

## 2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

### Failure – more useful than success?

Presented by Margaret Hall

#### Introduction

When I was a very young and inexperienced driver - I would have been on P-plates if they'd existed then - I was driving down the old Princes Highway - one lane each way in those days.

I was going down a hill in a light shower of rain when the road curved to the left. I took the curve too fast, skidded, over-corrected and would have caused a serious accident if anything had been coming the other way. But nothing was, and my little Volkswagen beetle somehow clung to the road - I had no doubt in answer to prayer. I was on my way to one of the beach missions that still take place up and down the coast at Christmas, and many people would have been praying for safe travel for team members. But from that failure to drive well I learned a lesson I never forgot about driving to the road and weather conditions.

Our failures in many areas of life can be destructive. They can cause great grief and shame. But they need not be a waste. Because the truth is, it's through our failures, rather more than through our successes, that we learn and grow, especially in the relationship for which we were made, of trusting and obeying God.

#### Part 1

Sometimes when we think about our failures we may try to offload the blame. Weirdly, but humanly, we may even blame God.

Philip Yancey in his book *Reaching for the Invisible God* tells how, when Princess Diana died in a car crash, he was invited to appear on a television show to explain how God could possibly allow such a terrible accident. Without thinking he replied, "Could it have had something to do with a drunk driver going at 90 miles an hour in a narrow tunnel? How, exactly, was God involved?" A young woman wrote to Dr James Dobson with this anguished question: "Four years ago I was dating a man and became pregnant. I was devastated! I asked God, 'Why have you allowed this to happen to me?'"

Perhaps you and I have asked similar questions: "Where was God when I was making that horrible mistake? Or when I was under such awful pressure? He could have prevented my blunders - relieved the pressures. If he's all-powerful - if he really cared - he could have made things clearer, or easier."

What God *has* revealed is that he's formed us in his image with the ability to think and reason and choose. So he doesn't force us against our wills, which he gave us to exercise responsibly. Our failures are merely demonstrations of our God-given freedom, often used, through foolish pride or carelessness, in opposition to what God wants. But by God's mercy our failures need not be a waste, because it is our failures, rather than our successes, that move us towards God, to cry out to him and humbly depend on him. Our successes are far more likely to steer us into the madness of proud independence of him.

Samson is a case in point. Larrikin that he was, glorying in his physical prowess, he wasted the gifts given to him to protect God's people from harm. He ignored both God's instructions and his parents' advice as to who he should marry, and although he had some successes in the battles he fought with the Philistines, he was putty in the hands of a beautiful but devious woman. So instead of rescuing God's people he became the reviled plaything of his enemies. He ended up shorn of the long hair that was the secret of his great strength, in shackles, with his eyes gouged out - a pitiful failure.

But Samson didn't lose his consciousness of God as the Giver of every good gift. In his desperation he turned to God and asked him to restore for one last time the gift of his physical strength. So God granted him his last spectacular victory.

Over a thousand years later Samson's name would appear in a list, put together to encourage Christians facing persecution and death, and preserved for us in the Bible. It's a list of people who persevered in trusting God and so became the recipients of the blessings he's promised. And Samson, despite all his failures, is right in there.

## **Part 2**

Our failures cause us shame, but they need not be a waste, because it's through our failures rather than our successes that we grow in the relationship with God we were made for.

One of the problems with success is that our desire for it can make us envious of others. Take, for example, King Saul, another whose life-story we can learn from. As king, Saul had some early successes, but then, through the pride that's natural to us all, he failed to do what God said. But his failures didn't move him to turn back to God. Instead, as the authority God had given him slipped away, he was consumed by jealousy and envy of David, the young man even he could see was a much better leader than he was. He tried again and again to kill David. He tried to kill his own son Jonathan for protesting David's innocence. Saul wanted above every other consideration to hang on to being king. But his desire for success as he saw it ensured that his failures were final.

Another problem with success is that it can make us careless, as David himself shows us. He did eventually take Saul's place, and became the most successful king Israel ever had. He subdued his enemies, united the nation, extended its borders and established Jerusalem, acknowledging all the while his need to refer every decision to God. He knew that whatever authority he had came from God.

But after a time David's successes made him careless. At the time of the year when he ought to have been out protecting his people from their enemies he was relaxing in his palace in Jerusalem. We know the story - how one afternoon he woke from his nap. Strolling on the roof of his palace, looking down on the houses below, he caught sight of a beautiful woman having a bath. He knew how God hates adultery, but as a successful king he'd become used to having his way. So he took her and slept with her. When she became pregnant he realised he risked discovery. So he brought her husband back from the front line and encouraged him every way he knew to spend time with his wife. When that failed he made sure the husband was returned to the thickest part of the battle so he'd be killed. For David, the man after God's own heart, it was a monumental failure. He was supposed to be the shepherd of God's people, leading them to do what was right. But repeatedly, and seemingly without shame, he did great wrong.

But there was a fundamental difference between Saul and David. When God's prophet confronted Saul he was defensive and tried to offload the blame. When David was confronted with what he'd done he acknowledged it and, overcome with sorrow, sought God's infinite mercy.

So David's failure wasn't final. Instead it moved him, far more than his successes had ever done, to turn to God and cry out to him for the forgiveness God alone can give.

### **Part 3**

A while ago I heard on the radio an interview with a songwriter who'd been inspired by a scrap of song he'd heard to write what became a hit. I have to confess here my ignorance: I'd never heard of either his song or the original which inspired him. But at the end of the interview they played what remains of the original. It went for about twenty-five seconds, but I remember clearly where I was when I heard it - even the time of day and the kind of day it was are etched on my mind, as I too was profoundly moved. It's hard to say why, but perhaps it was the combination of the words and what the voice revealed about the singer. He was obviously an old man. His voice was cracked and tired and very sad. Yet he sang over and over with quiet conviction, "Jesus' blood never let me down."

It seemed clear from his voice that life had let him down - perhaps his circumstances, his health, people he'd depended on. Perhaps he'd let himself down, falling short of the person he'd hoped to be. But Jesus' blood, that vivid expression for the death of Jesus - *that* he knew he could depend on.

The death of Jesus *is* unique, being as it is the death of the sinless Son of God on behalf of all us sinners. Unlike our deaths which are not a matter of choice for us, Jesus chose to give his life 'as a ransom' (to use his word) - the price that sets people free. That death can never let down any person who chooses to depend on it. It can never fail in its purpose for any person who accepts it. How can we describe its purpose? As C.S. Lewis wrote in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*: "When a willing victim who had committed no treachery was killed in a traitor's place, death itself would begin to work backwards". So Paul asks, in a fine rhetorical flourish, "Where's your sting now, death? Grave, where's your victory?"

We could also ask, "Where are the ugly stains of our failures?" All of them - my deceptions and betrayals, my hasty words, my unjust judgements, all the damage and losses caused by carelessness and ignorance and pride, have been wiped off the record, never to be counted against me. We know, from our own experience of hurt, that the pain caused by sin has to be borne by someone. That fits with what God revealed long before Jesus - that without the shedding of blood sin can't be put away. What a miracle of grace it is that God, in taking on human form and shedding his blood, has put it away once for all. All that remains is for you and me to accept what he's done on our behalf.

How did C.S. Lewis come to write so powerfully in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* about the meaning of Jesus' death? It may have been the flash of revelation he received one day as he repeated the phrase in the Apostles' Creed, "I believe in the forgiveness of sins". His sins were forgiven - gone! He wrote, "This truth appeared in my mind in so clear a light I perceived that, despite many confessions and absolutions, I had never before believed it with my whole heart."

### **Conclusion**

Everything we've ever done - whether we classify it as success or failure - has the potential to turn us either toward God or away from him. Samson failed miserably, but chose in the end to ask God for help.

Saul had his chances to ask for forgiveness, but chose to ignore God. David failed spectacularly, but recognised the justice of God's judgement and threw himself on God's mercy. And we can either allow our failures to destroy our peace, or humbly hand them over to our merciful God, who in Christ went to such extraordinary lengths to ensure they can't be counted against us.

### **Prayer**

*Almighty God and Father, you know all about us. You know our failures - the way we've let people down and let ourselves down - and how we've let you down. But Father, we thank you for not letting us down. Thank you for doing everything that needed to be done, so that you could use our failures to draw us back to you and then wipe them off the record. So help us to turn to you, and trust in the forgiveness Jesus' blood bought for us. For the praise and glory of your great Name.*