

Success...and Failure

by The Rev. David C.L. Prior



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“When you come to the end of your life and have nothing but death to look forward to and nothing but memories to look back upon, what will you need to con-

clude that your life was a success and that you’re satisfied?”

That is the kind of question we need to hear from time to time but might prefer not to hear, because it poses uncomfortable challenges—about what we understand by success and failure, how we evaluate our lives, what is ultimately important.

A recent poll of 1,000 people aged between 18 and 24 suggested that “young people who fail to achieve their life goals by the age of 30 are seen as ‘failures’ by their peers and are under so much pressure to succeed, that they sacrifice their health and leisure for success.” Among the young people interviewed “tight deadlines were set for finding a life partner and having money, a senior career position and a home. More than half had set time goals such as being a home owner by the age of 26, getting married at 27 and being rich at 29.” The study showed that 41 percent had given up a healthy diet and lifestyle in their attempts to attain all their goals and targets, and one in two had cut out holidays, hobbies and seeing family and friends.

Winning and Losing

Success and failure are generally linked with winning and losing. Winning and losing have a close connection with the world of competitive sport. Sport has assumed a pervasive place in today’s culture, and its

influence on our understanding of both success and failure is as powerful as the importance of examinations at school and college. There it is damaging to fail, and it is vital, not just to pass, but to achieve high marks and top grades—i.e. to succeed, not only against a benchmark but also in competition with others. So you can succeed and fail at one and the same time.

These factors can be seen at work in the highly competitive marketplace of the City [London’s Financial District]—and indeed, in most marketplaces today. As the man said, a “winning isn’t everything, it’s the only thing!” Mere success is not adequate; it must be greater success than others. Nor does one “success” guarantee anything for anyone—“you are only as good as your last deal.” This, too, is reflected in the sporting world. Former athlete, now politician, Sebastian Coe has said, “Real success is consistency—the hardest bit is...to do it again and again and again.” Comedian Billy Connolly says exactly the same, “You need to be good again and again and again.”

But if, to be a success, you need to keep on performing and producing results, this has to be kept in focus with two other priorities—potential and perspective. Bob Alexander, formerly chairman of NatWest, says: “What is success for one individual as a magnificent use of their talents would only be a modest use of talent by another.” Another athlete, Roger Black, said recently about winning a silver medal, “To me it is gold because it represents the best I could do.”

Perspective, too, is vital. The marketplace today seems dangerously locked into immediate results. But success, from a wider and more strategic standpoint, is something that can be noted, measured and appreciated only over the long haul. Sebastian Coe says, “To say a successful outcome is only if you win would be ludicrous, because the single most important contribution that any race has made to my career was the race in which I finished third.”

Success and Wealth

Success linked exclusively or mainly to wealth and material prosperity may be open to serious question, but it has most of us by the throat. Such an attitude is

fed remorselessly through the media, by advertising and particularly in the way employment, promotion, bonuses and perks are shaped in the marketplace. "Success stories" are commonplace—take this recent article:

In the past dozen years Gerry Robinson has enjoyed the sort of success of which most people can only dream: a huge personal fortune, a beautiful house and family and plaudits from turning Granada Group around from a floundering giant to a major player in hotels and independent television....It is a long way from Dunfanaghy, the little fishing village on the north-east corner of Ireland where Mr. Robinson was born in 1948 and brought up with his five brothers and four sisters. They lived on the edge of the village in one of a row of tiny semi-detached bungalows where cars are still a rarity. The house was so small that there was not room for all the children to sit down to meals together.

Such a rags-to-riches story is fairly typical of the drip-feeding by which we are fed a certain kind of success. The columnist betrays his own addiction to it by writing of "a beautiful house and family" in the same phrase—as though property and people are possessions of equal value and to be equally called "beautiful." Presumably failure—for the writer—means to have an ugly house and an ugly family, even more than having no house and no family.

The article is also a good example of another common perception of success—and, by implication, of failure. If you start poor and turn out wealthy, you are a success. If you start wealthy and end up poor, you are presumably a failure. If you start poor and end up poor, you are a failure. If you start wealthy and end up wealthy, you are unlikely to be seen as a failure—but neither will you be seen as a success.

Ignoring the Spiritual

Because we are living in the 21st century and the third millennium A.D., we need to appreciate that this is not new. Maybe more people are succumbing to such a materialistic concept of success, but essentially it is rooted in a worldview that diminishes and dismisses the importance (or even the existence) of the spiritual. A somewhat unexpected spokesman for recovering the value of the human spirit appears in the person of the German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche. Writing in 1882, the same year in which he famously declared that "God is dead," Nietzsche had this to say:

The American lust for gold, and the breathless haste with which they work,...is already beginning to infect old Europe with its ferocity and is spreading a lack of spirituality like a blanket. Even now one is ashamed of

resting and prolonged reflection almost gives people a bad conscience. One thinks with a watch in one's hand, even as one eats one's midday meal while reading the latest news of the stock market. One lives as if one might always "miss out on something"...Living in a constant chase after gain compels people to expend their spirit to the point of exhaustion in continual pretence and overreaching and anticipating others. Virtue has come to consist in doing something in less time than someone else.

The Absence of Joy

When Nietzsche talked about "spirituality" and the human "spirit," he was referring to specific aspects of human life—e.g. culture, good taste, "the ear and the eye for the melody of movements," honesty, openness, sociability and the arts, "taking a walk with ideas and with friends" and particularly what he calls "joy." "People are becoming increasingly suspicious of all joy," he commented. Intriguingly, in the film *American Beauty*, Lester asks the success-driven Carolyn, "When did you become so joyless?"

There would, for example, be many today who would agree with William James (brother of the American novelist Henry James) who, in a letter written to H.G. Wells in 1906, referred to "the moral flabbiness born of the exclusive worship of the bitch-goddess Success." He went on to say, "That—with the squalid cash interpretation put on the word 'success'—is our national disease."

A certain kind of success, in other words, or a particular attitude to that kind of success, corrodes and erodes the human spirit. The title of a book sums it up well—*The Paradox of Success: When Winning at Work Means Losing at Life*. That kind of success is ultimately failure. Thomas Merton, author of *Seven Storey Mountain*, was an American Trappist monk who found a great deal of fame and fortune as a writer in the second part of the 20th century. He was called "the most famous Catholic in America after John F. Kennedy." He had two incisive comments to make about his success as an author. One is personal—"I have a comfortable sense of success that I know to be meaningless." The other comment describes "the colossal sense of failure in the midst of success that is characteristic of America (but which America can't face)."

Merton, doubtless, had his own diagnosis of the "sense of failure in the midst of success." For our own purposes it is, perhaps, sufficient to say that any "cash interpretation" put on the word "success" is indeed "squalid" and leaves its adherents spiritually dissatisfied and empty. Nor is this the experience simply of individuals who go down that route—it can come to possess entire companies and communities. It can possess a whole marketplace. At root it buys into the

illusion that success is “something added to a person rather than something that grows out of a person.”

Back to the Bible

What does the Bible have to say about success and failure? The first thing to stress is that the two words are unknown in the Bible—in the sense that we use them today. Some English translations of both the Hebrew and the Greek originals refer to plans, for example, that succeed or fail. If there is any biblical theme about success and failure, it is linked to particular courses of action that meet with success or failure. The outcome depends, in most cases, on whether God is behind it or not. But no biblical writer speaks of individuals as being a “success” or a “failure.”

The single perspective says a lot about the Bible’s worldview and priorities, as compared with the modern attitudes outlined in previous pages. It is not that in the Bible there is no concern for material things—quite the opposite, in fact. The Old Testament, in particular, is constantly talking about both prosperity and adversity. This is classically summed up in the ultimatum put by Moses to the people of Israel in virtually his last instructions: “See, I have set before you life and death, blessing and curses. Choose life....”

In these words Moses is encapsulating the Old Testament understanding of success and failure. Prosperity is the result of the blessing of God and is to be found in the presence, the protection and the provision of God. The biblical writers are well aware that merely material prosperity is quite possible without any acknowledgment of God. But it remains merely material and does not lead to abundant living. In fact, it results in adversity at virtually every other level, in remoteness from God in life and in death. That is living under a curse—it is certainly not a blessing. “To fail is to have God’s blessing withdrawn, lose the esteem of God, shrivel up spiritually, become small-souled.”

God and Human Failure

One of the key perspectives in the Old Testament comes almost like a refrain throughout the narrative of Israel’s most successful leader—David. From the time, at the age of 16, he triumphed over Goliath with a sling and a stone, David knew full well that any success he had was due to the presence and the blessing of God—“In everything he did he had great success, because the Lord was with him....” “The Lord gave David victory wherever he went.” David himself was happy to acknowledge this publicly: “With my God I can leap over a wall...It is God who arms me with strength...He enables me to stand on the heights...You stoop down to make me great...You have made me the head of the nations...Exalted be God, my Savior.”

But, even with David, it was his success that proved his undoing. Standing on the heights and head of the nations, he lost touch with God and followed his own inclinations. As a direct result, he acted in defiance of all he knew about God’s will and forfeited the blessing of God—unleashing a trail of misery and havoc at home and at work. David failed at the point where he was succeeding. Very little changed for him materially, but in his soul and in his spirit he became a scarred man and his family became a scarred family—hugely successful, but deeply scarred.

That is why the word “prosper” is much more helpful than the modern word “succeed.” One of the relevant Hebrew words in the Old Testament occurs 65 times—it refers to successful activities in different areas of life, usually in the sense of accomplishing effectively what is intended.” It is also used of certain things that work properly—e.g. a tree “thrives,” a weapon “prosper,” a journey “succeeds,” a waistcloth “is useful.” In general terms the Hebrew word “emphasizes that God alone is the one who gives success.” God’s presence and God’s grace enable both people and things to be effective and to work properly—i.e. to meet his desires as Creator and Sustainer of life.

God’s Shalom

The other key Hebrew word occurs over 250 times and is linked with the first. It is *shalom*. It is commonly used as a greeting today—as then—but it enshrines all that human beings long for and (still more significantly) all that God intends for his world. It covers fundamental realities such as peace, friendship, happiness, well-being, prosperity, health, luck, kindness, salvation. *Shalom*, therefore, comes to us as an alternative goal to the modern drive for success. “All *shalom* comes from God and he is the foundation of *shalom*. *Shalom* is the result of restored righteousness and cannot be achieved while one is persisting in sin and evil.”

So, how do we discover the *shalom* of God? How do we establish that *shalom* in our daily lives at work, at home, with others, on our own? Here we need to return to the same words quoted earlier, when we referred to the illusion that success is “something added to a person rather than something that grows out of a person.” If I am more concerned for the person I am becoming than for the things I am achieving or the results I am producing, I will remain open to God’s will for me, God’s word to me, God’s ways with me.

The Prince of Peace

This is where Jesus Christ presents himself to us as the prince of peace, or the one who bestows *shalom* on those who acknowledge him as the Lord of their lives. This prince of peace “is himself the whole man, the perfectly integrated, rounded personality, at one

with God and humankind.” Because he is whole, integrated, rounded, he can make us whole as we make room for him day by day. “On a personal level, peace means fulfillment; to die in peace is to have lived a fulfilled life, to have achieved all God planned. Peace is well-being and a freedom from anxiety. In relationship it is goodwill and harmony. Towards God, it is the full realization of his favor.”

Success, then, is to reach the end of our lives having achieved what God put us here to become i.e. like his Son, Jesus Christ. Putting it like that underlines that we cannot achieve this by ourselves. We need the blessing and the grace of God. More than that, we need the daily presence of God, because *shalom* “is the gift of God and can be received only in his presence.” Jesus himself IS our *shalom*. He preached *shalom*. He made *shalom* possible and available through the blood of his cross and he himself is our *shalom*, our peace. As the prince of peace he looks after our success and he looks after our failures.

There is a glorious prayer of blessing, given by God to Moses to pass on to Aaron as high priest to pronounce and to go on pronouncing on the people of Israel: “The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to

you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace (*shalom*).” God’s blessing, God’s protection, God’s presence, God’s grace, God’s peace—that all adds up to being fulfilled and being complete. That is success. Anything else is, ultimately, failure.

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