

Fathers Who Failed

Genesis 37:3, 1 Samuel 3:13, Ruth 1:1, Genesis 50:20, 2 Samuel 12:24, Ruth 4:14

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Years ago a distraught father sat in my office and with tears running down his face asked, "Where did I fail her?" His daughter had run away from home and was nowhere to be found. Like so many other fathers who have faced similar situations, he felt like a failure. Perhaps you too have uttered these words when one of your children lost their way in life. If so, you are not alone. In fact, the Bible contains a number of accounts of fathers who failed. Their stories are reminders that we are not the first ones to utter those words. So this morning, let's take a look at four Biblical examples of fathers who failed.

The first one is Jacob, the father who played favorites. Genesis 37:3 states, "Now Israel (Jacob) loved Joseph more than any of his other children, because he was the son of his old age; and he made a richly ornamented robe for him." At this point in his life, Jacob was the father of eleven sons and at least one daughter. Joseph was his youngest son. So guess what? Jacob played favorites. He gave Joseph a fancy coat, one that had sleeves and which is often referred to as "the coat of many colors." That didn't sit well with the rest of Joseph's brothers, especially when Joseph told them about some dreams he had in which he was in a place of authority over them and, in fact, his entire family. They despised him. So when Joseph showed up one day where his brothers were watching over their father's flocks and herds, they wanted to kill him. Fortunately, they decided instead to sell him into slavery and I am confident that you know the rest of the story. Favoritism can be a big problem in anyone's family. One child is elevated to a position of prominence over the rest of the children. Sometimes it's an older brother or sister. Sometimes it's the youngest child who gets to do the kinds of things that were denied to the others. It can even happen in a school classroom. I suspect we've all known of someone who was the "teacher's pet." Fathers and indeed parents can fail and fail terribly when they play favorites.

The second father is Eli, the father who failed to discipline his sons. He was the high priest in charge of the Tabernacle at Shiloh, the place where the people of Israel brought their sacrifices and worshiped the Lord before the Temple was built in Jerusalem. He had two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, who assisted him and they were unscrupulous. They stole the sacrifices that should have been reserved for the Lord as well as reveling in immorality. Unfortunately, Eli let them get away with this misbehavior. He told his sons to stop what they were doing, but he didn't stop them. He refused to discipline them. As a result this is what God said to Samuel, the young man who was later to become the last and greatest of Israel's judges, "For I told him (Eli) that I would judge his family forever because of the sin he knew

about; his sons made themselves contemptible, and he failed to restrain them" (1 Samuel 3:13). Sure enough, not long thereafter, Hophni and Phinehas took the Ark of the Covenant, the golden chest which contained the Ten Commandments and carried it into battle against their enemies, the Philistines. Both of Eli's sons were killed and the Ark, the priceless treasure of Israel, was captured by the Philistines. Upon hearing this tragic news, Eli, now an old man, fell over and died. He and his family paid a terrible price because of his failure to properly discipline his sons. How many children in our own day and time have been visited by terrible tragedies because their parents failed to discipline them?

The third father is David, the father who broke the Lord's commandments. All of us are familiar with the story of David and Bathsheba. Instead of fulfilling his kingly duties, he let his eyes wander where they should not have gone. He committed adultery and when Bathsheba became pregnant he tried to cover up his crime by having her husband killed in battle. However, God knew what had happened and sent His prophet Nathan to confront the king with these words, "Why did you despise the Word of the LORD by doing what is evil in His eyes?" (1 Samuel 3:13). The Scriptures tell us that David had a heart for God, that he wanted to live a righteous life before the Lord. Nevertheless, he willfully broke two of the Lord's Ten Commandments and brought upon himself and his family the kind of discord and strife that nearly destroyed his kingship. David's bad behavior precipitated bad behavior among his sons, one of whom, Absalom, sought to rebel against him. How many times have fathers, and indeed parents, broken the moral and spiritual standards which they had adopted as their own, only to see those same standards broken and abused by their children?

Finally, there is the story of Elimelech, the father who turned his back on God. Facing economic ruin the Scriptures tell us, "In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land and a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab" (Ruth 1:1). Instead of staying in the land that God had given to Israel and trusting in the Lord to send rain, he abandoned his inheritance and went to live in a foreign land and a notoriously wicked culture. He even allowed his two sons to marry foreign wives. For all intents and purposes he abandoned his faith and his relationship with God. Sadly, all too soon, both Elimelech and his two sons died and were buried in that foreign land. Today the same kind of thing happens much too often. After having grown up in the church and professed faith in Christ, fathers turn away from the Lord. They may not have moved to another country, but they have certainly adopted the customs of a different culture and sometimes the outcome is less than rewarding in the lives of their children.

Yes, there are times when we as fathers and, indeed, as parents fail. We can play favorites like Jacob. We can fail to properly discipline our children like Eli. We can break God's moral standards like David. Worst of all when

we face the trials and tribulations of life, we can turn our back on God and walk away.

I suspect we've all seen situations like that. In fact, as we look back over our own lives, we may have been able to identify with one of these four Biblical examples. Like the man who sat in my office weeping over the disappearance of his daughter, we cry out, "Where did I fail my children?" It's an anguished cry of despair that seems to negate the possibility that anything good can come out of our failures. It's an admission of defeat and loss. Fortunately, it doesn't have to end that way.

Paul Harvey, the famous radio news broadcaster often spoke about "the rest of the story." Here it is. God can turn our failures into successes. He can turn our tragedies into triumphs. For just a moment let's see how things turned out in the lives and the families of the four fathers we have mentioned this morning. Jacob's family was restored. It took a while but Joseph forgave his brothers for what they had done. God had raised him up from slavery to become pharaoh's chief administrator in Egypt. He provided a place for the entire family to all live together in peace and harmony. Speaking to his brothers Joseph said, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" (Genesis 50:20). Eli lost two sons but he had been given a third child in the person of Samuel, an adopted son who had been given to him by Hannah years before. The Lord told Eli, "I will raise up for Myself a faithful priest, who will do according to what is in my heart and mind" (1 Samuel 2:35). David's first son by Bathsheba died, but the Scriptures tell us that David and Bathsheba were blessed with a second child. "She gave birth to a son, and they named him Solomon" (2 Samuel 12:24). It is also recorded that Nathan the prophet was instructed by the Lord to also name this child Jedidiah, which means "beloved by the LORD." Finally, Elimelech did not live long enough to see any grandchildren, but he did acquire a daughter-in-law named Ruth, who entrusted her life into the care of the God of Israel. Returning with Naomi, her mother-in-law, to Bethlehem in Judea, she married a godly man named Boaz. When she gave birth to a son, the women in the village declared to Ruth's mother-in-law, "Praise be to the LORD, who this day has not left you without a kinsman-redeemer. May he become famous throughout Israel" (Ruth 4:14). That child became the ancestor of King David and is listed in the New Testament family line linked to the birth of Christ.

So you see, God can take our failures and redeem them in some wonderful ways. Even at times when we have failed our children, God can transform those failures and bring something good out of them. He's done it time and time again. Indeed, that is what God did through His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. He took mankind's rejection of Christ and the tragedy of the cross and made Him our "**Kinsman Redeemer.**"