



Praying for Success

Nehemiah 1:4-11

TRINITY PULPIT

How do you define success? In his book *Success God's Way*, Charles Stanley begins with a story about a man named Scott who thought he had success. By the time Scott was thirty he was in business for himself, working between 70 and 80 hours a week. He was married with two children, drove a luxury car, and his wife drove one as well. They had a house in the suburbs. He went to church once a month, which he thought was sufficient to expose his children to the Bible stories in Sunday school. He loved deep-sea fishing, his only recreational hobby once per month. Scott's number one goal was to retire at the beach by the time he was fifty so he could fish as often as he wanted. Scott had professed his faith when he was a teenager and if you asked him, he would tell you that he was a believer; in fact, he would probably even say that his success materially was a blessing from God. However, Scott never considered that being a success in the Kingdom of God might be more than being a success in the American culture. Scott's business continued to grow but as his business grew his marriage fell apart. Scott started drinking too much and his wife, lonely from neglect, had an affair. They separated and Scott hit rock bottom. His business was bought up by a larger business and now, without his business that had become his life, he found himself alone and alienated from those he loved. Scott chose to turn back to God. This time he rededicated his life and he reached back out to his wife. She had ended her affair and, although it did not happen right away, after counseling, forgiveness, and working hard at their marriage they put their marriage back together. Now Scott, in his forties, does not dream of retiring at 50. He has started another business – this time a very small business by comparison. He is involved in his church and his wife now leads Bible Studies. Their marriage is restored and their faith is stronger than it has been.

The question is, did Scott find success, and if so, at what point? Some might say his great

success was when his personal life was in ruins. That is, when he was running with the big boys and making the money and living the life. Others might say, no, success is when your whole life is in balance. What does constitute success?

To be sure, there are various ways we measure success. In the sports world we measure success in wins and losses. There is an old saying that there are only two kinds of coaches: those who have been fired and those who are going to be fired. It really does not matter how good of a guy or woman you are as a coach. You have to win to keep your job. The same is true with our work. We have to produce. Our best intentions are not good enough. Even being the nicest person in the office might not keep you employed if you are lazy as well and do not perform your duties. To be sure, we know that there are those who are ruthless, rude, selfish, and completely self-centered who are also successful when it comes to business. In fact, you might argue that this seems to be a trait of those who are successful in business. I think that is why when we find someone who actually cares about others, is kind, shows compassion toward employees, we lift them up like we found a unicorn.

Success can be measured in so many ways. Even in the church we have our measurements for success. Attendance, baptism, and budgets are the old metrics of success in the American church. However, now we live in a culture where all of those measurements may be going by the wayside, and thus we may have to discover new ways to measure the effectiveness of the ministry of the local church.

So we know in our hearts that success is defined in various ways. Even in the Bible it appears that success is measured in different ways. A few years ago *The Prayer of Jabez* became a best seller. The author stumbled across the reference to a man named Jabez in 1 Chronicles. The few verses about him simply said that Jabez was favored above others and Jabez prayed to

God that God would enlarge his borders and God did. The book urged Christians to claim this prayer as their own and pray for success. The book was wildly popular; however, it was also theologically lacking. In the Old Testament there is no denying that part of the success of the people of God was winning a war, gaining land, being sovereign, or having a bumper crop. All of this was a sign of God's favor and success.

Yet when we arrive in the New Testament, we find a different view of success. To men like the man Scott I mentioned, Jesus would say sell all you have and come follow me, or he might tell the story of the man who just kept building more and more with the goal of retiring and taking it easy, only to say that his own soul would be required that night; then, who would get all this that he was hoarding?

When it comes to success, Jesus redefines it. Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, would talk about the things that pagans — those who don't believe in God — chase after. Jesus said,

Do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. (Matthew 6:31-33)

What then are we to do with the topic of praying for success? Is it right to pray for success?

Nehemiah's prayer for success and Nehemiah's story is an important reminder for us. Nehemiah was a cupbearer of the king with his people in exile. Nehemiah heard of how the city of Jerusalem — his city — was in ruins. The walls were torn down and the Temple lay in ruins. Nehemiah prayed for success. Nehemiah prayed for permission to go and begin the rebuilding of the city of Jerusalem. So, in the first chapter of Nehemiah we find his prayer. When Nehemiah hears of the ruin of Jerusalem, his heart is crushed. He sat down and wept. He turned to the Lord and he prayed. He prayed a prayer of confession. He knew that the ruin that had come to the city and the people had been the result of their sin. But he reminded God of God's promise of forgiveness and restoration. After confession, Nehemiah then prayed for success. He prayed that the King would look favorably upon him and his request to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the city.

In Nehemiah's prayer we find some insight into praying for success. When you and I, as followers of Jesus pray for success, we are praying for God's will to be done

in our life. To seek the kingdom of God first is to pray that our success will be success in the kingdom of God.

I like this definition of success. Success is the continuing achievement of becoming the person God wants you to be and to accomplish the goals God has helped you set.

Success for the Christian is to continue to become the person God wants you to be.

If we are going to pray for success, we have to first adjust our thinking on the definition of success. Let's look at Nehemiah for a moment. Nehemiah, we are told, is the cupbearer of the king. Nehemiah, for being a Jewish exile, had become a person of great importance. Just like Daniel and the other Jewish boys, Nehemiah had risen to a place of prominence, even in a place of exile. Nehemiah had become the cupbearer of the king. Now the cupbearer had an incredibly important job. He was essentially the Secret Service. He was to protect the king from poison. He was to protect the king and all those who grew close to him. Because he was in close proximity to the king, he would have had a relationship with the king. He would have been a trusted person. Nehemiah — for a person in exile — had become about as powerful as one could become. He was right next to the king with all of the power that evokes. Yet, with this success of his he has a different view of success. The thought of Jerusalem being in ruins is more than he can bear. He has a burden for the people of God and the reputation of God. Thus, he asks for permission to do something that seemed very unlikely to succeed. He asks to leave the place of comfort and power and return to Jerusalem. He had a God-size dream. He has a different view of success.

How do you define success? Do you define success as that which you accumulate or of fame or influence? Or can you hear the words of Jesus, "Seek first the kingdom of God." Success is becoming the person God intends for you to be. That is success.

For some of us, becoming the person God has intended for us to be will mean we will also experience success in cultural terms as well. Some of us will possess more than others. Some of us will have more influence than others. However, the goal still remains the same. The goal is to become the person God wants you to be.

Let's think of it this way. If we are successful in the things of the world, that success for the Christian is not for self but for the Kingdom of God. If God has blessed you with financial resources, be assured that what you possess is not just for yourself and your family. God expects you to be a generous person. God expects for you

to invest in the life of the local church and the greater movement of the Kingdom of God. If you have wealth and that statement bothers you, then this is a good time to examine your heart and to revisit your success. If you have influence by your fame or by your work or something you have done, God expects you to use your influence for the Kingdom of God. God expects you to use your fame and influence to share the gospel and to walk in a way worthy of the Lord that others might be led to Christ.

As Christians we must always be measuring the success we experience culturally with what it means to be a success in the Kingdom of God. We would be wise to remember the words of Jesus when he says that in the Kingdom of God the greatest is the servant. In the Kingdom of God the least becomes the first. Things get turned upside down in the Kingdom of God, and because of this, our definition of success must be turned upside down as well.

If we are going to pray for success, we must begin with the right definition of success. Success is for us to become the person God intends for us to be.

Nehemiah also reveals to us something else about success. Success is not just a prayer; it also takes effort. Nehemiah is granted the right to return to Jerusalem and rebuild, but the task that Nehemiah takes on is one of great effort. There is the effort of uniting those who will build and the effort of actually rebuilding. Nehemiah did not simply say, "Give us success," and then the wall was restored. Nehemiah prayed throughout his story and then went to work.

Interestingly, when we think about success in the Kingdom of God, we might think all we have to do is pray. Let's just pray that we will become the person that God has called us to be and we will be a success. However, even that success requires our effort.

One of my favorite verses for the Christian life is the word of Paul from Philippians 3. In Philippians 3 Paul is recounting his reasons for success in the Kingdom of God.

If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless. But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I

have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, (vv. 4-9)

Paul is saying if you want to measure success, I have it. I was born into the right family, my parents did everything right; I was a Hebrew of Hebrews. I was a Pharisee and lived my faith with zeal. I was faultless, but now I consider all of this rubbish – garbage for the sake of Christ. Paul is redefining success. Then we come to verse 12 and the following:

Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. (vv. 12-14)

I have a new definition of success: it is the goal or the prize that Jesus has called me to. So Paul says here is what we do: we forget what is behind and we strain forward to what is ahead.

Success is the continual striving to become the person God has called us to be. That means there are goals. Paul said there are goals and there is a prize. The prize is a heavenly prize. It is to see Christ face to face and know we have lived a life pleasing to God. So, we do not become a success in the Kingdom of God by simply praying for it and then just hoping it is going to happen. We set goals, we strive forward, and we seek that which is pleasing to God.

So what kind of goals can we set? Beyond the overarching goal of being pleasing to God. Let's list a few:

- Reading the Bible and Praying – Let that be a goal
- Asking God to help you reset priorities
- Asking God to guide you in how to use your wealth
- Asking God to give you a place of service in the church

Another way of going at this is to pray that God will reveal the fruits of the Spirit in your life. I want my goal to reflect the Spirit's presence in my life. When people think of me, I want them to think I am loving, joyful, peaceful, patient, kind, good, faithful, gentle and have self control.

Let us set some goals and let us take a step at a time.

I like what Rick Warren says:

Sow a thought it becomes an action. Sow an action it becomes a habit. Sow a habit it will become your character. Sow your character and it will become your life. It begins with the right thought. Turn your thoughts upon the Kingdom of God.

What are some goals you think God would have you set? Set them, pray about them and strive toward them. Success in the Kingdom takes effort just like success in the culture.

Finally, remember that success requires persistence. Nehemiah faced obstacle after obstacle in rebuilding Jerusalem. There were those who did not want Jerusalem to be rebuilt. There were those who stood in Nehemiah's way. It was Nehemiah's persistence that enabled him to have success.

In the same way, success in the Kingdom of God will require persistence. The writer of Hebrews uses a great sports analogy for the Christian life.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. (Hebrews 12:1)

Let us run the race with perseverance.

Success in the Kingdom of God is going to take persistence. There are going to be times when you fail — we all fail. There are going to be times when others do not understand the decisions you are making and will ridicule you or stand in your way. There are going to be times when you grow weary in doing good. Success God's way takes courage and persistence.

Let me remind you of two important principles. First, failing is not failure. Just because we fail does not mean we have become a failure in the Kingdom of God. The Bible is filled with those who failed and then God used them again. In fact, God seems to like to use the very ones who fail because that way everyone knows this is God's doing. So, when you fail remember you are not a failure.

Bob Carlisle's great song explores this idea:

*Cursing every step of the way, he bore a heavy load
To the market ten miles away, the journey took its toll
And every day he passed a monastery's high
cathedral walls
And it made his life seem meaningless and small*

*And he wondered how it would be to live in such
a place
To be warm, well fed and at peace, to shut the
world away
So when he saw a priest who walked, for once,
beyond the iron gate
He said, "Tell me of your life inside the place", and
the priest replied*

*We fall down, we get up, we fall down, we get up
We fall down, we get up
And the saints are just the sinners
Who fall down and get up*

When you fail, you are not a failure.

Secondly, difficulty does not mean stop. So many times when things become difficult we interpret that to mean that we must not be doing what is right. We have this odd conception that if we are following Christ and if we are doing God's will, then it is going to be easy and all will just fall in place. I am not sure where we got that idea, because we did not get it from Jesus. We follow the man who was rejected by his own family, ridiculed by his own community, denied by his friends, faced injustice, lost all he had in this world, and died a cruel death. There was nothing easy about his life; yet, he fulfilled what the Father sent him to do in every way.

When things get difficult it is not the sign you should stop: it might be the very sign you should persevere. In perseverance there emerges character.

Success in the Kingdom will require persistence.

It is right to pray for success, but we must always let Jesus define success in our lives. ▲



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