

Desert Lab 101

Exodus 2:15-22 & Selected Scripture

Introduction

There is nothing the world enjoys more than a success story. On the other hand, I do not think there is anything more disliked with greater aversion than a story of failure, at least in our culture.

The story of Willie Durant has always fascinated me, and I have read much on his life. The last few years of his life are shrouded with secrecy and mystery. He at one time, was the creative genius behind what would become, General Motors. He either talked men into becoming a part of it or bought them out. This included men with such names as: Walter P. Chrysler, David Buick, Louis Chevrolet, Ransom E. Olds. As a result, he formed a huge corporation.

However, because of poor decisions and a loss of his fortune, Durant, who had once been a multi-millionaire, spent his last few years managing a bowling alley. He was unable to even afford one of the hundreds of thousands of cars that his company had produced.

One interesting thing about the Bible is that most of the truth is shrouded in personality; it is cloaked with the personalities of men and women. When God authored, through His servants, the lives of men and women, He seemed to leave out nothing – especially the failures. We cannot find people in the scriptures who are given such spotlights that He seems to hide from our view the mistakes that they made; the sins that they were involved in; the deserts that they found themselves living in. I am so glad because, as we are told in II Timothy, chapter 3, verses 16 and 17,

All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.

It seems that you and I need help, especially in terms of failure. Hopefully we will learn from the failures of these men and women and not repeat their mistakes.

Now, there are several biblical failures that I want to bring to your attention, as we continue our study in

the life of Moses. You may wish to take notes as we are going to bounce back and forth.

The Desert of Disappointment and Weakness

Mark – A Failure in his Ministry

The first is a man called Mark, or John Mark. Mark is an interesting individual who had every potential of becoming a great success story and yet, something happened that God included in the record of scripture for our instruction. Look at Acts, chapter 12, where his story begins.

Peter has been in prison and there is a prayer meeting going on in his behalf. The scripture writer records, in verses 11 and 12.

When Peter came to himself, he said, “Now I know for sure that the Lord has sent forth His angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting.” And when he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John who was also called Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying.

It seems that the home of John Mark was a great hiding place, a great retreat for those early disciples. It is believed by most expositors that it was in the home of John Mark that the last supper took place – in the upper room; that is, their room above or on the roof, perhaps. It is also believed that this wealthy couple, whose son we know as Mark, were the owners of the garden where Christ prayed. We call it the Garden of Gethsemane. So, John Mark was raised in a home that was soon given to the cause of Jesus Christ.

It was Mark’s mother and perhaps, even his believing Roman father who opened their doors for the disciples to come and to pray. Mark, we know from studying, was twenty years old when Jesus Christ was crucified. It is believed that he was the young man who fled from the garden that the guards grabbed by the cloak. It is interesting that this young man John Mark, would be the one groomed perhaps, to be the

second generation disciple. He had all of the potential and background and yet, something happened in his life.

Turn to chapter 13, verses 2 and 3 of Acts. This takes place at the church in Antioch.

While they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul [Paul] for the work to which I have called them." Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away.

Now, note who is in the company of Paul and Barnabas, according to verses 4 and 5.

So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia and from there they sailed to Cyprus. When they reached Salamis, they began to proclaim the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews; and they also had John as their helper.

John Mark went along as a helper to Paul and Barnabas. It seems, therefore, that this young man had great enthusiasm. He was willing to be involved in the cause of Christ.

Mark had hobnobbed with the disciples. He had spoken to Paul and Peter. I would imagine that had he had a problem as a teenager, he could have asked one of those individuals for their advice. His home was the haven for the disciples, who were soon to be apostles, as they are at the time of this journey. So John Mark finds himself as the young helper on the first evangelistic crusade.

Some have suggested, and I think it is probably true, that John Mark would perhaps lead the teenagers, or the young people, or the singles in studying God's word. He would be in charge of that particular arena, while Paul and Barnabas would speak and teach to the adults.

Now, we are not given the details, but something occurred on that missionary trip that would change the record of John Mark's life. God introduces a colossal failure – a failure in his ministry. Note verse 13 of Acts, chapter 13.

Now Paul and his companions put out to sea from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia; but John [Mark] left them and returned to Jerusalem.

Turn to chapter 15 of Acts and let us get a little more insight as to what occurred. Look at verses 36 through 38.

After some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us return and visit the brethren in every city in which we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are." Barnabas wanted to take John, called Mark, along with them also. But Paul kept insisting that they should not take him along who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to work.

The word "desert," is the Greek word from which we get our word "apostasy".

Perhaps John Mark thought that having hung around with the disciples, knowing they had the power to perform miracles, that his ministry would be just as enlightened. We are not sure what happened, but evidently John Mark, when faced with the pressure of the crowd perhaps, was not met with the results he wanted to see. Maybe the youths sneered at him and called him names. We are not sure of all the clues, but we know that he apostasied; that is, he departed, he deserted them, he left them in the lurch. So Paul said, "There is absolutely no way I'm taking that young man with me again."

I can imagine the trouble that was probably caused by John Mark's leaving. Perhaps people had just come to Christ and then, the news came out that, "John Mark has abandoned his calling."

It seems that John Mark would go down in the record as a failure in ministry.

I think of Psalm, chapter 78, verse 9, that tells us,

The sons of Ephraim were archers equipped with bows, yet they turned back in the day of battle.

I also think of us, by way of application. We have so much potential. We have training. We have knowledge. We know more of the word perhaps, than many have ever known. We have so much at our disposal; our bows are ready and our arrows are finely shaped. Our prayers that are worded so well, are ascending to heaven. We put on great appearances. Yet, in the day of battle, when the pressure is on, when the sneering begins at school or at the job, for fear of ridicule, do we turn back?

We can hardly talk about the church being persecuted as the scriptures do, because the church in America is certainly not persecuted. Yet, I think of Jesus Christ's words to the church at Smyrna. He told them to stand in day of battle – whatever that battle may be. There are battles for us, although

different perhaps than those of believers in other countries.

I heard a story about a group of believers in Russia who met in an abandoned building on the outskirts of town one winter. There were so many people that they were packed like sardines into the building to hear the gospel. A Christian leader had slipped in undercover from America to speak to them and teach them. The people had come from all over in the dead of winter. There was no heat in the building and every window and door was open to allow circulation of air, though icy cold outside. They have their battles and we have ours, though different.

Perhaps your battle is to go next door and witness for Christ to your neighbor, who has never heard the name of Jesus Christ come from your tongue.

I heard a sad story of a businessman who had carpooled with his neighbor for nearly fifteen years. One day, his neighbor had a heart attack and died. The man sadly shared with a mutual friend that for fifteen years, he never asked his neighbor if he knew Jesus Christ.

What of us? Are we prepared for battle and yet, in the first fray, when we hear the clanking of armor, when we hear the rumbling of wheels, when we see the army approaching, do we desert? Do we, equipment and all, run and look for the white flag, or do we fight? I know it is a lot more convenient to keep our mouths quiet, but it is a lot less effective, wouldn't you say?

I read an interesting little story which is probably not true, of a farmer sitting on the porch of his small farm house. He had his back against his rocking chair and his feet propped up on a bucket that he had filled with water. Dangling into that bucket of water was a fishing line. His neighbor came over and said, "Hank, there ain't any fish in there. You're not going to catch any fish in that bucket."

Hank kind of shifted the straw to the other side of his cheek and said, "I know, but it's so convenient."

We will come back to Mark in a moment and I will give a good ending to his story.

The Desert of Guilt and Unhappiness

David – A Failure in his Morals

I think of another failure, not a failure in his ministry, not a coward, but one who ended up in the desert of guilt and unhappiness. David was a man who was a failure in his morals.

How different David was from Mark. There was not a streak of cowardice in this young man. He had taken on wild animals with nothing but a sling. And you may remember his approach to the armies of Israel when they had been at a standstill for months because the Philistines had a secret weapon known as Goliath. Goliath would come out every day and parade before the armies of the Israelites and say, "Who will come against me?"

No one would dare step forward until this runt of the litter, this teenage boy with his sling dangling from his hip pocket, comes to bring food to his brothers and hears that Philistine. He says, "Well, it's about time I took him on."

To the amazement of everyone, David walks out into the valley and tells this towering giant of a man, "Before this afternoon is over, I'm going to take your head from your body and feed your flesh to the birds."

David was a man who at the name of Jehovah, would fight an enemy like Goliath. Yet, he became a casualty because of moral failure. The man who was considered the apple of God's eye, a man after God's own heart, and who penned into existence such great experiences of worship, found himself in a lonely place – a desert of guilt and unhappiness.

Turn to Psalm, chapter 32, a Psalm that ties in with Psalm, chapter 51, and read what David said. Note the agony of one who was hiding his sin; one who had not yet learned the wonderful privilege of repentance and freedom from guilt. In verses 3 and 4, he writes,

When I kept silent about [hid] my sin, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me; my vitality was drained away as with the fever heat of summer.

Talk about a desert! Talk about unhappiness! Yet, turn to Psalm, chapter 51, to see what happens. In this desert of guilt and unhappiness, David had

learned and had been willing to repent. Look at verses 1 through 4a.

Be gracious to me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness; according to the greatness of Your compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against You, You only, I have sinned . . .

Skip to verses 10 through 12a.

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast [right] spirit within me. Do not cast me away from Your presence and do not take Your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of Your salvation . . .

Continue to verses 14 through 15.

Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, the God of my salvation; then my tongue will joyfully sing of Your righteousness. O Lord, open my lips, that my mouth may declare Your praise.

There is something, ladies and gentlemen, that we all have in common with Mark and with David. Because of failure, because of sin, we also find ourselves in a desert place. Maybe today, you are experiencing a desert of guilt or unhappiness, a failure of some sort, or some disappointment or weakness. God has brought you to that place not to abandon you there, but to teach you. That is the place where He can gain our undivided attention.

David, for a year, had hid his sin; tucked it away. He thought no one knew. Yet, he reveals to us, "My soul, my body, my mind, was wasting away."

The Desert of Obscurity and Silence

Moses – A Failure in his Methods

Let me point out one more man; an individual that we have been studying for some time. Moses finds himself in the desert of obscurity and silence, in Exodus, chapter 2.

Moses was undoubtedly the man that God had designed to be the deliverer of the Israelites. He was prepared in the throne room of Pharaoh to understand law that would be helpful when he would transcribe the oracles of God into the law that we have today.

He was the prince of the courts and was schooled in all the learning and wisdom of Egypt. Yet, he was not schooled in the wisdom of God. He thought that the time was right, "I will instigate my plan to deliver the Israelites."

So Moses strikes down an Egyptian and hides his body in the sand. As a result, Pharaoh learns of that murder and Moses has to flee.

Let us take the story up there. Look at verses 15 through 17 of Exodus, chapter 2.

When Pharaoh heard of this matter, he tried to kill Moses. But Moses fled from the presence of Pharaoh and settled in the land of Midian, and he sat down [pitched camp] by a well. Now the priest of Midian had seven daughters; and they came to draw water and filled the troughs to water their father's flock. Then the shepherds came and drove them away, but Moses stood up and helped them and watered their flock.

Perhaps Moses intimidated the shepherds by his Egyptian dress. This also gives us an indication that the priest in Midian had very little respect from the people who lived in that area. They would drive away his daughters and then, take the water that they had drawn for their sheep and give it to their own. Continue to verses 18 and 19.

When they came to Reuel [known from this point on as Jethro] their father, he said, "Why have you come back so soon today?" So they said, "An Egyptian delivered us from the hand of the shepherds, and what is more, he even drew the water for us and watered the flock."

Jethro's response, in verse 20, is interesting. He asks his daughters two quick questions.

He said to his daughters, "Where is he then? Why is it that you have left the man behind? Invite him to have something to eat."

In other words, "This is the kind of man we want around here."

He is probably thinking, "This might be a future son-in-law."

So they invite Moses in and indeed, verses 21 and 22 tell us,

Moses was willing to dwell with the man, and he gave his daughter Zipporah [which means, "little bird"] to Moses. Then she

gave birth to a son, and he named him Gershom, for he said [the meaning of the name], “I have been a sojourner [stranger] in a foreign land.”

Now do not miss for a moment, the agony of Moses’ soul. Here he is – the prince of the court, the deliverer, the one who believed, according to the seed his mother had planted in his heart, that he would lead the Israelites out of Egypt. And now, he is a disaster, a failure, and is perhaps even thinking that he is an eternal wash-out.

Moses is pitching camp in the dusty, sandy region of Midian. He who had so much wealth and everything at his fingertips, now will work as a shepherd for his father-in-law and live in an attached dwelling to his father-in-law’s tent. Here is “Mosheh,” here is the son of the Pharaoh’s daughter, a failure because of his methods.

I am glad that God has designed that we would learn of these men’s failures because we have much to learn.

The world would say, “Let’s cover this section up.”

Oral traditions, in fact, would often leave out the hideousness of the sins of their forefathers. They would say, “We don’t want to hear about that.”

Yet God says, “I want you to know so that you can learn.”

The world would scratch its head in amazement.

I read an unbelievable account and knowing you would probably not believe it, I brought the book along. One time I told a story and a lady leaned over to my wife and asked, “Did that really happen?”

So today, I brought verification! Let me tell the story and you can check it out after the sermon.

A woman who was very wealthy and had a lot of prominence, decided that she would have a book written about her ancestors. She was very proud of those in her family line, so at great expense, she hired a well known author to write the book.

It was not long, however, before the author discovered that one of her grandfathers, unknown to anyone, was a murderer. Although it had been covered up, he had been put to death in the electric chair at Sing Sing.

The woman was mortified and said, “Well, leave that out of the book. That won’t do much for my reputation.”

The author, however, with credibility, said, “No, I must include that.”

So the woman told him, “Well, I’ll double your fee if, when you write that account, you word it in such a way that no one will really know.”

Let me read these words that he wrote, “One of her grandfathers occupied the chair of applied electricity in one of America’s best known institutions. He was very much attached to his position and, literally, died in the harness.”

You can check it after the sermon!

What a cover up! And that is typical. We do not want anyone to know of something like that in our past or in our personal history; we want to cover it up.

God says, “No, expose it. I want believers in this century to learn from it.”

Application – Lessons Learned From Desert Experiences

Let me give three lessons that we can learn from the failures of these three men.

From Moses – The importance of dependence

1. From Moses’ failure, I believe, we can learn the importance of dependence.

Moses was a man who was so qualified and so equipped that he was ready to take on Egypt and lead Israel out in his own strength. However, he had yet to learn that he would have to go in the strength of God; in dependence on Him.

Did Moses learn that? Here he is in the desert of Midian – a wash-out, depressed, discouraged, tending sheep. He names his first son, and you could almost hear him weep, “I am an alien here; a stranger to this place.” Yet something happened because his next son, whom we learn of in a later text, he names Eleazar, which means, “God is my help.”

“*GOD* is my help.” Moses had learned in the desert that dependency is much more important than self-sufficiency. He would refocus his attention in the midst of that tribulation, on God, who is his help.

From David – The importance of repentance

2. From the life of David, I believe, we can learn the importance of repentance.

David was a man who had hidden his sin; who was living with the awful guilt of violating God's counsel. In Psalm, chapter 51, he finally bears his soul. He says in verses 4a and 12a,

*Against You, You only, I have sinned . . .
Restore to me the joy of Your salvation . . .*

My friend, if you are in the desert like Moses or David, perhaps God is trying to teach you dependence or lead you to repentance.

From Mark – The importance of endurance

3. From the life of Mark, I believe, we can learn the importance of endurance.

Mark, who had failed in his service for Jesus Christ, would one day write the second gospel of your New Testament and emphasize one thing about Jesus Christ – He is the servant of God.

Something had happened in Mark's life and I want to tell you what I believe it was. We have the first clue in Colossians. For eighteen years, Mark has seemingly vanished. We have not heard from him; we have not seen him; no one refers to him. Now, eighteen years later, something has happened. Look at Colossians, chapter 4, verse 10. Paul writes,

Aristarchus, my fellow prisoner, sends you his greetings; and also Barnabas's cousin Mark (about whom you received instructions; if he comes to you, welcome him);

I love that! Paul, at one time, did not want anything to do with Mark. Now, he is telling this body of believers, "If Mark comes along, let him in; welcome him."

What happened? Turn to II Timothy, chapter 4. I love this. It brings tears to my eyes to think of what has happened. Paul is writing from a prison cell. He says, in verses 9 and 10,

Make every effort [Timothy] to come to me soon; for Demas, having loved this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica; Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia.

It is interesting that he talks about Demas as now committing apostasy. Continue to verse 11.

Only Luke is with me. Pick up Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful to me for service.

Paul writes, "he is useful to me," where before Mark had been a detriment. He had caused problems and confusion. But now, in the last years of Paul's life, he says, "I want to see Mark, who is useful to me."

I think the verses that pull it all together for us are found in I Peter, chapter 5, written by Peter.

A lesson from all three "failures" – the value of listening

Before we read in I Peter, let me stop for just a moment to make a point, one final application that I think we can learn from all three "failures". The lesson that I believe we can learn is the value of listening.

It is interesting that the word "desert" in the Hebrew, is the same word that is translated "God speaks". Isn't it fascinating to think, by way of application to us today, that in the desert, when I am guilty of sin; when I have left the counsel of God; when I am covered with unhappiness; when there is solitude and seeming silence, that God *will* speak.

In all three of these men's lives, God spoke through another Christian.

I believe the Christian that God spoke through in Mark's life is Peter. Look at I Peter, chapter 5, verse 13,

She who is in Babylon, chosen together with you, sends you greetings, and so does my son, Mark.

This tells us that Peter had evidently taken Mark under his wing and disciplined him. Peter, the one who had denied Jesus Christ; Peter, the one who had fled when the battle began, now *he* is helping Mark along. "Son" is a term of discipleship. He says, "Mark, my son."

Somewhere in that desert experience, God allowed Mark to rub shoulders with Peter. Perhaps Mark was a potential disaster; someone who never wanted anything else to do with ministry; someone who said, "I'm finished. I'm quitting. I've failed. I've blown it. No more." Then Peter comes along and puts his arm around Mark and says, "Listen, I failed too. Let me show you how to focus on enduring for the name of Jesus Christ."

David, in his life, was in a desert that perhaps, would have lasted the rest of his life. Finally, however, another man, by the name of Nathan, would

come into his courtroom, confront him, tell him a story that rings in his heart about someone who had stolen the only sheep of someone else. David says, “We need to kill that individual. Let’s have justice.”

Nathan then says, “*You* are the man.”

David did something very interesting and perhaps, unlike what you and I would normally do. We defend ourselves; justify ourselves; refuse to listen. We say, “Who are you to accuse me? I know God.”

Yet David listened, and because of that, he repented.

Moses, in his life in the desert of Midian, I believe, had a father-in-law, Jethro, who turned out to be a rather godly priest. We would learn, later in the story, that Jethro would give Moses great advice on how to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt. Their God had sent Moses into a desert where it seemed that God’s silence was too loud to hear. Yet in the middle of that desert experience, there was a godly priest, who, although respected by no one in that village, would refocus Moses’ attention. When Moses’ second son was born, he says, “Now I know; now I understand, *GOD* is my help.”

My friend, has God brought someone into your life and are you listening? Perhaps it is a relative, like in the life of Moses. Perhaps it is a Christian friend or a preacher; someone who declares to you the counsel of God. Are you listening? Do I listen? We will all spend time in the desert. The important thing is what we learn there.

These three men were able to listen. As a result, from the pen of Moses would come the first five books of the Old Testament. As a result, from the pen of David would come more glorious Psalms about worshipping God, who forgave him. As a result, from the pen of Mark would come the second gospel of the New Testament.

Failure; a desert experience, does not mean the end. If we are able and capable, by God’s grace, to listen, to change, to repent, to learn, the desert can be the beginning of endurance; it can be the beginning of dependence.