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True Success—the Way to Attain it and its Different Manifestations

In the previous message, we considered an area that preoccupies the hearts and minds of the people of the world — the issue of success, ambition and accomplishment. This area is very important and has a proper place in the lives of believers. For the people of the world, this is often associated with wealth, status and recognition in society. However, as believers, we must understand and approach this area from the perspective, values and principles of God's kingdom.

In this message, we will continue to reflect on this subject, particularly from the angle of attaining true success and the different manifestations of true success.

Worldly approaches to success

Believers are constantly confronted with worldly ideas and concepts. There is a very strong influence and, often, subtle pressure in the direction of worldly success.

Many books have been written, and many courses conducted, to help people succeed in life, but they are mostly from the worldly perspective. They provide instructions, suggesting ways and means on how to be successful in career and in business, how to be wealthy, and how to make a mark in this world.

Some of the ways in which the world pursues success and prosperity are obviously wrong. For example, dishonest or unscrupulous means of achieving personal goals, or the pursuit of personal gain in utter disregard for the interests and welfare of others. Christians can easily recognise these to be clearly wrong. Some of us may think that as long as we do not use such methods, our pursuit of success and prosperity would be acceptable. However, this should not be the way we judge whether the approach is acceptable. *We have to see beyond the obviously wrong and the obviously unethical* and learn to perceive the underlying issues in these approaches.

Even though some of the world's methods of achieving success may not be obviously wrong or unethical, they are basically of the flesh. *The motivation, goal, meaning, approach and the spirit behind these methods* often stem from self-interest and a desire for self-glory. The spirit of the world permeates them.

God's way to true success

If worldly success is wrong, and there is a place for true success, what then does it mean to truly succeed and prosper?

We can view God's way to true success from three angles.

1. Fulfilling God's purpose for us on earth

To understand what a truly successful life is, we have to view it from the perspective of God's kingdom. Such a life is vitally linked to God's purpose for us on earth.

We have seen in Message 5 that there are two basic reasons for our time on earth. One reason is to learn and grow well and prepare for eternity and the other, which flows forth from the earlier reason, is to effectively contribute to the advancement of God's kingdom. *To the degree we grow well and contribute to the advancement of God's kingdom, to that degree our lives will be successful.*

2. Doing God's perfect will

We can also understand the truly successful life as one in which God's perfect will for our lives is being lived out.

God has a perfect will for our lives. His will is that which is most meaningful and it will lead us towards the fullest life we can live. The Lord Jesus tells us He has come so that we may have life, and have it abundantly (John 10:10).

The Lord Jesus also teaches us to pray: "Your will be done". This would include God's perfect will being accomplished in our lives. We should live in line with the thrust of this prayer; it must be our constant longing and prayer. *To the degree God's perfect will has been fulfilled in our lives, to that degree we would have lived a successful life, one of spiritual abundance and true accomplishment.*

3. Living the victorious Christian life

The truly successful life may also be viewed from yet another angle, which is that of the victorious Christian life, the overcoming life, the life of spiritual fruitfulness. It is a life that is true to God, one in which we enjoy God's blessings, His guidance, enabling and undertaking.

How to attain true success

The question that we would have to ask then is this: How can such a life of success be attained? In a nutshell, we can say that the attainment of true success involves two fundamental spiritual principles—that of "dying to self" and "walking according to the Spirit".

- *Dying to self.* If we die to self-life, we will be able to experience “the power of His resurrection” (Phil. 3:10) and being “filled with the Spirit” (Eph. 5:18). To the degree we attain to the reality of the principle of death¹, to that degree God will have the freedom to work in and through our lives, and to the same degree we will live a successful life, one of spiritual abundance.
- *Walking according to the Spirit.* If we are walking according to the Spirit, we will be walking in the truth, in fellowship with God and in dependence on Him. We will be fulfilling the will of the Lord by His empowering. This is what it means to live a Spirit-filled life. This is a life of true success.

The meaning and reality of such a life is covered in greater detail in the next message when we look at the life of the apostle Paul.

True success manifested in different forms

Every child of God should earnestly seek to live out the successful Christian life. It is therefore important to understand what true success is, and that such a life can be manifested in different forms. Some forms are obvious, while others hardly appear successful at all. What is important is not how it is manifested, but that we concentrate on doing the will of God regardless of the outward manifestations. If we are doing God’s will, we will be living a truly successful life, even if it does not appear to be so to others or even to ourselves.

Unless we are clear about this point, we may become unduly perturbed or distressed, especially when we see others living what seems a very successful life, thinking that we are ineffective in our own life and in our service to God. We may then try to achieve success that is of a more obvious form. When we do that, we would be misdirecting our energy and efforts, striving to achieve that which is not the Lord's will for our lives.

Obvious manifestations

When we read the Scriptures, we are invariably impressed by the lives of people like Moses and the apostle Paul. We can see clearly that they were very effective in service and contributed much to God’s kingdom.

God performed many great miracles through Moses. Moses confronted Pharaoh, overcame his many obstructions, and led the people of Israel out of Egypt.

¹ The meaning and outworking of the principle of death is considered in detail in two messages on “Identification with the Lord Jesus Christ in His death and resurrection” (AR120-121) posted on the website www.godandtruth.com.

The apostle Paul, by his faithful ministry, helped many to turn to the Lord. He founded local churches and, through his preaching, teaching and epistles, helped believers to grow.

Christians can readily recognise the achievements of people like Moses and Paul and the fact that they lived successful lives.

There are, however, many successful lives whose meaningful and effective contributions to God's kingdom are not immediately obvious. The supreme example is the life of the Lord Jesus Christ and what took place at the Cross². What the onlookers saw was a dismal picture of the lonely Lord Jesus dying a very cruel and painful death on the cross. The whole situation appeared an utter failure—there was nothing obvious to suggest otherwise. Yet, it is the greatest triumph and the most significant contribution to mankind and to the fulfilment of God's eternal purpose. The very foundation for the building of God's kingdom was laid at the Cross.³

We will look at four other examples from the Scriptures of successful lives whose contributions to God's kingdom are not immediately apparent.

Less obvious manifestations

Daniel

God deeply appreciated Daniel, but it is not obvious from scriptural records how much Daniel has contributed to the kingdom of God. He lived in exile in an idolatrous land and served in the court of the tyrannical King Nebuchadnezzar, together with sorcerers, conjurers, diviners, and astrologers whom the king turned to for advice. These were men steeped in idolatrous worship and superstition. He later served under another arrogant king, Belshazzar, and, subsequently, the Persians.

Although not obvious, Daniel's contribution to God's kingdom was, in reality, very significant.⁴ His high standard of moral qualities and character, together with his careful and faithful discharge of responsibilities in high office, would have been a powerful testimony in the spiritual realm. And it would have significant positive impact on all those he came in contact with and beyond. So too would his unwavering and uncompromising faith in God and calmness even in the face of imminent death. His effective prayer life would also have contributed to the fulfilment of God's purposes. Likewise, the remarkable, significant and deep insights and revelations of the future and the unfolding of God's plans and advancement of His kingdom, which the Lord was pleased to reveal to and through Daniel, would also have contributed significantly to the fulfilment of God's purposes⁵.

² The perfectly successful life of the Lord Jesus is described in Message 6.

³ Appearance and reality pertaining to the death of Christ are covered in detail in messages AR173-274 in the series on *Appearance and Reality* under the section: *Reflections on the Death of the Lord Jesus Christ*.

⁴ The meaning and significance of Daniel's life and his contributions are considered in detail in messages AR31-44.

⁵ For a fuller appreciation of Daniel's contribution through God's revelations to him, please refer to AR40.

Simeon and Anna

It would be even more difficult to see how effectively Simeon and Anna have contributed, but the Scriptures highlights their lives favourably. Simeon and Anna were not noted for being very “active” or for doing what many would regard as “mighty works” for God. Nor were they among the religious leaders of the day. Yet, they were specifically singled out as two people in the whole nation of Israel who were ready for the First Coming of Christ.

Luke 2:25-35

25 And there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; and this man was righteous and devout, looking for the consolation of Israel; and the Holy Spirit was upon him.

26 And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ.

27 And he came in the Spirit into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to carry out for Him the custom of the Law, 28 then he took Him into his arms, and blessed God, and said,

29 “Now Lord, You are releasing Your bond-servant to depart in peace, According to Your word;

30 For my eyes have seen Your salvation,

31 Which You have prepared in the presence of all peoples,

32 A Light of revelation to the Gentiles,

And the glory of Your people Israel.”

33 And His father and mother were amazed at the things which were being said about Him.

34 And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary His mother, “Behold, this Child is appointed for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and for a sign to be opposed—

35 and a sword will pierce even your own soul—to the end that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.”

Without any fanfare, the Scriptures introduced Simeon simply as “a man in Jerusalem”. He apparently led a quiet life and would probably have been unnoticed by many had it not been for this inspired account in the Scriptures.

God, through the Scriptures, highlighted the moral and spiritual qualities of this man and the longings of his heart. He was described as devout and righteous and one who was looking forward to the coming of the Messiah, the consolation of Israel. The Holy Spirit was upon him and as he was sensitive to the Holy Spirit, God had the freedom to speak to him and to indicate to him that he would see the Messiah. When the Lord Jesus was brought into the temple as a child, God guided Simeon to testify that this Child was the Messiah. Evidently, within the heart of Simeon, there was a meaningful identification with the heart of the Lord and a desire for the fulfilment of God’s purposes.

Not many people would be conscious of the effectiveness of a life such as Simeon's because there was hardly any obvious outward manifestation. Yet, this scriptural record highlights to us that what may not appear to be a successful life can indeed be so. This is because positive impact on the spiritual realm and effectiveness of contribution to God's kingdom basically arise from what is within a person's heart.

The Scriptures paints a similar picture of the life of Anna the prophetess.

Luke 2:36-38

36 And there was a prophetess, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years and had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage,

37 and then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple, serving night and day with fastings and prayers.

38 At that very moment she came up and began giving thanks to God, and continued to speak of Him to all those who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

This passage describes Anna in very favourable terms. For many years of her life, Anna served God day and night with fastings and prayers. God approved of her life and used her to testify of the Lord Jesus Christ. From the scriptural presentation, we can say that Anna lived a successful life and that she would have contributed significantly to God's kingdom. But such a life is not easily recognised as a life of great achievement, not even by Christians.

May we learn well from the lives of Simeon and Anna so that we will be among those who are ready for the Second Coming of Christ.

The poor widow

The effectiveness and significance of the life and contribution of the poor widow who offered two small copper coins are even less obvious than those of Simeon and Anna. The story of the poor widow is recorded in Mark 12:41-44.

Mark 12:41-44

41 And He sat down opposite the treasury, and began observing how the people were putting money into the treasury; and many rich people were putting in large sums.

42 A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which amount to a cent.

43 Calling His disciples to Him, He said to them, "Truly I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all the contributors to the treasury;

44 for they all put in out of their surplus, but she, out of her poverty, put in all she owned, all she had to live on."

What the poor widow had contributed may seem an insignificant amount, but the Lord Jesus made the remarkable statement that she gave more than all the other

contributors, which included many rich people who put in large sums of money. How could this be possible? The significance of her contribution was not because of anything special about her two copper coins. It was because of the meaning in her heart. That made the act meaningful and her contribution significant in the eyes of the Lord.

If the Lord Jesus had not highlighted it, it could well be that no one else would have realised the significance of her contribution or even noticed it. Even the poor widow herself, when she put in the two small copper coins, might not be conscious that she was contributing anything significant.

There are important lessons for us to learn from the remark of the Lord Jesus concerning service and significance of contribution to His kingdom.

If a person's heart is right, and he is living a faithful life, then God will appreciate all that he does in fellowship with Him and in obedience to Him. His contributions would be significant in God's eyes, even though they may appear unimportant.

Like the poor widow, such a person could very well be living a life that hardly anyone would notice or would regard as significant.

Likewise, there are believers all over the world who live faithfully and effectively for the Lord, in simplicity and quietness, with hardly any outward sign to attest to the value of their contribution to the kingdom of God. We therefore need not be unduly concerned about the relative absence of contribution in obvious forms.

What motivates us to serve God?

So then, let us ask ourselves: *Is it our longing and prayer that God's perfect will be fulfilled in our lives, whatever form it may take and whatever it may involve?* Are we prepared to fulfil His will without any desire for personal recognition or appreciation by others? Would we be fully contented with such a life, even if it means hardly anyone notices us or recognises us as being effective? Are we able to continue living according to God's perfect will in such a context, without flagging in our zeal and fervour? *Or do we need visible, obvious accomplishments and men's recognition in order to persevere in our walk with God and service for Him?* If we seek accomplishments so that we may be noticed and praised, it is an indication that within us there is a wrong spirit, fleshly desires, pride, and a tendency to make unhealthy comparisons.

We have to resolve this area of our lives decisively. Failure in this area has resulted in various complications and negative consequences in many lives and in the outworking of church life and the Lord's work generally.

A healthy spirit and attitude is very important for true spirituality. We must progress in the direction where our basic desire is for the Lord's will to be fulfilled, and we live lives of truth and faithfulness. These realities in the heart must form the basic motivating force in our lives. This is the way to attain true spirituality and godliness, and the way for the Lord to have much freedom to work deeply and effectively in and through our lives.

Failure to adopt this kind of posture will hinder God's working in our lives and will keep us from experiencing His blessings. We will then fail to attain to a life of spiritual abundance.

Desire for spiritual success

Many Christians would like to emulate Moses and Paul. They want to accomplish great things for God. Such sentiments may appear very positive and spiritual and may be regarded by believers as commendable. But such aspirations can easily be mixed up with an undesirable and unwholesome spirit and attitude of fleshly desire for a sense of accomplishment, recognition by others, status, power and authority.

This kind of spirit is similar to the desire for worldly accomplishments and recognition. It is the spirit of the world being transferred to the Christian context—a desire for spiritual success motivated by fleshly desires.

This is a serious danger to our development and service, and it opens the way for the evil one to work in us, to deceive us and to make use of us for his evil ends. We must deal decisively with any trace of its presence in our lives and prayerfully guard against its emergence and growth. This kind of spirit is not what we find in Moses and Paul. *If we want to be like these two giants of the Christian faith, we need to learn to be truly like them in motivation, spirit and attitude.*

We will reflect further on this issue of right motivation in service in the next and final message, where we will continue to consider the examples of Moses and Paul in their service to God.

Concluding remarks

We must be wary of the subtle influence and pressure towards worldly success. The spirit of the world can easily influence our thinking and approach. We may be seeking to attain worldly success and prosperity and still think that it is all right. Or we may be seeking to attain spiritual success but with an unwholesome spirit.

On the other hand, we should not neglect to fulfil our responsibilities in this world or be deterred from seeking to do well in our career or studies or in spiritual service. The critical issue is: What is it that motivates us, what is the reality in our hearts, what are our true goals and values? Are we honestly and sincerely longing, praying

and seeking that God's perfect will be fulfilled in our lives, whatever form it may take?

A life of success cannot be divorced from the fundamental issues of the Christian faith. A life of spiritual abundance, of God's presence and blessings, entails walking in the Spirit and death to the self-life.

The successful life can be manifested in many different forms, some easily recognisable, whereas others may be inconspicuous. Whatever form it may take, it does not matter. The deep longing of our hearts must constantly be to remain faithful to the Lord and to fulfil His perfect will for our lives.

So what does it mean to truly succeed and prosper during our time on earth? It means growing well and contributing effectively to the advancement of His kingdom according to His guidance and enabling. To the degree God's perfect will has been fulfilled in our lives, to that degree we have truly succeeded and prospered.

And as we have seen in the examples of Daniel, Simeon, Anna and the poor widow, positive impact on the spiritual realm and contribution to God's kingdom cannot be measured by outward manifestations. It arises from the quality within one's heart. It is therefore vital that we pay much attention to nurturing the quality of our heart.

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. Reflect on the world's approach to success and God's way to true success.
2. What are some biblical examples of obvious manifestations of true success and those which are less obvious?
3. What can we learn from the remarkable statement of the Lord Jesus with regards to the contribution of the poor widow?

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