

September 24, 1999, Evening
International Messengers

True Success
Genesis 39:1-6, 19-23

Each of us wants to succeed in life. But if we want true success, it's crucial to work out a biblical definition of the term. Otherwise, you'll be like the guy who climbed the ladder of success only to find that it was leaning against the wrong wall. You'll waste your life pursuing the wrong goals and making wrong decisions. If our target is wrong, we will fail even if we hit it.

American culture and many other cultures define success primarily in financial terms, throwing in, perhaps, the ideas of influence, fame, and the elusive quality, "happiness." As Christians, we can easily see the fallacy in defining success in those terms, and yet often we are influenced by our culture more than we care to admit. Many pastors succumb to the prevailing definition, thinking that if you pastor a large church, or gain national recognition through writing a book or speaking at important gatherings, you are successful. Christians reveal their skewed definition of success when they rush out to buy the latest story of some celebrity who has made a profession of faith, or when they parade famous athletes before the church as if they were spiritual authorities. So we need to bring into sharp focus the biblical answer to the question, *What is true success?*

Genesis 39 is a rags to riches to rags story. At the beginning of the chapter, Joseph is at the bottom, a slave sold into a foreign culture. But God prospers him and he rises to the top in the house of Potiphar, security chief to Pharaoh. Life was about as good as a slave could expect at that point. But then Potiphar's wife tried to seduce Joseph. When he refused her demands, she falsely accused him. He ended up in the dungeon, seemingly worse off than when the chapter started.

There are some parallels between Joseph's rise to the top spot in Potiphar's house (39:1-6) and his experience in the prison (39:21-23):

*Verse 2: "the Lord was with Joseph"

*Verse 21: "the Lord was with Joseph"

*Verse 4: "So Joseph found favor in [Potiphar's] sight"

*Verse 21: "the Lord ... gave him favor in the sight of the chief jailer"

*Verse 4: "[Potiphar] made him overseer over his house, and all that he owned he put in his charge"

*Verse 22: "And the chief jailer committed to Joseph's charge all the prisoners who were in the jail; so that whatever was done there, he was responsible for it"

*Verse 6: "with [Joseph] there he did not concern himself with anything except the food which he ate"

*Verse 23: "The chief jailer did not supervise anything under Joseph's charge"

*Verse 3: "[Potiphar] saw that the Lord was with him and how the Lord caused all that he did to prosper"

*Verse 23: The chief jailer also put Joseph in charge because he saw that "the Lord was with him; and whatever he did, the Lord made to prosper."

Clearly, Joseph was truly successful, whether he was in Potiphar's house or in the prison, because God's hand was on him. That is the biblical definition of true success:

True success is to have God's blessing on your life.

If you have God's blessing, you have everything, even if you're poor and unknown. If you lack God's blessing, you ultimately will have nothing, even if you're rich and famous now. But, we need to think biblically about what God's blessing means.

1. God's blessing is not necessarily related to favorable circumstances.

Was Joseph more blessed by God or more successful when he was at the top of Potiphar's household than when he was in the dungeon? Clearly not! They were just different phases of God's training program in which He was preparing Joseph for the job He had for him under Pharaoh. We are mistaken when we think that if everything is going well, God is blessing us, but that when trials or problems hit, He has withdrawn His blessing. His blessing isn't necessarily related to favorable circumstances.

Joseph's circumstances in the prison were anything but favorable, at least at first. Psalm 105:18 gives us a glimpse of reality when it states, "They afflicted his feet with fetters, he himself was laid in irons." The NIV translates, "They bruised his feet with shackles, his neck was put in irons." The dungeon was most likely beneath Potiphar's house (Gen. 40:3), probably with no windows, a dark and unpleasant place, especially if you had irons on your feet and neck!

For a while, Joseph must have wondered what was going on. He had been obedient to the Lord in resisting the advances of Potiphar's wife. He knew that God had spoken to him in his dreams years ago, about how the sun, moon, and stars would bow down to him. But where was God now? Why was this happening? He must have felt like Tavye in "Fiddler on the Roof," who says, "Lord, I know that we are the chosen people." But as he considers the trials the Jews have gone through, he looks up toward heaven and pleads, "Couldn't You choose someone else for a change?" Most of us have felt like that: "If this is God's blessing, what must His curse be like?"

But God's blessing often comes through trials. Every person God uses must go through times of training and testing, where character is refined. You see it in Moses, who was the most competent, gifted man you could have picked to lead Israel, a man trained in all the knowledge of the Egyptians. But he had to spend 40 years in the wilderness in order to be trained in the ways of the Lord before he could lead God's people to Canaan.

You see the same thing in David, the man after God's heart. He was a teenager when the prophet Samuel anointed him as the future king. He was still in his teens when he slew Goliath. Yet he had to spend his twenties running as a fugitive from the mad king Saul before he was ready at 30 to lead the nation.

You see the same thing in the apostle Paul. When he was converted, he was a scholar of the Hebrew Scriptures. In our day, we probably would have him teaching in a seminary within a few years. But God sent him into Arabia for two or three years and then into obscurity in Tarsus. It was about ten years after his conversion that he finally began to minister with Barnabas in Antioch, where the Lord began to use his mighty gifts. If you've read his

epistles and the book of Acts, you know that the training didn't end there. Throughout his ministry, Paul was continually trained in the school of Christ through many trials.

You can even see the same thing in the life of the Lord Jesus, who, though he was the perfect Son of God, learned obedience through the things He suffered (Heb. 5:8). I marvel when I think of the fact that Jesus was 30 before He began His public ministry. If there ever was a competent, godly young man, ready to minister at 20, Jesus must have been the one. In terms of modern standards of success, we would have to admit that Jesus didn't make it. He alienated the religious leaders. He only ministered for three years and left behind a ragtag band of confused followers. If God's blessing means favorable circumstances, large numbers, and everything going your way, Jesus wasn't blessed.

We each need to recognize that God is using our circumstances to shape us into the image of Jesus Christ. We don't know what He has ahead for us. He may elevate us to a position of prominence, as He did with Joseph. He may use us in a quiet, behind-the-scenes ministry which never gains attention. But in Joseph's story, it's obvious (to us, not to Joseph) how God was using these trials to shape Joseph into a mature man of God who could handle the success which later would be thrust upon him.

But what if Joseph hadn't submitted to God's hand in these trials? What if he had sat in jail, complaining, "It's just not fair! If that's how God is going to treat me when I obey Him, then I'm not going to obey Him!" If Joseph had responded like that, he wouldn't have been ready for the job God had for him a few years down the road. I think that Joseph must have clung to God in faith while he was in that dungeon, praying, "God, You promised me through my dreams a position of importance. I don't understand how this dungeon fits in with that, but I trust that You know what You're doing."

That's how we need to trust God when we're in the dungeons of life. Someone has said, "Interpret your circumstances by God's love, not God's love by your circumstances." It's crucial that each of us learns to turn to God, not away from Him, in a time of suffering. Just because you're going through trials doesn't mean that

God has withdrawn His blessing. It means that He is training you to become like His Son.

You may be thinking, "Well, if God's blessing isn't necessarily related to favorable circumstances, how can I know for sure when I'm experiencing it?"

2. God's blessing is related to personal integrity in every area of life.

If you have come to God through faith in Jesus Christ, and thus know that your sins are forgiven through His blood, and you're living with a clear conscience before God and man, then you can know that His hand is on your life. That doesn't mean that there isn't more that you could be experiencing from the Lord. Nor does it mean that if you maintain your integrity, you can demand God's blessing as your due. Even when we've done what we ought, we can only say, "We're unworthy slaves" (Luke 17:10).

We see this in Genesis 39:21, where it states that the Lord ... "extended kindness to [Joseph], and gave him favor in the sight of the chief jailer." "Kindness" and "favor" both point to God's unmerited favor, or grace. Even though Joseph walked uprightly before God, he could not demand God's kindness and favor as his right, but only accept it as undeserved grace.

It's important that you catch this distinction, because it has everything to do with your attitude when you're treated unfairly. And the right attitude is central to integrity. If you think, "I've been good, therefore, God must bless me by sparing me from harsh circumstances," you'll develop a bitter attitude when that doesn't happen. But if you think, "As far as I know, I have confessed all my sin and there is nothing between me and God or between me and any other person. But even so, I'm still an unworthy sinner, and I can't demand anything from God. Any goodness He bestows upon me is due to His mercy and love." Then, you'll maintain your integrity before God and experience His blessing, even in the midst of trials.

Let's face it, Joseph could have developed a rotten attitude. He had been terribly mistreated by his brothers. After a few years, he had finally overcome that by rising to the top in Potiphar's house. He obeyed the Lord by resisting Potiphar's wife, only to be

thrown in this dungeon. It wouldn't be hard to imagine him being a difficult, disagreeable prisoner. Yet I believe that Joseph was an agreeable, cheerful prisoner who did his duties with a positive attitude. If he had been disagreeable, the jailer wouldn't have promoted him as he did.

Let me ask, "How is your attitude when you're treated unfairly?" Perhaps you think that your supervisor isn't being fair with you. He isn't recognizing your hard work. You have a choice: You can either become sullen and disagreeable, angry at God and at the world. Or, you can think, "God doesn't owe me anything but judgment, yet He's shown me so much mercy." And you can be cheerful and agreeable, doing your work with gladness in your heart as unto the Lord. As Paul instructed slaves, "Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men" (Col. 3:23). You may need to communicate openly with the offending party, but first you need to deal with your attitude before God.

Note, too, that Joseph didn't seek his own advancement, but rather sought to prosper his master, whether Potiphar or the jailer. These men noted that and advanced Joseph. That's a key principle in any situation, whether at work or at home: If you seek to make the one over you prosper, God will see to it that you're advanced in due time. That is directly opposite to the ways of the world, where you sabotage the guy over you so that you can grab his spot. As Christian workers, we should be seeking God's glory and not care about which worker gets the credit on earth.

Also, Joseph maintained integrity with regard to money and moral purity. Potiphar entrusted Joseph with the oversight of everything he owned (39:4-6), and Joseph did not abuse that trust by skimming off a little for himself. Remember, he was a slave, and he could have rationalized, "How else am I going to get ahead in life? Besides, I deserve it because I have caused my master to prosper. God is providing for me in this way." When the temptation with Potiphar's wife came along, Joseph easily could have rationalized his need for sexual fulfillment. But he maintained his integrity before God with regard to greed and sexual purity. The main thing to keep in mind in both of these areas is that God sees all that I do, and to sin in these matters is to sin against Him (39:9).

So live with integrity, which includes having the right attitude and maintaining your honesty and purity, as Joseph did, and you'll experience God's blessing, even in the dungeon times of life. There's a third principle here related to success and God's blessing:

3. God's blessing should be used as a witness to others.

God never gives His blessing to be bottled up or squandered on ourselves, but only to be channeled through us to others. And the greatest blessing He gives is not material wealth, but the contentment that accompanies godliness. Joseph had something which both Potiphar and the chief jailer lacked. Both men were fairly successful in worldly terms, which Joseph was not at this point. But Joseph, like Paul, had learned the secret of being content whether he was living in splendor or in squalor. That is far better than worldly success! I've heard that John Muir, the famous naturalist, was a Christian. On one occasion he claimed that he was richer than a wealthy business tycoon because, as Muir explained, "I have all the money I want and he hasn't."

It's obvious that Joseph didn't hide the source of his attitude, his competence, or his purity. Verse 3 states, "Now his master saw that the Lord was with him and how the Lord caused all that he did to prosper in his hand." He didn't just see that Joseph prospered, but that it was *the Lord* who prospered him. When Potiphar's wife tried to seduce Joseph, he didn't just give her the impression that he was a moral guy. He said, "How then could I do this great evil, and sin against God?" (39:9). The implication of verse 23 is also that the jailer recognized the Lord's hand on Joseph. He didn't hide the source of his moral purity, cheerful attitude and competent work.

Both Potiphar and the jailer recognized God's hand on Joseph because they saw it in his work habits. I doubt if he announced his prayer and quiet time in front of them. They were impressed by the results in the workplace. When they commented on that, then Joseph was careful to give the glory to God, not to himself. All too often, we're quick to tell unbelieving people that we're Christians, but then we deal with them in anger, greed, or selfishness so that the non-Christian thinks, "If this guy is a Christian, give me a pagan anytime!" But Joseph's life teaches us that we need to be cheerful, diligent and faithful in our dealings with lost people, even

when we've been mistreated, so that others will ask, "How can you be so cheerful and content when you've been treated as you have?" Then we have a platform to tell them about our Savior.

We ought to view any promotion or ministry success as a platform for greater witness and influence for the Lord, not as a means to gratify ourselves or to exalt our name. William Carey, the great missionary to India, became deeply concerned by the attitude of his son, Felix. He had professed to be a believer and had promised to become a missionary, but he reneged on his vows when he was appointed ambassador to Burma. Carey requested prayer for him in these words: "Pray for Felix. He has degenerated into an ambassador of the British government when he should be serving the King of kings" ("Our Daily Bread," Spring, 1979). God blesses us so that we can be a channel for witness, to bring His true blessing of salvation to others, not just to make us happy or give us a better lifestyle. If God gives you a promotion or a position of influence, ask Him to show you how to use your position to bear witness for Jesus Christ, both by your character and your words.

Thus true success is to have God's blessing on your life. His blessing is not necessarily related to favorable circumstances. It is related to personal integrity in every area of life. And God's blessing should be used as a witness to others of His grace. So the bottom line is,

4. God's blessing should be sought above all else.

Whether we succeed or not in the eyes of the world or even the Christian world, whether we become well-known or influential or not, what counts when all is said and done is that the Lord is with us. Four times this chapter repeats, "The Lord was with Joseph" (39:2, 3, 21, 23). True success is not where you are, but *whether God is with you where you are*. Worldly success is fickle. Potiphar and the chief jailer were riding high, but one little change of circumstance could have plunged them into the dungeon, as the cupbearer and baker could testify (Genesis 40). But success with God goes with you from Potiphar's house to the dungeon. Success with God is the only success worth striving for. Constantly examine your life and keep a clear conscience, so that there is nothing in your life, as far as you know, to thwart God's blessing.

Conclusion

Watchman Nee has a sermon which I've come back to repeatedly in my life and ministry. It undergirds my prayer life and is a driving principle in all I do. It's called, "Expecting the Lord's Blessing" (*Twelve Baskets Full* [Hong Kong Church Book Room], 2:48-64). The sermon is based on the Lord's feeding of the 5,000. Nee makes the point that *everything* in our life and service for the Lord depends on His blessing. With reference to the needs of that hungry multitude, he states, "The meeting of need is not dependent on the supply in hand, but on the blessing of the Lord resting on the supply.... It is of fundamental importance that we realize this. Whether our loaves be few or many is of little consequence. If man's hunger is to be satisfied one thing is needful. That one thing is the blessing of the Lord" (pp. 48-49).

Nee later defines God's blessing as a working of God not based on and all out of proportion to our working (p. 58). If we calculate that a certain amount of effort and activity should bring in a certain amount of results, and it happens, that's not God's blessing. But when the results are far beyond what we might reasonably expect, that is God's blessing!

I covet that for myself. I'm not satisfied that I have it yet, so I continually ask God to reveal any wrong attitudes or actions in my life which would hinder it. I ask Him to give me His blessing. I want each of you to covet God's blessing for yourself. Like Jacob wrestling with the angel, we all should say, "I will not let you go unless you bless me" (Gen. 32:26). You can live a comfortable Christian life, serve the Lord, and succeed in worldly terms. But if you lack God's blessing on your life, you've missed true success. True success is when it can be said of us, whether we are in Potiphar's house or in prison, "The Lord is with that man or woman." Being blessed by God, we then will be used as His channels of blessing the nations through the Lord Jesus Christ.