

Learning from King David's Mid-Life Failure

Charles was a highly respected pastor.¹ The church he planted many years ago has survived some hard times and is now flourishing. He is well respected in his denominational circles. He is a popular conference speaker and he has even published several articles and one book. His family seems exemplary. He has been happily married for twenty-five years and he and his wife have successfully raised their four children, the last of whom starts college next year. We were shocked last week when we heard that Charles had been caught in a pattern of adultery and deceit and had been removed from office. How could such a thing happen to a man who seemed to have it all together, who had successfully passed through the temptations of his younger years, who seemed to have everything a minister could want? Does this mean that his entire ministry had been a lie? Are the books, articles and tapes he produced worthless? Or did something happen to take a man who had been qualified and used of God and ruin him?

Stephen is a lay leader in his church. He has a lovely wife with whom he has enjoyed a close relationship. He has been very successful in his business. He is knowledgeable in the Scriptures, is involved in the life of the church, and is leading Bible studies discipling younger men. He has been close to his pastor for many years. Imagine his pastor's grief when Stephen's wife came for counsel complaining she has found evidence Stephen has returned to the excessive drinking of his pre-conversion days. Also, she has caught him viewing pornography on the internet. Most evenings he comes home from work and sits in front of the television. He doesn't interact with his children and he is very distant from his wife.

Modern people would say Charles and Stephen are exhibiting the classic symptoms of the "mid-life crisis".² Their experience is not, however, unique or particularly modern. What happened to Charles and Stephen is similar to what happened to King David in II Samuel 11-12. David seemed to have achieved his life's goals. He had been greatly used of God. He was truly a man after God's own heart. Yet in middle age, he fell into sin and brought disgrace upon himself and trouble to the people of God. Studying David's fall and restoration will give us insight as to how a man can fall into a mid-life crisis, the heart problems behind it, and how we can help the man who is struggling.

How does a godly man fail in mid-life?

Different phases of life present different challenges. Youthful lusts may give way to the dissatisfied boredom of mid-life. Both are equally dangerous.

A. No more worlds to conquer. David's fall in II Samuel 11 is alarming. His life's goals have, for the most part, been achieved. His domestic enemies have been vanquished and he is securely established on the throne as king over all Israel (II Sam. 1-4). The Philistines, Arameans, Moabites and Edomites have been subdued (II Sam. 8,10). The ark of the covenant has entered Jerusalem (II Sam. 6). He has multiple wives of beauty and at least one of character (Abigail). Yet David's success may have provided the circumstances which led to his great sin. Alexander the Great is said to have wept because there were no more worlds to conquer. It appears that David's most glorious victories were behind him.

B. Facing his limitations. After conquering the land, he sought to embark on one more grand project. He aspired to see the temple built in Jerusalem, but God revealed that this honor would go to his son (II Sam. 7:1-2,12-13). David's life had settled down to administering the kingdom he had established. There were no more great dreams to be realized in his lifetime.

¹ Charles and Stephen are fictional characters whose experience is a compilation of men known to me.

² Mid-life crisis is not a biblical term. It is used in popular literature to describe the experience, primarily of men between 35 and 50, who become dissatisfied with their lives. People in mid-life crisis can become depressed and often engage in impulsive and risky behavior.

C. Lethargy sets in. “Then it happened in the spring, at the time when kings go out to battle that David sent Joab and his servants with him and all Israel. But David stayed at Jerusalem” (II Sam. 11:1). Like many driven men, David appears to have functioned better in the midst of great challenges. Once his kingdom was established, he seemed to lose heart for his life’s work. The defeat of the sons of Ammon wouldn’t add much to his already illustrious record as a warrior. Perhaps David decided that he had already fought in his share of battles. Now he had underlings whom he could send in his place to fight his wars. As King, he could still receive the glory for the conquest without having to go to the field.

D. Idleness and boredom lead to temptation. David’s lack of attention to his calling put him in a situation in which he was vulnerable to the temptation which resulted in his wicked liaison with Bathsheba.

The pattern repeated today.

David’s mid-life failure continues to be repeated in the lives of many men today. Just as different phases of life present different challenges, circumstances of mid-life may affect men in various ways according to their personalities. Driven men who are leaders seem especially prone to stumble as David did.

A. They have achieved success in their life’s work. The pastor has spent his early adult life seeing his ministry established. He has completed his formal training. His own theology is settled and he has driven out the doctrinal Philistines. No more personal theological journeys or battles are anticipated. The followers of Saul who would have divided the church have been subdued. Perhaps he has seen the church through a building program.

In the same way a Christian businessman may have worked his way through school, landed the good job, and fought his way up the corporate ladder. At the same time he has enjoyed a successful marriage, raised his children, and been active in his church. He owns his home, has put his kids through college, and is saving towards retirement.

A Christian wife and mother may also be tempted. Twenty-five years ago she gave up her career in order to take care of her husband and children. Now her daughter is getting married and her son is going off to college.

There may be greater danger in times of peace and prosperity than in the midst of the battle. Spurgeon points out, *It is not easy to carry a full cup with a steady hand, and, smooth places are slippery places.*³

B. They have reached a plateau and dreams have died. From childhood life is seen as a sequence of ever increasing challenges and opportunities. One looks ahead to completing his education, establishing a career, marriage, and raising children. The horizons continue to broaden. He is always looking forward to the challenges of the next phase of life. As he gets older, for the first time the horizons begin to narrow. Perhaps for some men reality hits in their twenties when they realize their childhood dream of playing in a Super Bowl will never be realized. As he gets older, the limitations become more serious. He is a mid-level manager, but he will never be the president, or even the vice president of the company. Or as a minister, his church is of a certain size, but it has leveled off. He realizes he will probably never be the leader of a mega-church. Nor will he have a national radio ministry or publish a best-selling book. He also senses the beginning of a gradual physical decline. He can’t run as fast or lift as much weight. Those aches and pains don’t go away as quickly as in the past. Nor do the extra pounds he (and his once slim wife) seems to put on all too easily.

After sacrificing her best years to care for her family, the Christian woman may find that not only do her children, into whom she has poured out her life, not need her anymore, but also they aren’t living as she

³ Spurgeon, Charles Haddon. Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Volume 8. Pilgrim Publications, Pasadena, TX. Page 278

taught them. She and her husband have grown apart during these busy years of his career and her child rearing. Now she feels unneeded. What can she do with the rest of her life?

The seeming termination of the sequence of challenge and opportunity can come as quite a shock to a driven man. What is the next phase to which he can look forward? Is it retirement and then death? Furthermore, as he looks back, he has regrets. *Why didn't anyone tell me that my youth would pass by so quickly? Why didn't I realize how soon my children would be gone? Why didn't I make better choices in these crucial phases of life? Why didn't someone prepare me for this mid-life phase? I couldn't wait for each new challenge in life. One man said, I rushed through my twenties and thirties and then when I hit middle age and tried to put on the brakes, I discovered that the accelerator was stuck!*⁴

C. Boredom and laziness set in. Just as David could get Joab to fight Israel's battles, the seasoned pastor can meet people's expectations with much less effort. He can delegate much of his work to his assistants or to eager young interns. He can prepare an acceptable sermon in less time, or recycle an old message. Those engaged in vocational ministry have flexible working hours. A driven man can work 80 hours a week (sometimes to the detriment of his family). A lazy man can work very little and go undetected. At this stage of one's career his fellow leaders trust him and don't feel the need to check up on him (just as David's staying behind in Jerusalem when the battle raged probably went unchallenged). The distractions of surfing the net (where Bathsheba may be found) can even enable the pastor to give the appearance of working while he is really wasting time.

In the same way, the established businessman can meet his supervisor's (or his customer's) expectations in less time. He has learned how to delegate his work to his underlings. He is trusted by his superiors, and therefore is not held accountable for his time. The stay-at-home wife no longer has to drive to orchestra rehearsal, soccer practice and ballet. Watching the television, reading the newspapers, or shopping can fill her days.

D. He seeks sinful diversions. A man in mid-life may be able to put much of his life on autopilot and coast, but with the idleness and the resulting boredom will come temptation to sinful diversions such as immorality and covetousness (I Tim. 5:13). Calvin warns, *David did not carry out his duty. By thus sparing himself and staying in his house in order to be at his ease, he threw himself into the net of Satan.*⁵ Spurgeon reminds us that *idleness is the mother of mischief*, and that *David was safer in the midst of raging battles than inside his own palace when he was being lazy.*⁶

What are the spiritual causes of a mid-life failure?

Calvin says of David's fall, *Now here is a story which should make our hair stand straight up on end whenever we think of it - that a servant of God as excellent as David should fall into such a serious and enormous sin...*⁷

When a man of God falls, we all wonder how it could have happened. Jesus tells us sin proceeds from the heart (Mark 7:21-23). After being caught in his sin, David's prayer reveals the state of his heart, "Create in me a clean heart O God and renew a steadfast spirit within me... Restore to me the joy of Your salvation" (Psalm. 51:10,12). I don't believe David suddenly fell into this condition on the day he fell into sin with Bathsheba. Instead, the sin with Bathsheba was an expression of the sorry state into which his inner

⁴ I am unable to identify the source of this quote.

⁵ Calvin, John. Sermons on 2 Samuel. Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1992. Page 479

⁶ Spurgeon, Charles Haddon. Metropolitan Pulpit Volume 8. Pilgrim Publications, Pasadena, TX 1985. Page 278

⁷ Calvin, John. Sermons on 2 Samuel, Banner of Truth Trust, 1992. Page 476

spiritual life had already deteriorated. Inward spiritual deterioration leads to acts of sin (James 1:14-15). In II Samuel 12 the prophet Nathan gives explanation for David's fall.

A. Ingratitude. *Thus says the LORD God of Israel, 'It is I who anointed you king over Israel and it is I who delivered you from the hand of Saul. I also gave you your master's house and your master's wives into your care, and I gave you the house of Israel and Judah; and if that had been too little, I would have added to you many more things like these'* (II Samuel 12:7-8). Sin blinds us to the goodness of God. David had lost sight of the great blessings God had bestowed upon him. He was no longer mindful of and thankful for his elevation from being a shepherd boy to becoming the anointed of God. He seemed to have lost his sense of reverent amazement at his deliverance from Goliath, from Saul, and from the enemies of Israel. Perhaps he had forgotten the land was united by the power of God (not David). The joy he had experienced when the Ark of the Covenant entered Jerusalem (II Sam. 6:12-15) seems to have dissipated. Rather than being content with his own wives and property he coveted the wife of another man.

In the same way, the Christian leader can begin to take God's kindness for granted. Like David, he has been blessed immeasurably! He can lose sight of the wonder of Christ's amazing work of delivering him from slavery to the world, sin and death. He can take lightly the privilege of his calling to the ministry. He may no longer marvel at how God has used him to lead others to faith and to build up the church. Perhaps he has slipped into a mind set in which he takes much of the credit for the success of his ministry.

The businessman no longer "rejoices in the wife of his youth" (Pr. 5:18f), perhaps noticing she is no longer so young and attractive as other women around him. He tends to see his wealth and position as the fruit of his own labor. He is no longer filled with awe and wonder at God's goodness to him.

The homemaker forgets how God has blessed her by giving her a faithful husband, blessing their marriage with children, and providing so she could stay at home.

B. Undervaluing the things of God. *Why have you despised the Word of the LORD by doing evil in his sight?... Because you have despised Me and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife...* (II Sam. 12:9-10). Just as Esau was guilty of despising his birthright (Gen. 25:9), David was guilty of counting God Himself of little value. At the same time, David had counted his flesh of great value. He had exchanged the sweetness of pure fellowship with God for a few moments of pleasure. Then he sought to cover his guilt by bringing Uriah back from the battle. Uriah, in contrast, placed high value on the things of God, *The ark and Israel and Judah are staying in temporary shelters, and my lord Joab and the servants of my lord are camping in the open field. Shall I then go to my house to eat and to drink and to lie with my wife? By your life and the life of your soul, I will not do this thing* (II Samuel 11:11). David should have been pierced by Uriah's piety; instead he shows the folly and hardness of his sin by murdering this loyal servant of God. Like his predecessor Saul (see I Samuel 15:22,30), David seemed to no longer care what God thinks, so long as he could maintain his personal comfort and his status before men.

C. Idolatry. Isaiah 55:2 scolds, *Why do you spend money for what is not bread, and your wages for what does not satisfy?* David chose to spend himself on the bread of fleshly indulgence, rather than valuing the free wine and milk offered by the Lord (Isa. 55:1). He thought sinful pleasures could provide greater fulfillment than walking with God.

The onset of the mid-life crisis may reveal how a man's accomplishments have been motivated too much by a love for the world (or the human glory of achievement) and not enough by a love for God. In mid-life the old bread of the world starts losing its taste, so a man may be driven to overcome his boredom and dissatisfaction by pursuing worldliness in new ways. His response to these difficulties exposes how weak his trust in God really is, and how far away he is planted from the satisfying rivers of His grace (Jer. 17:5-8).

Perhaps when David's greatest victories (and the accompanying adulation of the people) were behind him, his motivation for battle dried up. In the same way, the man who has made an idol out of sexual pleasure

will be severely tempted when the flower of his wife's beauty begins to fade and his own virility is waning. He will seek out lustful diversions, not because of raging hormones (II Tim. 2:22), but rather because he is desperately trying to recapture the passion of his youth. Others may try to use material possessions to fill the void, hoping that their toys (i.e. the red convertible) will satisfy them. Others try to recapture their youth with a new wardrobe, an intense fitness program, or even plastic surgery. Many eat or drink too much as they try to overcome their spiritual emptiness. Some may try to recapture a dream of their youth. One successful businessman tried to turn back the clock by spending thousands of dollars buying musical instruments and building a recording studio.

The man in a mid-life crisis needs to realize his problem is not that the world is passing him by, but rather that he is not valuing God and finding fulfillment in Him. People still turn to idols seeking the satisfaction only God can provide.

How can you help counselees to overcome (or avoid) mid-life failure?

Teach them these principles from Scripture.

A. Be on your guard. Paul tells the Ephesian elders, *Be on guard for yourselves* (Acts 20:28). He also tells Timothy, "*Pay close attention to yourself...*" (I Tim. 4:16). The Proverb reminds us, *Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life* (Prov. 4:23).

1. Don't think it can't happen to you. *Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed that he does not fall* (I Cor. 10:12). The scriptural examples of David, Noah, and others; along with men of God in recent years who have fallen should serve as a warning to all of us. It is possible for a person to have a true walk with God (David was a man after God's own heart), to be used of God, and yet to fall.⁸ Perhaps Christian leaders are most vulnerable because they may think they are so spiritual that they are beyond such sins. Beware that Satan will never stop trying to destroy you (I Pet. 5:8).

2. Neglect of the small things can lead to a big disaster. Just as a newly conceived life in the womb is tiny, sin which is conceived in the heart can seem very small (James 1:15). The neglect of private Bible reading to feed one's own soul or a loss of fervency in private prayer will long be unnoticed by others. Lowered personal standards for the use of the television or the internet, or indulging private lusts and fantasies can seem harmless. A man may become slack in his work habits with no visible impact on the results of his job or ministry performance. Sooner or later the embryonic lust will give birth to sin which has deadly consequences. Small sins must be aborted in the womb of the heart before they grow to full term.

3. It is possible for a spiritual leader to carry on his official duties with apparent success while harboring secret sin. David continued to function as king and as judge (II Sam. 12:1-5). He probably continued to participate in the external rituals of worship (lest he be suspected). I never cease to be amazed at how fallen pastors can continue to preach the Word of God, give counsel, and administer the church until they are caught. An experienced man may be able to fool the people in his church, his spouse, and perhaps even himself. The ability to go through the motions of ministry reflects a frightening hardness of heart.

4. Remember the consequences of your fall. Even though David was forgiven by God, he paid a steep price for his wickedness (II Sam. 12:10-15). Men who stray fail to count the cost to their wives, their children, their personal reputations and to the Name of Christ.⁹ It may take many years for a church to recover from the betrayal of an unfaithful shepherd. His family may never recover. The man who falls into immorality is like a stupid ox going to the slaughter (Pr. 7:22). He doesn't realize the calamity he is bringing upon himself and others.

⁸ The fact that a man has fallen does not invalidate his past ministry. We don't remove David's early Psalms from the Canon because they were written by a man who later committed murder and adultery. In the same way the work of a man who has badly stumbled is not necessarily invalidated. This does not, however, change the fact that he is no longer qualified for office (See I Tim. 3:1f).

⁹ Perhaps the sternest indictment of David was that his actions had given the enemies of the LORD occasion to blaspheme (II Sam. 12:14).

B. Seek help. Don't wait for Nathan to appear on your doorstep.

1. Make yourself accountable. Be open with your wife and with your fellow church leaders about the state of your soul. Pray with them. Invite them to ask you the hard questions about your contentment, your zeal, your use of your time, etc.

2. If you are living a lie, come clean. One thing that grieves me about Christian leaders who have fallen into sin is that they seem to only confess after they are caught. The cost of exposing themselves seems to be too great. They fool themselves into thinking they can free themselves from bondage and then go on as if it had never happened. When David kept silent about his sin he was miserable (Ps. 32:3-4). When he confessed his sin, God forgave him (Ps. 32:1-2,5). Though David despised God, God does not despise a broken and contrite heart (Ps. 51:17). It is better to face your sin, even with its consequences, and be right with God than to live a lie.

C. Remain faithful to your present call.

1. Continue to cultivate the gifts and opportunities God has given you. Paul encouraged Timothy to "kindle afresh the gift of God which is in you" (II Tim. 1:6). The fire which remains unkindled will go out. Continue to make a study of ministry: preaching, counseling, and shepherding God's flock. Learn new and better ways you can serve the Lord.

2. Pursue every phase of your life as a vocation from God. *Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord, not men* (Co. 3:23). If it is conquering nations, do it as unto the Lord. If it is establishing new churches which grow to thousands in attendance, do it to the glory of God. But if God has called you to something less exciting, be satisfied with the place God has given you and do it with all of your heart. If it was David's calling in the last half of his life to faithfully administer the land, he should have done it with the same faithfulness and zeal by which he conquered it. If it is God's call for you to be a faithful pastor of a small flock, without receiving human recognition, then do it with all of your heart. If your career has reached its plateau, then serve God in that job with all of your strength. If you need to find a new vocation, pursue it heartily.

3. Make good use of the time God has given you. He is not done with you yet. He has allotted you a fixed amount of time on this earth to serve him. Every hour should be carefully used for His glory. "*So teach us to number our days, that we may present to You a heart of wisdom*" (Psalm 90:12). He has kept you here for a reason. You may have many more years of fruitful labor ahead of you. Even though our culture worships youth, Scripture honors the wisdom of those with age and experience (Pr. 20:29). Pray God will continue to favor your life's labor and establish the works of your hands (Ps. 90:17).

4. Be determined to finish well. David wanted to quit before the warfare had ended. In contrast, the Apostle Paul expressed a passionate desire to complete his race without being disqualified (I Cor. 9:27 II Tim. 4:6-8). As you see others stumble into immorality, greed, or simply losing heart, pray God will give you the endurance to run with all of your heart until the end, without falling.

D. Find your joy in the LORD.

1. Put off the false hope of satisfaction or bliss from earthly things (Isa. 55:2). Like Solomon in Ecclesiastes, you will discover worldly pleasures and treasures are vain. If your hope is not heavenly, you will be bored, for there truly is nothing new under the sun. Deal honestly with your idols. Destroy them before they destroy you.

2. Cultivate a living relationship with God. Feed upon Christ as the bread of life (John 6:51). Be satisfied with the wine and milk which God offers without money and without cost (Isa. 55:1). Be alert to any pharasaical formalism in your personal devotional life.

3. Be thankful for God's past faithfulness to you (I Thess. 5:18). David had forgotten all of the wonderful things God had done for him. We should follow the pattern of some of the Psalms by continually reminding ourselves of all of the great things God has done in our lives. He has always met our material needs. He has blessed us in our homes and in our churches. His past faithfulness, in the earlier phases of our lives, is the basis for our confidence in the future.

4. Learn the secret of being content in the present (Phil. 4:11f). Remember God's sovereignty. He has given you what is best: your wife, your children, your ministry, your money, your health, your friends, etc.

5. Keep a redemptive focus. Your value and significance are based upon the work of Christ, not your earthly achievements. Find your delight and identity in what Christ has done for you.

6. Live in light of the future (I John 3:2-3 II Pet. 3:11 II Cor. 4:17-18). If age 40 were truly mid-life, it would be a crisis. If the only phases of life to look forward to were retirement and death, you would have cause for alarm. The believer always has a hope beyond earthly dreams of marriage, children, and vocational success. One day we will be with Christ and we will be like Him. The years we spend here are to be spent in light of the eternity we will enjoy in His presence.

7. Your legacy is in heaven. If the Lord tarries, you almost certainly will be forgotten after two generations pass (Ecc. 2:16). Earthly treasures and reputations are fading. Store up treasure in heaven which is secure and eternal! (Mt. 6:19-21).