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By all accounts, he'd blown it. Thrown his life away. His name is Antonio Reza. At age 19, Reza was arrested and charged with felony robbery for being the getaway driver for four armed robberies in San Francisco. For many people caught up in a hopeless downward spiral of crimes and jailtime, that would be the end of the story.

There are basically two ways to respond to failure. One is *"Falling Flat."* Falling flat means you make mistakes and fail, and then continue making those same mistakes and failures. You fall, and never get back up.

The other is *"failing forward."* Coined by leadership author, John C. Maxwell in his 2000 book of the same title, failing forward means acknowledging your mistakes and failures, and using them as stepping-stones towards success.

Antonio Reza was determined to fail forward. In fact, Reza told the police detective who arrested him, "*I messed up. But this won't be the end for me. This will be my low point.*" And he lived up to his word! Seven years after his conviction, Antonio Reza graduated as the Valedictorian of his class at the University of San Francisco. In Reza's words, "I turned my felonies into 4.0s."

When we left our hero Samson last Sunday, by all accounts, he'd blown it. Thrown his life away. He'd taken so many steps away from God that God left, and took Samson's miraculous physical strength with him. Samson was then easily captured by his enemies, the Philistines. Would Samson respond to his failure by falling flat? Or by failing forward?

How about you? Maybe you've never been arrested for felony robbery or lost miraculous strength because you fell away from God. But I can guarantee you've made mistakes and failures in your life, because everyone has. So the question is personal. How do you respond to your failures? Do you *Fall Flat, or Fail Forward?*

Last Sunday, we left on a cliffhanger. "But the hair on [Samson's] head began to grow again after it had been shaved." Samson was pretty helpless. God had taken his miraculous strength, the Philistines had taken his eyes and his freedom, and the formerly powerful servant of God, was now powerless to resist serving his enemy captors.

That led the Philistines to believe they were totally in control! But although Samson was the one without eyes, it was the Philistines that were blind to the truth. They threw their blowout bash to honor their god, saying, *"Our god has delivered Samson, our enemy into our hands."* They gave credit for capturing Samson to their stone, fish-god idol named Dagon. But it wasn't the strength of their handcrafted stone "god" that captured Samson. It was the true God, who took away Samson's strength, that delivered Samson into their hands. And as we'll see later, stone can't resist the power of the true God very well!

Filled with liquid courage from their celebration, and feeling courageous because of Samson's helplessness, the Philistines shouted, *"Bring out Samson to entertain us."* And what a sight he was. Samson, whose hands had killed so many, now needed a young boy to lead him by the hand.

But when you're blind and forced to repetitively grind grain all day long, you have plenty of time to reflect. It's easy to see that Samson did plenty of reflecting when we observe the seismic shift in his attitude. After asking the young boy to position him by the key foundational pillars of the temple, Samson prayed, *"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."*

The Bible only records one other time when Samson prayed to God, during the height of his strength. But even in that prayer to God, Samson exuded a sense of entitlement. But in this prayer...he's humble. After a lifetime of trusting in himself for his strength, Samson finally understood that his strength and power could only come from his gracious God.

That's why God allowed Samson to fail and fall like he did. God knew that if Samson continued walking away from him, eventually he'd fall away entirely, and be lost eternally.

Samson had to fall, so he'd stop trusting in himself, and start trusting in God. Samson had to fall, so he'd understand his need for repentance. Samson had to fall, so he'd learn from his sinful failures and use them as stepping-stones towards spiritual success! God didn't leave Samson because he'd given up on him. God left Samson because he refused to give up on him!

God wants the same thing for us when we fail and fall into sin. He wants us to see our need for repentance and forgiveness and turn to him. However, we don't always fail forward, do we? Sometimes, we fall...into a pattern. We sin, but instead of repenting, we continue in that sin, falling again and again, until we no longer see a need to repent. Like Samson's lustful weakness for women.

Sometimes, we fall...into despair. We fail and feel the guilt of our sin. But instead of leading us to repentance, and turning us to Christ for forgiveness, the guilt convinces us that God can never forgive us for such horrible sins. Instead of getting back up once we've fallen, despair keeps us down in the fetal position, convinced everything's hopeless. Like Judas, who committed suicide after betraying Jesus.

Samson could have fallen into either of those. But instead, God led him to fail forward, by falling...on God's mercy. Samson hadn't earned the right to make this request of God, but in repentance, he humbly trusted that God is gracious. He asked God to remember him, not as if God had forgotten him. Rather, Samson was asking God to take appropriate action on his behalf.

Humbly and repentantly throwing himself on God's mercy, Samson pleaded with God to remember the purpose he'd given him-- to deliver Israel from the Philistines--and give him the strength to carry it out one more time. The significance of Samson's hair growing back wasn't that his hair gave him power. That came from God. Rather, Samson's hair growing back meant he had another chance to keep the Nazarite vow he'd failed before. After a lifetime spent largely serving himself, Samson once again could serve God.

And with the last action of his life, trusting God for his strength, that's what Samson did. "Bracing himself against [the pillars on which the temple stood], 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."

For many, the pressing question is: Did Samson commit suicide here? Without understanding the purpose to which God had called Samson, we might think that. But God called Samson to defeat the enemies of his people, and through this action, that's exactly what Samson did. Samson didn't pull the temple down on himself because of unbelief, or because he was despairing of his life. For the first time in a long time, he was acting according to faith, carrying out the duty God had called him to. Like a firefighter rushing into a burning building to rescue those trapped inside, even if he's unsure he'll come back out, or a soldier jumping on a grenade to save his fellow soldiers, Samson pulled down the temple in order to deliver his people, and carry out the duty God called him to. And that's certainly what he did. Killing over 3,000 Philistines, including most of their rulers and leaders, Samson dealt a blow to the Philistines power they wouldn't quickly recover from.

Thus ends the life of Samson. This man, who so often served himself and failed to serve God with his life, ends his life faithfully serving God once more. Although Samson was flawed, sinful, and spiritually weak, Samson's name is included in Hebrews 11, often referred to as the Bible's "Hall of Faith," because Samson died in faith, because God led him to fail forward, repenting and trusting in God.

That's one of many reasons that God is so extraordinary. He doesn't give up on people. He constantly calls people who fall and fail, to fail forward. To turn to him in repentance, to fall on his mercy, and to trust that God can use even flawed, sinful, ordinary people like us to accomplish his extraordinary purposes!

All three of our readings today highlight God's extraordinary grace. Samson. Paul, the former blasphemer of God and persecutor of his people, by God's grace became the greatest gospel missionary, helping the gospel spread to all nations. Peter, who denied Jesus three times to save his own skin, gently restored and reinstated by Jesus to serve as one of the foremost leaders and Apostles of the Christian church. The fact that God would use such people to proclaim his good news says a lot more about God than it does about them!

Likewise, the value of Samson's life for us is not to marvel at how strong Samson was, but to marvel at how merciful and forgiving our God is. Samson's life reminds us that no matter how badly you've failed in serving God; no matter how great your sins might seem; no matter how flawed or broken you are, God doesn't give up on you or abandon you. No matter how much you've failed, God will still use you to carry out his purposes!

Because there was another who willingly sacrificed his life to carry out God's will and purpose for him. There was another who willingly died in order to crush our spiritual enemies. The reason we can fail forward, is because Jesus has already paid for every one of our failures with his perfect life and innocent death!

After graduating as valedictorian, Antonio Reza wanted to pursue law school. But the felony conviction on his record made taking the bar exam basically impossible. That is, until the same Detective who'd arrested him asked the prosecutor to expunge the case from Reza's record. The judge signed off on it. That meant Reza hadn't just failed forward, learning from his failures and mistakes, it was now as if they'd never happened.

The same is true for you, dear brothers and sisters in Christ. Because Jesus has expunged all your sins and failures, not only can you humbly and repentantly learn from your failures and fail forward, it's as if your failures never happened! May that be your confidence and motivation to serve God with your life, as our extraordinary God uses ordinary, weak sinners like us, to carry out his powerful work.