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Success, Ambition and Accomplishment—the Biblical Perspective

The serious Christian living in this fallen world will find himself constantly challenged by the world's values and ways. Many issues of life will confront him. To walk faithfully before God, he has to learn to respond to the various issues of life from the perspective of God's eternal kingdom. This is especially important because of the pervasive negative influence of the spirit of the world, which has seriously distorted God's values.

In the last three messages of this book, we will reflect on one major issue that confronts all of us—the issue of success, ambition and accomplishment. We will consider this issue from the biblical perspective. As we do so, let us learn how we can likewise ponder over other issues in life, and how we can respond to them in a wholesome manner¹.

The world associates a successful life with material wealth, status, recognition, fame and power. All over the world, people are intent on achieving success in life. They invest much time and energy pursuing worldly success, ambition and accomplishment. For many, seeking worldly success is what life is all about. But how does the Lord look at such issues?

Should a Christian aim for a successful and prosperous life?

This may seem a strange question to ask. Some Christians may recoil at its mere mention because they tend to associate terms like "ambition", "prosperous" and "successful" with worldliness.

Indeed, Christians should beware of the teaching that if you are doing well as a Christian, you will have earthly wealth and prosperity. Sadly, this unwholesome teaching has made inroads into many Christian circles and we do well to avoid being enticed by it. Yet, we should not then think that the area of success, ambition and accomplishment has no place in the life of a true disciple of the Lord.

Properly understood, this area has a very important place in the lives of believers and ought to be encouraged and emphasised. What is needful is to distinguish between true success and worldly success and to examine the motivation behind the pursuit of

¹ Messages AR140-165 on the website www.godandtruth.com address other issues of life and explain in greater detail the meaning of being truly strong and truly rich, the meaning of true greatness and true dignity, and how we should understand the subject of sorrow and pain, peace and joy.

success. Is it for personal gain and glory or is it for the glory of God and the advancement of His kingdom? The critical issue is: Are we seeking worldly success and prosperity or success and prosperity in God's kingdom?

Our Goal—success and accomplishment in the kingdom of God

We should seek true success because it glorifies God. Indeed, attaining true success and accomplishment is at the heart of biblical revelation and exhortations, both in the Old and the New Testaments, and should be the goal of every Christian.

The success and accomplishment that the people of the world seek are temporal and have no eternal value. But true success and accomplishment have eternal worth. Why then do Christians not pursue true success and accomplishment with the same zeal and passion as non-Christians pursuing their earthly goals? Indeed, believers ought to be even more highly motivated to succeed and prosper in God's kingdom. Instead, many are lukewarm and complacent in this area.

The lives of God's faithful servants such as Moses, Daniel and Paul exemplify this motivation to succeed in God's kingdom. And the life and ministry of the Lord Jesus exemplify it perfectly.

The Lord Jesus: A perfectly successful life

The Lord Jesus lived a perfect life—one of success and accomplishment every step of the way. When He uttered on the cross, "It is finished", He declared that He had accomplished all that God the Father wanted Him to. Although not everyone responded positively to Him and to His ministry, He was successful in that He did His part perfectly. He lived out the perfect will of the Father.

It is not obvious that the Lord Jesus lived a successful life on earth. He was born of poor parents. He did not amass earthly possessions and had neither earthly power nor status. He had to endure humiliating treatment by sinful men and was put to death in a most excruciating manner—death on a cross. Hanging there on the cross, apparently lonely, helpless and without obvious accomplishments, His life must have appeared to be a total failure in the eyes of the onlookers. But in reality, throughout His life and ministry on earth, climaxing in His death on the cross, He was laying the groundwork and foundation for the kingdom of God.

Even while He was being afflicted and crucified, the Lord Jesus was prospering. In Isaiah 52:13, it was prophesied of the Lord: "Behold, My servant will prosper, He will be high and lifted up and greatly exalted."

Even as He was lifted up physically on the cross, He was also being "lifted up" in the spiritual sense. The lonely, agonising death on the cross was in reality a demonstration and an accomplishment of supreme power, glory and triumph in the spiritual realm (Col. 2:15).

Indeed, His death on the cross made it possible for mankind to attain full salvation. His death opens the way for us to be forgiven of our sins and to be reconciled to God, be born of the Spirit and enter God's kingdom, and experience a life of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. We no longer have to be in bondage to sin and to the powers of darkness. We can live a life of triumph and victory if we exercise true faith on the basis of the Cross.

The Cross is the ultimate expression of love. It is the supreme example of faithfulness and obedience to the will of God the Father. These are crucial issues in the establishment and advancement of God's kingdom.

The Lord Jesus lived out God's will perfectly. God is likewise concerned with whether we seek to live out His perfect will for our lives. This is what we must concentrate upon: How He assesses us during our earthly journey, and how He is going to assess us when we face Him in eternity. Have we accomplished what He desires of us, or have we been complacent and indifferent about it?

The kind of accomplishment that glorifies God

What kind of accomplishment glorifies God the Father? Certainly, it is not the fleshly achievements that the people of the world and many Christians glory in. The accomplishment that glorifies God is best seen in the life of the Lord Jesus. He fulfilled the perfect will of the Father when He walked on this earth. In His prayer to the Father, the Lord Jesus said:

John 17:4

"I glorified You on the earth, having accomplished the work which You have given Me to do.

Fulfilling the Father's will was of utmost importance to the Lord Jesus. Fulfilling the Father's will is true accomplishment. It glorifies God.

Likewise, we should wholeheartedly and earnestly work towards accomplishing what God desires of our lives. We can never pursue this too earnestly. Our failure has been a lack of zeal, earnestness and perseverance in this direction. To the degree we have done His will, to that degree we glorify God and succeed in life.

Scriptural encouragement to live a successful life

Both the Old Testament and the New Testament encourage us to live a successful life and show us the way to attain it. Joshua 1:1-9 highlights this and also shows us the conditions for success.

Joshua 1:1-5

1 Now it came about after the death of Moses the servant of the Lord, that the Lord spoke to Joshua the son of Nun, Moses' servant, saying,

2 "Moses My servant is dead; now therefore arise, cross this Jordan, you and all this people, to the land which I am giving to them, to the sons of Israel.

3 "Every place on which the sole of your foot treads, I have given it to you, just as I spoke to Moses.

4 "From the wilderness and this Lebanon, even as far as the great river, the river Euphrates, all the land of the Hittites, and as far as the Great Sea toward the setting of the sun will be your territory.

5 "No man will be able to stand before you all the days of your life. Just as I have been with Moses, I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you.

It was a momentous occasion. Moses was dead and the Lord was speaking to Joshua whom He had earlier commissioned and appointed leader over Israel (Deut. 31:23; Num. 27:15-23). Joshua's role and responsibilities were significant. They involved the exercise of authority and leadership responsibility pertaining to God's work and the fulfilment of God's purposes.

The Lord assured Joshua that He would be with him to help him (v. 5). He further encouraged Joshua:

Joshua 1:6-7

6 "Be strong and courageous, for you shall give this people possession of the land which I swore to their fathers to give them.

7 "Only be strong and very courageous; be careful to do according to all the law which Moses My servant commanded you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, so that you may have success wherever you go.

The Lord wanted Joshua to be consistently successful and He explained to Joshua the way to true success. "Do not turn from it to the right or to the left", the Lord said to him in verse 7. Joshua was not to deviate from the path of obedience. He was not to act according to his own ways or desires, but "according to all the law", that is, God's revelations, teachings and instructions.

Joshua 1:8

"This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have success.

God wanted Joshua to be "prosperous" and to have "success". He told Joshua how this could come about. The book of the law was not to depart from his mouth. He was to meditate on it "day and night" so that he would "be careful to do according to all that is written in it".

Joshua was to meditate on the whole of God's revelation, not just selected portions here and there. He was to assimilate the truth into his life such that his whole life would manifest the true intent of God's instructions. This would help him draw near to God and deepen in his knowledge of God and fellowship with Him. His character, perspective and way of life were to be moulded by the instructions and ways of the Lord.

Likewise, God wants us to be obedient to Him and to His instructions in the Scriptures. He wants us to study, understand and absorb into our lives all that He has revealed to us. If we are faithful in following the true meaning and spirit of His teachings and instructions, He will also make our way prosperous, and we will have success.

Joshua 1:9

“Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous! Do not tremble or be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.”

The principles reflected in these words to Joshua are applicable to us. God wants us to be strong and courageous. We need not be fearful or be dismayed when we encounter trials, sufferings, temptations and pressures. *If* our hearts are set to do God's will, He *will* be with us wherever we are.

The whole of the Scriptures is intended to help us attain to spiritual maturity, contribute to the advancement of God's kingdom and succeed in life.

In the Sermon on the Mount, the Lord Jesus highlights the moral and spiritual qualities that are necessary for a life of blessedness. When we have such qualities in our lives and the right attitude and spirit, the Lord will be with us in a favourable sense. We will then be assured of success. When we are poor in spirit and learn to mourn, when we hunger and thirst after righteousness, when our hearts are pure, we will be able to grow well and contribute to God's kingdom.

We should seek, personally and together as God's people, to achieve as much as we can according to God's guidance and enabling and the principles He has revealed.

In this way, God will be truly pleased with our lives and we will attain a life of true blessedness. This is the biblical meaning of a prosperous and successful life, and it ought to be the goal and earnest desire of all true disciples of the Lord.

A truly successful life is not always obvious

However, a truly successful life may not always be obvious or easily recognised by others, especially by non-Christians. Christians, and even the person himself who has attained to such a life, may also not appreciate what is taking place. You may wonder how this can be so. Let us consider the example of Joseph.

Joseph

Genesis 37 and 39 record a period in Joseph's life when he suffered terrible ordeals. Out of jealousy, his brothers sold him to Midianite traders, who in turn brought him to Egypt and sold him to Potiphar, the captain of Pharaoh's bodyguard. As a slave in Potiphar's household, Joseph was put in charge of everything his master owned. One day, his master's wife tried to seduce him. She persisted over a period of time, but Joseph steadfastly rejected her advances. Being rebuffed, Potiphar's wife falsely accused Joseph of sexual assault. On hearing his wife's account, Potiphar became very angry and had Joseph imprisoned.

From the world's viewpoint, Joseph did not appear successful during this period of his life. His own brothers sold him and he served as a slave in a foreign land. Not only that, he was falsely accused and unjustly imprisoned. How could he possibly be considered successful? Even Christians would have difficulty recognising a person going through such times as successful or prospering. And it would not be surprising if Joseph did not see himself as successful and prospering during this period of his life.

Yet Genesis 39:2-3, 23 pronounce Joseph successful and prosperous.

Genesis 39:2-3

2 The Lord was with Joseph, so he became a successful man. And he was in the house of his master, the Egyptian.

3 Now his master saw that the Lord was with him and how the Lord caused all that he did to prosper in his hand.

Genesis 39:23

The chief jailer did not supervise anything under Joseph's charge because the Lord was with him; and whatever he did, the Lord made to prosper.

It is remarkable that this pronouncement on Joseph being successful and prosperous refers to the period when Joseph was a slave in a foreign land, and when he was subsequently falsely accused and unjustly imprisoned (the margin of the NASB indicates "successful" in verse 2 can also be translated "prosperous").

Verses 2-3 and verse 23 tell us that Joseph was successful because God was with him and caused all that he did to prosper. This is the key factor. God was pleased with Joseph, and He therefore enabled and undertook for Joseph in what he was going through.

So long as Joseph was faithful to God, his life would not be lived in vain, even if it appeared to others a pitiable life. There would be spiritual health, positive growth and development. His life would be a positive testimony for God in the spiritual realm, and there would be contribution to God's kingdom. This remained true regardless of the outward circumstances.

To those seeking to be faithful to God, the story of Joseph offers strong encouragement. It can help us to view life and go through our own trials and difficulties with the right perspective: *Whatever the circumstances, whatever the opposition from the powers of darkness or from man, the Lord can and will make us prosper if we are faithful to Him. We will fare well from the perspective of God's kingdom.*

The apostle Paul

The apostle Paul is an outstanding example of one who lived a successful life and he accomplished much for God. But the descriptions of his life in various passages of the Scriptures are not what would generally be associated with a life of success.

In 2 Corinthians 6:3-10, Paul testified about the difficulties he went through in the course of serving the Lord.

2 Corinthians 6:3-5

3 giving no cause for offense in anything, so that the ministry will not be discredited,
4 but in everything commending ourselves as servants of God, in much endurance, in afflictions, in hardships, in distresses,
5 in beatings, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in sleeplessness, in hunger,

In this passage, Paul reveals much about his attitude, perspective and approach in life. It is intended to instruct us on how we too ought to live our lives. He explained how he sought to live a blameless life as God's servant in the midst of various trials and difficulties.

Paul had to endure afflictions, hardships, distresses, beatings, imprisonments, tumults, labours, sleeplessness and hunger (vs. 4-5) in the context of a faithful and effective ministry. It was a life God approved of. He was indeed prospering, but not in a way the world could recognise.

While many Christians would find it difficult to associate such experiences with a prosperous and successful life, Paul's testimony illustrates the reality that going through difficulties and hardships is an integral part of the life of a successful servant of God.

Verses 6 and 7 reveal the critical aspect of the moral and spiritual dimension in a life of true success and prosperity.

2 Corinthians 6:6-7

6 in purity, in knowledge, in patience, in kindness, in the Holy Spirit, in genuine love,

7 in the word of truth, in the power of God; by the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and the left,

The expression “in the Holy Spirit” in verse 6 tells us that Paul lived according to the guidance and enabling of the Holy Spirit. In the original Greek text, there is no distinction between what is in upper-case letters and what is in lower-case letters. It is therefore possible to also translate “in the Holy Spirit” as “in the holy spirit”. It would then mean “in the spirit of holiness”. So “in the Holy Spirit” could mean “according to the guidance and teaching of the Holy Spirit” or “in the spirit of holiness”. Both meanings are possible. The second rendering is also consistent with the context. Paul is here referring to moral qualities like purity, patience, kindness and love. These have to do with what is in the heart and spirit of the person—in this case, Paul himself.

Such moral qualities are indispensable in a life of true success and prosperity. It is also important to have the right approach—“in the word of truth, in the power of God”—and to be properly equipped with “the weapons of righteousness”. The effective soldier of God’s kingdom wields weapons of righteousness like love, patience, kindness and truth, unlike the weapons used by the world, which are the fleshly and aggressive kind.

In verses 8 to 10, Paul describes the varied and contrasting facets of the successful and effective Christian life.

2 Corinthians 6:8-10

8 by glory and dishonor, by evil report and good report; regarded as deceivers and yet true;

9 as unknown yet well-known, as dying yet behold, we live; as punished yet not put to death,

10 as sorrowful yet always rejoicing, as poor yet making many rich, as having nothing yet possessing all things.

Here he draws a contrast between how he and his co-workers would appear before the world and how they are in reality and in the eyes of God. He emphasises what true spiritual riches are in contrast to worldly riches.

“by glory and dishonor”

In his service, Paul was sometimes treated with honour and sometimes with dishonour. How he was treated was not critical to Paul; his primary concern was to be faithful to the Lord.

“by evil report and good report”

Sometimes he received a good report, and sometimes a bad report. But it did not matter to Paul; his concentration was on how the Lord viewed his life and service, and he knew the Lord was pleased with him.

"regarded as deceivers and yet true"

Though he was regarded as a deceiver by some, he was in reality true to God and lived a life of truth.

"as unknown yet well-known"

He was regarded as unknown, yet he was well-known. In this world, he might be regarded as an unknown, but in God's kingdom, he had stature and distinction.

"as dying yet behold, we live"

His outer man went through much bodily afflictions and he would be seen as dying, but in reality he was living the true spiritual life, a life of fullness and abundance.

"as sorrowful yet always rejoicing"

He might have appeared sorrowful to other people, but he always had the joy of the Lord.

"as poor yet making many rich"

He had little material possessions, yet he could make many rich from the perspective of God's kingdom.

"as having nothing yet possessing all things"

He appeared deprived in the eyes of the world, yet he was spiritually rich and had an abundance of true and lasting possessions. Though "having nothing", he was in reality "possessing all things". "Possessing all things" can also be viewed from the angle that we can have access to all things, as if we possess all things. Nothing can prevent us from having what the Lord wants us to have, and from using them as He desires us to.

God has revealed to us the way to true success and accomplishment in His kingdom. When we abide by His instructions, when we walk in truth, we will attain to it. This is true however man may regard us and even when the outward appearance suggests otherwise.

The way to true success and accomplishment

As disciples of the Lord, we must be deeply motivated to strive for true success and accomplishment. But how should we go about it?

The way of the world is the way of the flesh; it is characterised by a life of self-seeking, personal ambitions and desire for worldly success and achievements. The

way of the kingdom of God is the opposite. To truly succeed in God's kingdom, we have to give up *all* fleshly ambitions and desire for worldly success and accomplishment. To the degree we fail to give them up, to that degree we will fail to achieve true success.

The way to true success and accomplishment is perfectly exemplified in the life of the Lord Jesus Christ. It involves living according to the principle of "the grain of wheat must die", which the Lord Jesus Himself taught in John 12:24.

John 12:24

"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.

By prefacing His statement with the words, "Truly, truly, I say to you", the Lord Jesus emphasised the significance of what He was about to communicate. The context was His impending death on the cross, which He referred to in verse 23: "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified."

Bearing much fruit in verse 24—true fruit in the kingdom of God—refers to a life of success and accomplishment. How does it come about? Verse 25 (read with verse 24) provides the answer.

John 12:25

"He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it to life eternal.

If the grain of wheat refuses to die, it will not bear fruit. Likewise, if we cling to our lives and refuse to follow the principle of death, we will not be able to succeed.

We have to say "no" to all our selfish, personal and worldly desires. We have to concentrate on living only for God and what is pleasing to Him. That was the principle that the Lord Jesus lived by throughout His life (John 8:29), and this manner of living climaxed at the Cross.

Having only one ambition—to be pleasing to Him

We should have only one basic ambition—to be pleasing to the Lord. That was the secret of Paul's success. In this respect, he was following the example of the Lord Jesus—to be pleasing to God *whatever it may involve*.

2 Corinthians 5:9

Therefore we also have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him.

Whether he dies and is with the Lord, or he lives on in this world, Paul seeks always, then and through eternity, to be pleasing to the Lord.

Philippians 1:20-21

20 ... with all boldness, Christ will even now, as always, be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.

21 For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.

Paul's goal in life was to exalt the Lord at all times, whether by life or by death. The Cross and its implications for mankind were upon his heart. He wanted to do what the Lord had entrusted to him, to follow all His instructions and to do so in the power of God.

Is it really your ambition to be pleasing to God? Affirming it is easy, but do we understand its meaning and implications? Are we ready for the cost of discipleship, whatever it may involve, whatever the pain, whatever the cost? We must seek to accurately and wholesomely understand His will, His instructions and revelations, and seek to live by them. There must be a serious commitment to be pleasing to Him.

Concluding remarks

The people of the world are gripped by the desire for worldly success and prosperity. As Christians, we should be wary of this and not be enticed by this desire.

Yet the Scriptures does speak of success and prosperity for God's people. There is a legitimate place for success, ambition and accomplishment in the life of true believers. It should, however, be achieved in God's way, according to His desire, and by His guidance. A primary goal of the instructions and exhortations in the Scriptures is for us to succeed in our lives. We must not neglect this area of doing well in God's kingdom. Instead, we should encourage and emphasise success and faring well from the biblical perspective.

The Lord Jesus is the perfect example of a life of success and accomplishment. He glorified God the Father while He was on earth by accomplishing the work God gave Him to do. Likewise, we must also strive to succeed in life and glorify the Lord by being faithful to Him and accomplishing all that He requires of us. It is imperative that we have the moral and spiritual qualities of heart and spirit to be able to walk the path of faithfulness and experience the life of blessedness and fruitfulness.

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. Should a Christian aim to live a successful life? What can we learn about living a successful life from the example of the Lord Jesus and the words of the Lord to Joshua?

2. Is a truly successful life always obvious? What can we learn from the biblical examples of Joseph and the apostle Paul?
3. What is the way to true success and accomplishment? What can we learn from the perfect example of the Lord Jesus?

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