

Failure and success (Num. 11)

Part 1

Speaker	Ernest Pettman
Date	06.01.1963
Duration	00:49:59
Online version	https://www.audioteaching.org/en/sermons/ep001/failure-and-success-num-11

Note: This text is a computer generated transcript of the sermon. In some cases it may contain errors.

[00:00:00] This is a recording of the evening address given by Mr. Ernest Pettman at Wildfellow Hall, Catford, on Saturday, January the 5th, 1963, his subject, Failure and Success. Now I'm going to ask you to bear with me if I read five short scriptures. The first is in the Book of Numbers, Chapter 11. I want to read from verse 4.

Numbers 11, verse 4.

And the mixed multitude that was among them fell a-lusting.

And the children of Israel also wept again and said, Who shall give us flesh to eat?

[00:01:06] We remember the fish which we did eat in Egypt freely, the cucumbers and the melons and the leeks and the onions and the garlic. But now our soul is dried away, there is nothing at all beside this manna before our eyes.

Verse 10.

Then Moses heard the people weep throughout their families, every man in the door of his tent. And the anger of the Lord was kindled greatly. Moses also was displeased. And Moses said unto the Lord, Wherefore hast thou afflicted thy servant? Wherefore have I not found favour in thy sight that thou layest the burden of all this people upon me?

[00:02:11] Have I conceived all this people? Have I begotten them? That thou shouldst say unto me, Carry them in thy bosom as a nursing father, Bear the sucking child unto the land which thou swearest unto their fathers? Whence should I have flesh to give unto all this people? For they weep unto me, saying, Give us flesh that we may eat. I am not able to bear all this people, alone, because it is too heavy for me. And if thou deal'st with me, kill me, I pray thee, out of hand, if I have found favour in thy sight. [00:03:02] And let me not see my wretchedness.

And the Lord said unto Moses, Gather unto me seventy men of the elders of Israel, Whom thou knowest to be the elders of the people, and officers over them, And bring them unto the tabernacle of the congregation, that they may stand there with thee. And I will come down and talk with thee there, And I will take of the Spirit which is upon thee, and will put it upon them, And they shall bear the

burden of the people with thee, that thou bear it not thyself alone. And say thou unto the people, Sanctify yourselves against tomorrow, And ye shall eat flesh.

For ye have wept in the ears of the Lord, saying, Who shall give us flesh to eat? [00:04:06] For it was well with us in Egypt. Therefore the Lord will give you flesh, and ye shall eat. Ye shall not eat one day, nor two days, nor five days, Neither ten days, nor twenty days, but even a whole month, Until it come out of your nostrils, and it be loathsome unto you, Because that ye have despised the Lord which is among you, And have wept before him, saying, Why came we forth out of Egypt? And Moses said, The people among whom I am are six hundred thousand footmen, And thou hast said, I will give them flesh that they may eat a whole month. [00:05:02] Shall the flocks and the herds be slain for them, to suffice them? Or shall all the fish of the sea be gathered together for them, to suffice them? And the Lord said unto Moses, Is the Lord's hand waxed short?

Thou shalt see now whether my word shall come to pass unto thee or not. Now in the first book of Kings, chapter 19. 1 Kings 19 And Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and with all how he had slain all the prophets with the sword.

[00:06:13] Then Jezebel sent a messenger unto Elijah, saying, So let the gods do to me, and more also, If I make not thy life as the life of one of them by to-morrow about this time. And when he saw that, he arose and went for his life. He came to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah, and left his servant there. But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a juniper tree, And he requested for himself that he might die.

[00:07:01] And said, It is enough now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am not better than my fathers.

Now from there to the book of Jonah, the book of the prophet Jonah. Chapter 3, verse 10.

And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way, and God repented of the evil that he had said he would do unto them, and he did it not.

But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was very angry.

[00:08:09] And he prayed unto the Lord, and said, I pray thee, O Lord, was not this my saying when I was yet in my country? Therefore I fled before unto Tarshish, for I knew that thou art a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repentest thee of the evil. Therefore now, O Lord, take, I beseech thee, my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.

Now Matthew 11, verse 20.

[00:09:11] Then began Jesus to upbraid the cities wherein most of his mighty works were done, because they repented not.

Woe unto thee, Chorazin! Woe unto thee, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I say unto you, it shall be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon than to have judgment than for you. And thou, Capernaum, which art exalted unto heaven, shall be brought down to hell.

[00:10:10] For if the mighty works which have been done in thee had been done in Sodom, it would

have remained until this day. But I say unto you that it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment than for thee.

At that time Jesus answered and said, I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes. Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in thy sight. [00:11:02] Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me, for I am meek and lowly in heart, and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

And then lastly, in the first chapter of the Epistle to the Philippians, Philippians 1, verse 12.

But I would ye should understand, brethren, that the things which happened unto me have fallen out rather unto the furtherance of the gospel.

[00:12:03] So that my bonds in Christ are manifest in all the palace and in all other places. And many of the brethren in the Lord, waxing confident by my bonds, are much more bold to speak the word without fear. Some indeed preach Christ even of envy and strife, and some also of goodwill. The one preach Christ of contention, not sincerely supposing to add affliction to my bonds, but the other of love, knowing that I am set for the defence of the gospel. What then? Notwithstanding every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is preached. And I therein do rejoice, yea, and will rejoice.

For I know that this shall turn to my salvation through your prayer and the supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ. [00:13:08] According to my earnest expectation and my hope, that in nothing I shall be ashamed. But that with all boldness, as always, so now also, Christ shall be magnified in my body, whether it be by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.

But if I live in the flesh, this is the fruit of my labour, yet what I shall choose I want not. For I am in a straight betwixt two, having a desire to depart and to be with Christ, which is far better. Nevertheless, to abide in the flesh is more needful for you.

[00:14:03] And having this confidence, I know that I shall abide and continue with you all for your furtherance and joy of faith. That your rejoicing may be more abundant in Jesus Christ for me by my coming to you again. Those scriptures do indeed speak for themselves, and I hope God will bless the very reading of them to us. Now, I cannot think that any of you will have failed to see the connection between these scriptures that we have just read together.

[00:15:03] There are times when testimony for God in this world seems to prosper.

When those who take part in it find themselves borne along on a wave of success, and they are able to hold their heads high.

But there are other times when it seems to languish, when difficulties persist, when dangers threaten.

When the servants of the Lord find themselves face to face with unbelief and indifference, and the temptation is to despair.

[00:16:19] And it's a temptation that is well-nigh overwhelming.

How is a believing man to react to a situation of that kind?

The scriptures we have read give three examples from the Old Testament of worthy men who failed.

And then we have in Matthew the perfect example of the Lord Jesus Christ.

[00:17:10] And lastly in Philippians we have the words of triumph written by the Apostle Paul as he followed closely in his master's footsteps.

As I said a few moments ago, these scriptures just speak for themselves. And there isn't really a great deal that the lecturer needs to add. And yet I think we shall find it profitable just to go through them together. The trouble in the Eleventh of Numbers seems to have arisen because of the presence amongst the Israelites of the mixed multitude [00:18:18] who decided to throw in their lot with the people of God when Moses led them out of the land of Egypt.

These people became bored and disheartened by the problems of the wilderness, forgetting that their faces were toward the land that was flowing with milk and honey, [00:19:05] and despising the manner that God provided day by day until they reached the promised land.

They hankered after the things which they had left behind, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, the garlic.

Why did we ever come out of Egypt?

We had plenty to eat there, and here we are in this wilderness with nothing but this manner.

And the disaffection of that mixed multitude spread to the whole of Israel.

[00:20:13] They rose up as one man, and they demanded of Moses that they should be given flesh to eat.

Their murmuring, of course, was against God, and it was a very serious thing that they did to complain against the God who had delivered them from the land of their servitude.

But they complained also against Moses, who was God's representative and God's spokesman.

He saw and he heard the weeping of the people throughout their tents, [00:21:09] and he found it distasteful and displeasing to himself.

And so, in a spirit of self-pity, he dared to reproach the one who had called him to lead the people into Canaan.

Have I conceived all these people, he says? Have I forgotten them, that thou shouldst say unto me, Carry them in thy bosom as a nursing father, Beareth a sucking child unto the land which thou swearest unto their fathers? He protests that the whole task is too great for him. [00:22:04] And he goes so far as to seek death at God's hand, to deliver him from the wretchedness of the position in which he was.

Moses was, of course, occupied with the poverty of the contribution which he could make to the situation. He looked round and said, what can I do? Instead of considering, as he should have done, the resources of the living, the resources of the living God.

When God told him that he would give the people flesh to eat for a whole month, [00:23:07] Moses, of all people, Moses inquired, are we going to sacrifice, are we going to slay all the flocks, all that we've got? Is someone going to gather all the fish of the sea together to feed this multitude? Were those not sorry words to come from the lips of the man who had struck his rod over the Red Sea and it had divided?

Were they not poor words from one who had seen the miracle of the manna which God had provided day by day? And the one who had found water for the people out of the rock? [00:24:08] It was a moment of weakness and failure so far as Moses was concerned. There it was, Moses was overwhelmed by the greatness, the vastness of the need by which he was surrounded.

Now if you feel tempted to think poorly of Moses, take a look round yourself into this world where God has placed us.

Think of the vast multitudes without Christ.

Think of the need of people on every hand.

[00:25:06] Think of the crying need that there is amongst the people of God. Or you say, I can't do it, it's too great for me. Well, just consider that little place where God has put you, a little assembly where your lot is cast. And just try to think of the needs of those men and women with whom you meet week by week. You say, as you think of it, who is sufficient for these things?

Who can possibly supply the needs of the people that are around me? And God answered Moses and he said, Is the Lord's hand waxed short?

[00:26:12] Thou shalt see now whether my word shall come to pass unto thee or not.

You see, Moses failed because he underestimated the abundance of what God was able to provide.

Now turn to the case of Elijah.

Here was a second man who sought death at God's hand as an escape from the disaster which appeared to him to be overtaking the testimony of God.

[00:27:06] And Elijah's case is very much more striking because the incident of the juniper tree that we read follows immediately that wonderful demonstration of the true God on Mount Carmel.

When Elijah's witness to the true God was honored by the fire which fell from heaven and consumed his sacrifice. The people of Israel under a weak and a wicked king who had married an unscrupulous heathen woman had become so sunk in idolatry that God had to punish them with three and a half years of serious famine.

[00:28:07] And that was bad enough.

But God sent a way into obscurity where they couldn't find the man.

The one man, the one person whose prayers had brought the famine and the one man upon whose prayers the people would depend for the removal of the famine conditions.

God sent him into obscurity. God as it were withdrew his word and his witness and they couldn't find him anywhere. And then one day Elijah reappeared and there took place on Mount Carmel [00:29:07] that challenge, that contest as it were between the gods that they were worshipping and the true God in heaven.

And the false gods were exposed and the true God was vindicated.

And when the great day was over and Elijah prayed the rain came and brought relief and healing to the land.

It was a tremendous personal triumph for Elijah.

A wonderful vindication of his ministry. Surely the downward trend of spiritual life has come to an end now. [00:30:05] Surely things are going to be on the upgrade. The prophets of Baal have been slain by the hundred. The rain has come.

The rain has come.

Elijah is surely on the crest of the wave. And he goes into Jezreel running before the chariot of the king. But there was one in Jezreel who was determined that things should work out otherwise. She said within 24 hours when that wicked woman heard of what Elijah had done she said within 24 hours I'll have his blood. He shall be as one of those prophets that have been destroyed. [00:31:04] And that was a terrible threat from a terrible woman.

And when Elijah heard it he fled for his life.

He flung himself down under a juniper tree and he asked God to take his life. If the triumph of Mount Carmel was going to be nullified by the machinations of a wicked woman Elijah felt he would be better out of it altogether.

He would rather suffer death at God's hand than the humiliation of being slain at the behest of this awful woman.

[00:32:04] Now Elijah's mistake was that he failed to trust God for protection. He just couldn't face up to the possibility of being humiliated.

But was God incapable of protecting him? Could the God who had sent fire from heaven to devour the sacrifice, could he not send fire from heaven to devour all the enemies of Elijah? Who did Elijah really think this woman was that he should be so terrified of her? Would it not have been better for Elijah to have put his whole trust in the living God whose power had just been so strikingly demonstrated?

[00:33:12] In passing you'll find it interesting to remember that one who came centuries later in the spirit

and power of Elijah, his life was taken at the request of a wicked woman.

Rather an interesting thing. Now we come to the case of Jonah, a great prophet, although disobedient and self-centered. Jonah was a man who could not trust God to take care of his reputation.

[00:34:04] I don't think Moses cared about reputation at all. I think Elijah did, but he was prepared to trust God with it. But Jonah was a man who couldn't do that. You remember the story of Jonah? He was sent to proclaim judgment against Nineveh. And that was, I suppose, a very distasteful thing for an Israelite to have to do, to be a messenger of God to outside Gentiles. If the people of Nineveh were wicked, let them perish. So much the worse for them. Why should he be bothered? He belonged to the favored nation. Why bother about these Ninevites? [00:35:04] But you know, God has no room for snobbery. He cares about mankind everywhere. He cares for the whole human race. He gave his only beloved son for all men. He gave his only beloved son for all men. You remember how in contrast with this man Jonah, who didn't want to go to the Gentiles, the contrast of Paul, who was a great lover of his own nation, and yet he was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, but was prepared to become the apostle to the Gentiles. Well, we can't follow the story of Jonah right through. He had to learn that if he's God's servant, he must do God's will, and go where God wants him to go. [00:36:04] He tried to escape from an unpleasant duty, but he had to do it. And after the dark and the terrifying experience of being in the fish's belly, he was told a second time to go and preach against Nineveh. And this time he went, and so effective was his witness against the wickedness of that city, that the people repented, they called for a fast, the king removed his robe, sat in sackcloth and ashes, clothed himself in sackcloth and sat in ashes, and no one, no beast was allowed to eat or drink, as a mark of their repentance for their sins. And when God saw it, he did what he always does, [00:37:03] when people repent of their sins, he spared them. Them from the judgment they deserved. As the scripture says, he repented of him, of the evil which he thought to do to them. What a triumph for Jonah! What a wonderful thing to preach so effectively, that a whole city repents. Jonah, your name is made, your fame is certain.

How wonderful, that God's mercy, the thing that God loves to show, to think that God is able to show mercy to that nation. [00:38:04] Jonah, you've been the instrument, in bringing the people to their senses, in making them repent, so that God's mercy can flow out to them, as God loves to do. But Jonah was having none of it. He had none of it. It's almost difficult to believe that this could have happened, that Jonah complains against God. He did what some school boys do when they're bowled out at cricket, he threw down his bat and scuffed. And he dared to turn to God and say, I told you so. I knew you'd do that, he said. I know that you're a gracious God, [00:39:02] merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness. He said, I knew that, and I foresaw that this would happen. You've let me down. My name is discredited.

The thing that I said would happen hasn't happened at all. And in that sulky mood, Jonah asked that his life might be taken. He says, I can't stand it. I can't live with this. Oh, how careful we need to be about our moods, don't we? And finally, he could not trust God for his reputation. [00:40:04] Now we turn away from those three cases of failure to the wonderful example of the Lord Jesus. How that clock does go round, doesn't it? In the eleventh chapter of Matthew, the Lord Jesus had been reviewing the results of his ministry. From the very beginning there had been opposition, and now people were getting indifferent, and the Lord has to call for woes upon the cities wherein his mighty works had been done. Bethsaida, Chorazin, Capernaum, blessed as no other cities had ever been, they rejected his testimony. [00:41:03] Their hearts were filled with unbelief. Now the Lord says it will be

more tolerable in the day of judgment for Sodom than for those cities. What a terrible thing. The prince of preachers, as we say, the very son of God himself, faced with what was, to all human eyes, as far as the human eye could see, defeat and disaster. And what did he do? Ask that his life might be taken? At that time, notice the force of those words, at that time, Jesus said, I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes. No selfishness in his heart. [00:42:04] No word of reproach from the one who permitted such a thing to happen. But a willingness and a contentment with it, if that was the will of God. All that was wonderful. My friends, here is the perfect one. Here is the one who can stand up and take even defeat. What was apparently defeat. And who says, Oh God, if that's how it must be, then I'm content. I thank thee, if it be thy will. Friends, what do we know of this? Here was the effacement of self. Here was one in whom there was no selfish thought. No care for his own reputation. But the utter submission to the will of God. [00:43:03] And the readiness to accept whatever God permitted. And notice, too, that it's in that connection that those wonderful last verses of the eleventh of Matthew occur.

Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me, for I am meek and lowly in heart. And ye shall find rest unto yourselves. Unto yourselves. The perfect example.

And now finally we come to the case of the apostle Paul. A man of like passions with ourselves. Paul was a man who knew what it was to watch his life's work [00:44:01] crumble to pieces around him. The epistle to the Philippians was written when he was in prison. As the human eye saw things, it was a disaster. The leading exponent of the Christian faith to the Gentiles, a man who was free and willing to go anywhere and everywhere to spread the knowledge of Christ. The one who preached with power that has surely been unsurpassed since.

And he's in prison for two long years. Didn't that look like disaster? We know that God's providence overruled. Paul knew it to a certain extent. He says so in the first of Philippians. And we know looking back how wonderfully God overruled that [00:45:01] imprisonment so that the apostle Paul might write the letters which have been handed down to us and have been blessed to the people of God ever since. But as they must have seen it at the time, this was disaster. Paul in prison. Moses was overwhelmed by the weight of his responsibilities. And he sought relief in death. Paul's burden was no less. Appointed by the Lord a preacher of the gospel with the care of all the churches weighing heavily upon him day by day. Wasn't it a wonderful thing that he didn't succumb? That he didn't seek death as a relief? Here in Philippians 1 he recognizes that to die would be gain. But he doesn't ask to die. He says I'd love to depart [00:46:01] and be with Christ which is far better. But he said to abide is needful for you. And because it was needful for them.

Because this great hearted apostle was not selfish and didn't put the needs of his own wishes before the needs of others. He said I'm content to remain. All I need is to be amongst you and I believe I shall be given back to you. And you'll rejoice in the power of God. Wonderful triumph, wasn't it? And then compare Paul with Elijah. Elijah was threatened by Jezebel and he fled for his life. When Paul was on the way to Jerusalem they said to him don't go.

[00:47:02] They'll take you. They'll arrest you. They'll kill you. Don't go.

Paul said to them what mean you to weep and break my heart? He said I'm willing not only to suffer for the name of Jesus Christ. In one place where Paul is listing the dangers that beset him and had

beset him in his ministry he says in death's aft. In death's aft. And yet not once do we find him asking that God would take him and remove him from it all. And then Jonah what a contrast. The man who shrank from being discredited in the eyes of his fellow countrymen. [00:48:03] Up to a certain point Paul's ministry had succeeded marvelously. He'd gone from strength to strength. Think of his missionary journeys.

Think of his attitude of converts. Think of the assemblies that he had founded in the great cities of Greece in the great centres of population. But you see the tide turned. Life became almost one long continuous slap in the face for Paul. He had to say all Asia is turned away. My first hearing no one stood with me. No one.

Not one.

No one stood with me. Save the Lord. Did he ask that he might be removed by death?

[00:49:04] Listen.

But none of these things move me.

Neither count I my life dear unto myself so that I might finish my course with joy in the ministry which I have received of the Lord Jesus to testify the gospel of the grace of God. What a trial. What a man. The lessons I feel I needn't point out just meditate upon these scriptures and see what you can get for yourself. See what lesson you need for yourself from them.