Leaving Past Failures Behind

By Paul E Billheimer

Some of us find it difficult not only to forget our sorrows, but also to forget our mistakes. If we are not careful, the mistakes of the past can hang like chains about us, effectively hindering our progress. We are tempted to feel that we can never succeed because we have failed in the past.

It may surprise us to know that past mistakes need not only not be a hindrance, but may actually be a blessing. We may grow through mistakes. Before the artist can put a masterpiece on canvas, he must make many failures due to mistakes. Before the musician is able to thrill an audience with his talent he must spend years making mistakes and correcting them. In every department of life there are years with little but mistakes, immaturities, blunders, while men and women are preparing for beautiful living and noble work.

God Can Overrule

Comfort for those of us whose past lies heavily upon us because of mistakes, should be found in Jeremiah's visit to the potter and God's message about the potter and his work. In Jeremiah 18:4 we read, “And the vessel that he made was marred in the hands of the potter.” That is not a bright picture. No doubt many of us can see ourselves in this picture. We have failed God. We have not lived up to our best. We have been as a vessel marred in the hands of the potter because of our own self-will. Now we are living under the tyranny of a regret-filled past which robs us of enterprise.

One of the clearest revelations of the Word of God and particularly of this incident is God's willingness to restore to men the mercies which they have forfeited. He renews the grace they have misused. Every year and even every day may be one of new beginning.

“And the vessel that He made of clay was marred in the hands of the potter.” Was the potter baffled thereby? Did he give up his purpose? Did he throw aside the clay after one failure? “So he made it again, another vessel.”

We may think that the second vessel which the potter made was less beautiful and useful than the one he would have made if it had not been marred. But I have been told recently by one who works in clay, that the second vessel, made out of a failure, may be even better than the one originally attempted. I have been told that the additional working of the clay renders it more pliable and yielding, and that the second vessel may be even more honorable than the first.

God said to Jeremiah as He watched the potter re-fashion another vessel out of the clay, “O house of Israel, cannot I do with you as this potter?” If the potter can make another, and perhaps even a better vessel from the first abortive attempt, cannot God take a marred life and make it into a thing of beauty and joy? “Behold as clay in the potter’s hand, so are ye in Mine hand, O house of Israel” (Jer. 18:6).

To all who have thought that by your failures you have forfeited a second trial, these words are spoken: “I will restore to you the years that the locust hath eaten, the cankerworm, and the caterpillar and the palmerworm” (Joel 2:25).

Think of all of the biblical characters who failed and were later restored. There is Jacob who, after his deception, is visited by God with a vision of the ladder and of the angels and of the throne of God and was given the assurance that God had not given him up. There is Moses who, after his miserable failure early in life, is carefully tutored by God for forty years and then recommissioned for his old task.

There is David who, after his most heinous crime, is trusted to start afresh. Remember Jonah who turned his back upon his mission but received the Word of God the second time and is sent again to take up the task he had deserted. Consider Peter who denied three times with cursing and swearing, and who yet was the subject of a special invitation to rejoin his old fellowship.

Think of Thomas who failed so miserably in his faith and yet was reinvested with his old office. And finally, look at John Mark who went to pieces in the beginning but was renewed and restored and made good.
All of these examples encourage us to believe that the past, whatever its delinquencies, need not tyrannize our lives. That failure, however inexcusable, need not be a permanent handicap. God's grace is not exhausted by His first gifts. These examples teach us that a new life may be organized out of the old.

“So he made it again another vessel” (Jer. 18:4). This is a message to those who have somehow ceased to try because they once have failed. Some failure has brought them to the dust in humiliation and shame. The nerve of all their effort has been paralyzed, and it seems hardly worthwhile to try again.

But the Divine Potter, like Jeremiah’s potter, is not so easily discouraged. “He will not fail nor be discouraged” (Isa. 42:1).

“So he made it again another vessel.” And the second effort evidently resulted in a vessel that pleased the potter. “As seemed good to the potter to make it.”

It is true that all sin, error or mistakes must be considered a liability. And yet, such is the grace of God that when they are truly repented of; He may overrule them all for His glory. And the second vessel which the potter made seemed good to the potter.

Repentance Necessary

It must not be overlooked, however, that while potter’s clay is impassive and without feeling, human clay is not. In the case of a human life, the ability of the Divine Potter to remake the human vessel and to organize victory out of defeat, depends first of all upon a clear knowledge of the mistake, then a clear acknowledging of it and finally, a real repentance and correcting of it.

God said to Jeremiah, “O house of Israel, cannot I do with you as this potter? ... At what instant I shall speak concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up, and to pull down, and to destroy it if that nation... turn from their evil—I will repent of the evil that I thought to do unto them.”

This principle is just as valid in individual life. The moment we realize a mistake, and truly repent and correct it and make adjustment, that moment God reverses the trend of evil that would follow. The reversal of the evil trend is instantaneous. “At what instant,” God says. No matter what the mistake or failure may be, the moment you turn to God in penitence, correction and adjustment, that moment things will begin to change.

But the mistake must be recognized in particular. It is not enough to acknowledge mistakes in general. We must single out and define the mistake in so many words. We must face up on specific propositions. We must have a clear definition of our mistake in order to correct it and to get God’s forgiveness.

And the moment the correction is made, we must do as Paul did, we must place the whole thing in God’s hands and accept the forgiveness which He gives. From then on, it is no more our business, and we should forget it. When God forgives us, we must forgive ourselves. This is the pathway to victory over past mistakes and failures. “Forgetting those things which are behind...” (Phil. 3:13).