

How God Measures Success

In the Book of Genesis we read the amazing story of Joseph, with the theme of the sovereign presence of the Lord, giving Joseph “success in whatever he did.” Even as an immature youth, he alienated himself from his brothers after telling them his dream of someday ruling over them. His angry brothers sold him as a slave to Midianite merchants, who in turn sold him to Potipher, an official of Pharaoh, king of Egypt. Young Joseph resisted temptation from Potipher’s wife, whose false accusation against him resulted in his imprisonment.

In Genesis 40 we read how the Lord enabled Joseph to interpret the dreams of two of his fellow prisoners, the king’s cupbearer and baker. Although the baker was beheaded, as Joseph prophesied, the cupbearer was released from prison and restored to his service to King Pharaoh. Because the cupbearer forgot him, Joseph languished in prison another two years. When Pharaoh needed someone to interpret his dream, the cupbearer told him about Joseph’s ability to understand dreams. When Joseph interpreted the king’s dream, he was placed in charge of all of the administration of Egypt as Pharaoh’s highest official. Through Joseph’s God-given wisdom, he devised a conservation plan that prepared Egypt for the seven years of drought and famine that was predicted in Pharaoh’s dream (Genesis 41).

When the drought became severe, Jacob sent his older sons to Egypt to find grain for their survival (Genesis 42). Joseph’s identity was hidden from his brothers, and he insisted that they return with their youngest brother Benjamin, which caused no small consternation to their father Jacob. On this second journey to get grain from Egypt, Joseph revealed his identity to his brothers in a very emotional disclosure. Pharaoh invites Jacob and his sons to come and live in Egypt, which sets the stage for the great Exodus of the Israelites generations later (Exodus 1). In today’s text, Joseph speaks to his brothers, who suddenly realize that not only is their brother alive, but has become the administrative ruler of Egypt. Joseph’s prophesy to them when he was a youth (Gen. 37) comes to fulfillment as they bow before him.

Our second Scripture reading is Genesis 45:4-8:

“Then Joseph said to his brothers, “Come closer to me.” And they came closer. He said, “I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. ⁵ And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. ⁶ For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are five more years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. ⁷ God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. ⁸ So it was not you who sent me here, but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt.”

Joseph’s was a successful life, in the way that God measures success. Nowhere is his success more obvious than when he revealed his identity to his brothers who had sinned against him by selling him into slavery many years before. His testimony to them is a testimony of a successful life. Joseph had risen from his unjust prison sentence to becoming the prime minister of Egypt. This achievement would have made Joseph successful by anyone’s standard of measurement. But the way that Joseph reached this career pinnacle shows us the way God measures success.

There are many ways that people define success, which in our culture is often associated with gaining a certain career level or accumulating a certain amount of material wealth. Some may

associate success with achieving determined goals and accomplishments in sports, business, politics or self-help and personal enhancement. In stronger societies, value is placed upon successful relationships, such as in marriage, family and community. Such success is seemingly devalued in our society. Essentially, success is defined as “the attainment of a desired object or end,” which is open-ended to whatever we desire to attain. Most seek success by their own definition. And being successful often means being a success in the eyes of others.

The desire for approval and the admiration of others is indicative of our fallen nature. James, in his "Wisdom Book of the New Testament," speaks of this selfish ambition which is equated with bitter envy, and as “wisdom” that is “earthly, unspiritual, of the devil.” This envy and selfish ambition is associated with “disorder and every evil practice.” A selfish drive for success often leads to envy and bitterness (Jas. 3:15-16). Their envy of their precocious younger brother, Joseph, is what led the older brothers to be rid of him. Think of the lives, careers and families that have been destroyed by such ambition and bitter envy in the home and work place. So, in a sense, Joseph and his brothers represented two polarities in the search for success. Joseph, despite his earlier immaturity, found success God’s way. His brothers, on the other hand, were envious and resentful because of Joseph’s favor and his inside track on the road to success.

To Joseph it was important that he trust in the Lord’s guidance in his life. He seemed to have a sense of peace when his brothers violently seized and threatened to kill him; when they sold him to nomadic traders as a slave; and when he was falsely accused and imprisoned, after serving faithfully in Potipher’s house. Trusting in the presence and activity of God sustained him while he languished in prison after the cupbearer forgot to speak to Pharaoh in his behalf.

Joseph sought to be successful God’s way by trusting and obeying, through years of trial and also during times of prosperity and blessing. When he rose to power he was successful in his stewardship of that position of leadership and authority. Probably more people are ruined by “success” than by adversity, and are corrupted by the power of privilege and authority. So called “successful” ministers have been unfaithful in their use of leadership and abuse of power and the corruption of their morals and ethics. Some people, it seems, are successful in obtaining power, wealth, or fame, but are failures in character.

God doesn’t enable success in ways that are always obvious to us or that even make sense to us. God chose David over his more physically impressive brothers because he was looking for a man after his own heart (1 Sam. 13:14; 16:7). The most successful life was the brief earthly life of our Lord Jesus Christ. And yet, by the account of the world he was deemed a failure, having but three years of public ministry, having in the end been betrayed by one of his small band of disciples and denied and abandoned by the others. And his life was ended, so it was thought, penniless and executed on a shameful cross. And yet it was through his “failed” life that God brought salvation and his kingdom rule to all who believe. And God calls us to take the same route to success—through a life of self-denial, service to others, and willingness to share in Christ’s sufferings. Success with significance is a [cruciform](#) life, living in the weak power of the crucified and risen Christ.

Jesus rebuked Simon Peter for his desire to protect Jesus from his prophesied cross, saying that Peter’s desire for him to avoid the cross showed Peter’s preference for “success” the way the world chooses it. Jesus then described the only truly successful life as one that dies to self-centered, self-serving and self-preserving desires and ambitions (Matt. 16:21-28).

We can be deceived into thinking that success equals acclaim or gaining the approval and admiration of others and satisfying personal ambition. I struggled with a sense of failure because I had been led to believe, even by very good people, that success in ministry was measurable by church growth and size, including the size and impressiveness of the buildings, attendance numbers and the size of the budget. I was convinced that if I followed all the principles of church growth, I'd be successful.

Joseph was a victim of his brothers' jealousy and murderous hatred toward him and lies to their father. Then he confronted the adulterous schemes of Potiphar's wife and her false accusations. And the apparent indifference of the cupbearer, who failed to support him during the years after his release from prison, left Joseph feeling abandoned and perhaps betrayed once again.

As followers of Christ we too can sense the overwhelming opposition of people. The temptation is to become fearful toward those who threaten us and resentful and bitter toward those who have mistreated us. The Apostle Paul counseled Timothy to regard his enemies as Satan's dupes, and to regard them as candidates for conversion (2 Tim. 2: 24-26). Such a perspective frees us from anger and bitterness, as we realize that these people can't stand in the way of our spiritual success. This thought was of great encouragement to me personally in dealing with people that I thought were destroying my ministry by obstructing my leadership. I realized that God was measuring my success in ministry, not by achieving ministry goals, but in dealing with people in godly ways and being faithful in teaching and praying for even my worst opponents.

Perhaps, at least in his youth, Joseph was his own worst enemy. He seemed to be a pampered youth, favored by his father. And when God first began to speak to him with prophetic dreams, he didn't know quite how to handle that "success." He flaunted his spiritual revelation, much to his brothers' resentment. And so we too can be our own worst enemy against our success in life. Obviously young Joseph grew up fast when adversity came upon him. And it might take adversity to bring us to greater maturity and a higher sense of responsibility with our spiritual blessings and opportunities.

No doubt Joseph struggled with devilish doubts about God's providential care over his life, perhaps most strongly when he languished in prison during those years when it must have seemed that God had forgotten him. At the time we are experiencing adversity, success appears the farthest thing from our minds. Yet it was during his difficult moments, days and years when perhaps God was doing his greatest work in Joseph's life. Perhaps the greatest threat to Joseph's success was his being tempted to doubt God's love, care and involvement in his life. Doubt, disobedience, anger and bitterness could easily have destroyed him. Yet Joseph displayed a stubborn faith in God's design for his success.

During my nearly five decades of pastoral ministry I've seen almost identical tragedies strike different families, and I've noted that some react in faith and trust, even though they can't understand God's purpose at the present time. They trust that someday they'll understand. Those who don't respond in faith and trust often despair or come to anger and bitterness against God. One succeeds through faith and trust while the other fails through unbelief and bitterness. My real heroes are not necessarily those who achieve great things in the church or in ministry leadership, but rather those who remain faithful to God through times of personal adversity, family tragedy, suffering or disappointment.

Joseph's success lay in his being available and faithful to God in life's opportunities. And because he was faithful and available, God used him distinctly and mightily. Joseph was allowed to see the design of God for his success in life. The faith perspective Joseph maintained was one that the Apostle Paul articulated:

"We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28).

Joseph's life was surrounded by all kinds intimidating symbols of earthly power and authority. Yet Joseph seemed to rest in a calm assurance that God was in control. He was in the midst of the mighty Egyptian Empire, yet he knew his life was in the hands of Almighty God. As Joseph testified, it was ultimately the perfect will of sovereign God that prevailed.

It's easy to see the difficulties that lay in the pathway of Joseph on his way to success. And yet it seemed almost that some divine alchemy was at work. "Alchemy" was "a medieval chemical science and speculative philosophy aiming to achieve the transmutation of the base metals into gold." It came to mean "a power or process of transforming something common into something special." Throughout our text we hear Joseph telling his brothers, "You did this to me, *but God* did this through me." God worked in Joseph's life to create in him a godly character that enabled him to forgive and serve his enemies. In fact, the character of Joseph stands out as one of the clearest Old Testament types that prophesy the person and character of Christ Jesus.

The difficulties on the way to success cannot frustrate God's purpose for us. With his divine alchemy and sovereign power, he uses difficulties for our good. God turns failures into successes. God allows even evil things to happen and uses even our sinful and self-destructive actions to bring about ultimate good.

As was true with Joseph, we need also to realize that our success in God's eyes can never be a private thing. God's blessings upon our lives are meant to be shared with the Body of Christ and the needy, lost world around us. God used Joseph to make a difference in the world. Our view of personal success must be subsumed under the greater purposes of the kingdom of God. What God expects is not the recognition of the world, but our faithfulness in the work of the kingdom of God. Kingdom faithfulness always amounts to success in God's eyes. My "success" is worth nothing if it doesn't allow me to serve your success. Our goal is to someday hear the Master say, "*Well done, good and faithful servant!*" (Matt. 25:21).

We know the names of successful politicians, business people and athletes, but the Lord alone knows those who are the truly successful in his eyes. He knows our hearts. He knows the quiet and secret victories over temptation. He sees the faithful intercessions of his prayer warriors and knows the successful spiritual battles won.

I'm always amazed to read about the shameless ambition of Jesus' disciples, James and John, who sought a high position of honor and power in God's kingdom, even using their mother as an advocate (Matt. 20:20ff)! Jesus replied that the road to kingdom greatness would be through sharing his sufferings and serving others, following his supreme example. A serving life is a successful life, worthy of God's acclaim.

In your life also, God measures success differently.