

What Paul once wrote to the Ephesians he also writes to us: **"You were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live. ...Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved"** (Ep 2:1-5). When we repent, we trust God's promise to forgive us, to strengthen us again, and to give us real meaning and purpose in life.

So, quit living in remorse and live, instead, in repentance. Lift up your head and turn to God. Be assured of his forgiveness in Christ. That's why Jesus lived. That's why he died. That's why he rose again from the dead. Ask him to raise you up again. Believe his tender promise: **"A bruised reed [I] will not break, and a smoldering wick [I] will not snuff out"** (Mt 12:20). You have the same Spirit in you that raised Christ from the dead, and that Spirit will strengthen you again. You may be down, but in Christ you are never out. You can be God's blessing to those around you, a leader, an example of what God can do in and through your weakness.

But let me tell you what it's going to take. Like Samson, all of us need to push some pillars down. So, the question I have for you is this: What's the pillar in your life that needs to come down? Let's not kid ourselves. We all have pillars that need to come down. For some of us, it's the pillar of pride. For others, the pillar of anger. For others, the pillar of hasty and uncharitable judging. My goodness, there are as many pillars as there are people here today. There's arrogance; there's gossiping; there's fear; there's wallowing in self-pity; there's taking the words and actions of others in the worst possible way. All of these, when stripped down to their core, are sin. And they all need to be taken to God in remorse, in heartfelt and genuine sorrow over them, but, at the same time, in repentance, trusting God's promise to forgive, to strengthen, and to restore.

In the book of Proverbs, it says, **"For though the righteous fall seven times, they will rise again"** (24:16). That's God talking to you, talking to me. We may have fallen seven times, we may have messed up 7000 times, we may have blown it 70,000 times, but in Christ God promises to raise us up and do great things through us. The devil loves to make strong men weak, but God loves to make weak men strong. How true it is that our extraordinary God does extraordinary things with ordinary people like us. He even promises to bless us as we fail forward for him. Amen.

**Jdgs 16:23-30** – *Ordinary People-Extraordinary God: Falling Forward*  
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In June we've been studying one of the most intriguing characters in the Bible. We've seen that Samson was a man who was given much by God. Even before he was born, he was set apart by God. He was then called by God and empowered with supernatural strength from God. God's purpose in all this was to use Samson to deliver his people from their long-time nemesis, the Philistines. But even though Samson was chosen by God to be his instrument, he messed up time and again. He broke his vows to God. He chased after the wrong women, he touched the things he wasn't supposed to touch, and he drank the things he was forbidden to drink. Sad to say, Samson was emotion-driven, not Spirit-led. Step by step, he squandered away all that he had been given by God and ruined his life.

We see Samson today as a prisoner. His eyes are gouged out, and he's chained to a grinding wheel designed for oxen. His life has been reduced to pushing this grinding wheel around and around, hour after hour, day after day. He's on public display for everyone to mock and taunt. You really can't get any lower than where Samson is now.

Which raises the question: What do you do when you realize you've really messed up? You've wasted years of your life. You've squandered away the gifts God has given to you. You've done things that you can't undo. You've hurt the people you love the most. In short, you haven't done what God designed and called you to do.

Let me address the men here. I believe that we take this kind of failure very, very personally, even more so than most women, because men and women typically find their worth in different things. Statistically, women find their worth in relationships. They're concerned with "Do you like me?" "Are we friends?" "Can we hug?" "Can we cry?" "You took 72 seconds to text me back; are we still best friends?" For most women, it's all about relationships. Not so much for us guys. We want to be liked, yes, but that's not as big a deal for us, because we tend to find our value in accomplishments. I want to know how I measure up. Did I do well? Did we win? Yes, I want to be liked, but I'd rather be respected. Ask a woman if she'd rather be loved or respected and she'll most likely say, "I'd rather be loved." Ask a man that question, and he'll almost always say, "I'd rather be respected." And that's why, generally speaking, a man's greatest fear is failure and his greatest pain is regret.

Perhaps you look back and realize your failed marriage was mostly your fault. You could've made it work, but you didn't. Maybe your kids have rejected you because you weren't there for them. Maybe you regret not getting married. Now you're all alone, and you wish you'd done things differently. Perhaps you're frustrated because you're in a career that's going nowhere. Your friends are doing better than you are, and you feel like a failure. Maybe it's an inward failure that gets to you. It's a promise you made to yourself or to God never to do something again. And guess what? You did it again.

Samson's story teaches a powerful lesson. Just because I've failed at something doesn't mean that I'm a failure. In fact, a failure is an event, not a person. Samson is a man who failed over and over again, and yet God used him to accomplish his purposes. This is such good news for us today, especially for us fathers. If we've failed at something, we are not a failure. Let's discover how this truth unfolds in our text.

### Failing Forward

*"Now the rulers of the Philistines assembled to offer a great sacrifice to Dagon their god and to celebrate, saying, 'Our god has delivered Samson, our enemy, into our hands.' When the people saw him, they praised their god, saying, 'Our god has delivered our enemy into our hands, the one who laid waste our land and multiplied our slain.'"*

Samson had once tied torches to the tails of 300 foxes and burned their land, and with the jawbone of a donkey had killed 1000 of their warriors. No wonder the Philistines were whooping it up! *"While they were in high spirits, they shouted, 'Bring out Samson to entertain us.' So they called Samson out of the prison, and he performed for them."* Now I doubt that Samson put on a dog and pony show for them. Most likely he was forced to stand before them in chains and listen to their slurs and their insults. Truth be told, this is the ultimate low point for Samson. He's miserably failed God, his people, and himself.

There are two possible responses to failure. The natural response is remorse, sometimes called contrition, feeling bad about what I did. Sometimes this remorse turns inward: "I'm a bad person. I'm horrible. I'm no good." Other times it turns outward and blames others, making me the victim. Sadly, some of you men may recall only one verse from last week, namely, *"With such nagging [Delilah] prodded [Samson] day after day until he was sick to death of it" (Jdg 16:16).* (And you told me you couldn't memorize Scripture!) All humor aside, the natural response to failure is remorse, whether it's directed inwardly or outwardly.

But there's a second response to failure, and it's by far the better one. In fact, it's the godly response. It's repentance, admitting that we blew it, confessing our sin, but then turning to the God of mercy and grace for forgiveness and the strength we need to right the wrong. Repentance always involves a turning around, a going in the other direction. Remorse focuses on the bad, but repentance directs us to the good—the good and gracious God we have in Christ. Our catechism puts it this way: *"Confession has two parts. The one is that we confess our sins" (remorse); "the other, that we receive absolution or forgiveness" (repentance).* By inspiration of God the Holy Spirit, the Apostle John tells us, *"If we confess our sins, [God] is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 Jn 1:9).* We repent to be assured that we are forgiven. I believe that Samson came to that point in his life where he genuinely repented—not just remorse, but repentance. By God's grace, Samson remembered who he was set apart to be and called to do. In a sense, the loss of his eyes enabled Samson to really see.

By the grace of God, Samson recognized what all of us here need to recognize. You and I were created and redeemed by God for a great purpose, to do something significant, to be used by God to make a difference in the lives of others for eternity. It's at the end of his life that Samson finally realizes this. *"When they stood him among the pillars, Samson said to the servant who held his hand, 'Put me where I can feel the pillars that support the temple, so that I may lean against them.' Now the temple was crowded with men and women; all the rulers of the Philistines were there, and on the roof were about three thousand men and women watching Samson perform. Then Samson prayed to the Lord, 'Sovereign LORD, remember me. Please, God, strengthen me just once more, and let me with one blow get revenge on the Philistines for my two eyes.' Then Samson reached toward the two central pillars on which the temple stood. Bracing himself against them, his right hand on the one and his left hand on the other, Samson said, 'Let me die with the Philistines!' Then he pushed with all his might, and down came the temple on the rulers and all the people in it. Thus he killed many more when he died than while he lived."*

In many ways, Samson's life is a tragedy. It's an example of what not to do: to neglect God's calling or squander away his blessings, but it's also a powerful lesson that, even when we fail, God can and does use us. Even when we've messed up, it's not over. We're not defined by what we've done. We are who God said we are: his dearly loved children and bearers of his name. If we're not dead, we're not done.