing freely, the chanting has built to a crescendo, “ *We want Samson, we want Samson, we want Samson.*” So Samson was led, blind, chained and broken onto the arena floor. Can you imagine the glee of thousands of Philistines, when they saw the hated and feared Samson led in like an animal on a chain, a broken and defeated man ? They toyed with him and played with him and finally Samson asks the young man who was his keeper to let him feel the pillars. With one final exhibition of strength Samson pulls down the building as he cries out to God “ *Let me die with the Philistines.*” (16:30) Now do you see what is going on here ? If Samson still had his sight do you think the Philistines would have allowed him near those pillars ? Not on your life. But then Samson was blind. He was a failure. But God took the results of Samson’s failure and used his blindness to win a great victory. My what a God we have ! *A God who can even take our failures and use them for His glory.* He can even use blind, broken, forgiven sinners ! Are you a failure ? Of course you are. There is no such as a perfect Christian. Do you know the hymn

? “ *Then we shall be what we should be.*” Have you learned to deal with your failure ? So we have learned lessons from the life of Samson which rebuke and encourage those of us who are called to live by faith and this life of faith comes through looking off onto Christ, who is enthroned at God’s right hand. “ *Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith.*” (Heb 12:2)

Keep your eyes on Christ. A pilot who was flying a small plane one day heard a noise which he recognised as the gnawing of a rat. Wondering what its sharp teeth was cutting through, he remember that rodents don’t survive at high altitudes. So he began to climb and climb until he had to put on his oxygen mask. Soon the gnawing stopped and later when he ground the plane, he found the rat dead. For us also the power to overcome the world, the flesh, and the devil is from above. Samson’s problem’s began when he “ *went down to Timnath.*” (14:1) Let’s see to it that we do not follow his example in this regard, but rather let us climb, climb, higher and higher with our eyes on Christ, for in Christ and in Christ alone is the secret of a life of victory, power and blessing. So “ *turn your eyes on Jesus.*”

