



Notes and Excerpts from:

QUESTIONING SUCCESS

Why do I need God if I've got all I need?

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Psalm 14:1, Luke 12:13-21, Ecclesiastes 1, Philipians 3:8-14

From a Christian perspective, there's absolutely nothing wrong with success. As Christians, we do not oppose success or pleasure or prosperity. We believe that our Father in heaven loves us and wants for us to succeed, especially in ways that will stand the test of time. When it comes to success, God is our greatest advocate and champion.

BUT SUCCESS IS ELUSIVE

Success is like a mirage, shimmering in the desert, just over the next dune. When you reach it, it disappears.

Think of the wealthy people you know. How many of them are satisfied with their success? Most of the wealthy people I've known over the years haven't been satisfied at all. They always have their eyes on that bigger house, that nicer boat, that fancier car, etc.

Again and again we hear this same report from the rich and famous, who say, "I've made it to the top, but I still haven't found what I'm looking for." Like tennis star Boris Becker, who was the youngest player to win at Wimbledon, fabulously wealthy, married to a beautiful model, friends with the stars, and yet while he was at the top of his game, he was also suicidal. He had it all, but his sense of emptiness nearly killed him. The same could be said for so many other athletes and performers and heroes in our culture, and in every other culture around the world, and throughout human history.

Solomon was the greatest emperor in ancient Israel. He had everything: power, money, wisdom, wives, and children. Yet toward the end of his life he wrote Ecclesiastes, in which he grieved the impermanence of success. Having tasted success in most every way imaginable, Solomon still found it all to be a "vanity of vanities"—a glimmering mirage.

Thus, success is a paradox. There *are* successful people like Boris Becker. But such people don't feel successful. When they arrive, the mirage vanishes and reappears on the horizon.

All of us already know this to be true. We live in the richest time in history, among the richest people in history. We may not feel rich, but in comparison with the overwhelming majority of the earth's peoples through the centuries whose short lives were plagued by disease, fear and oppression, we are fabulously rich. We have all we need and so much more. Yet having gotten here, we're still not satisfied because of the elusive nature of success.

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WHY IS SUCCESS ELUSIVE?

Christians believe that the innate drive to succeed is God-given, and it stems from the *Imago Dei*, the image of God within us. (Genesis 1-2.) In the beginning, God made humanity in his image and endowed us with dignity that comes in part from doing. Work isn't evil, it's something good that God gave us in order that we might be like him. And whatever our work, we were made with the expectation that it wouldn't be futile, but that it would last.

Thus the elusive nature of success is not a part of the created order. It's not the way God designed the universe. Rather, it's a consequence of humanity's fall into sin.

When sin entered our world (Genesis 3), two things happened. First, we lost our ability to do our jobs well. Whether because of our own sin, or the brokenness of the world, work became difficult, filled with unanticipated setbacks and difficulties, thorns and thistles.

Second, when sin entered our world, we took our eyes off of God. Whereas we used to do our work for God's sake, on the basis of our relationship with him, we began to look to ourselves as our *raison d'être*. And as soon as we did that, we lost any hope of ever being satisfied. As soon as we began to measure success against one another (as Cain did with Abel in Genesis 4), success became a mirage on the horizon. It's been that way ever since.

So, from a Christian perspective, the problem with success isn't God's opposition to it, but rather our sinfulness that keeps us from ever attaining it. As a result, we're all part of the worldwide fraternity of failure.

THE WORLDWIDE FRATERNITY OF FAILURE

As we've seen, every person in every culture struggles with the elusive nature of success. Different people deal with it in different ways apart from God:

1. There are those like Boris Becker who succeed, but instead of celebrating are plagued by despair, because they still haven't found what they're looking for, namely the relationship with God that was the original driver of success. Thus Boris Becker succeeded as a tennis player, but *he felt like a failure*, because his heart was longing for God.
2. There are those who haven't yet tasted success, at least according to their own standards. And so they keep trying and trying and trying. In their rare moments of reflection they'll tell you that *they feel like failures*, because after trying for so long, they still haven't succeeded.
3. There are those who give up, saying, "All this effort isn't getting me anywhere. I'm just going to settle with what I've already achieved." But there's not a lot of joy in their resignation, because deep down inside *there's a sense of failure*, like they should have been able to achieve more.

What all of these people have in common is that to one degree or another they *feel like failures*. But what about those rare instances of people who—apart from God—genuinely feel successful? What about the people who ask, “Why do I need God if I’ve got all I need?” They may not know it yet, but failure will be part of their story as well.

Jesus told a parable of just such a man in Luke 12:13-21. The man in the parable was a great success, and unlike so many others, he felt full rather than empty. He had so much wealth that he had to tear down his barns and build bigger ones. And so he congratulated himself, and sat down to enjoy his retirement savings. But as Jesus pointed out, there was still one thing the man hadn’t accounted for, one thing that all his retirement savings couldn’t provide, and that was life after death. Luke 12:20. *But God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’*

In all his preparation for retirement, the man hadn’t thought to prepare for death. So God called him a fool, because he learned the hard way that you can’t take it with you. It may seem a bit harsh for God to call this man a fool, but you first have to understand that Jesus’ parable is actually a dramatic rendering of Psalm 14:1, which reads, “The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God.’” Jesus’ story teaches what can happen when someone chooses to believe in nothing more than himself and his own comfort. From God’s perspective, all of this man’s wealth is the result of blessing that comes from the hand of a God he doesn’t believe in. So in the end, the man’s self-confidence is exposed as folly. He’s no more successful than anyone else.

Death is the final card that trumps every other, the weightiest of evidence proving that failure is a universal human experience. All have sinned. All will die, and then any wealth or influence or knowledge won’t matter in the least. We’re all part of the universal fraternity of failure. All of us, that is, except for Jesus.

CHRIST THE SUCCEEDER

It would be very sad if failure were the end of the story for humanity, but thankfully it’s not. The good news of Christianity is that God loved the world so much that he sent Jesus into the world, to live a perfectly successful life. Of course, Jesus was far from a success in the eyes of the world. He never had a big house, or a lot of money. While he did at one point during his life have thousands of followers, they all abandoned him before he died. And then of course he was arrested and tortured and humiliated and cruelly executed nailed to a cross outside of Jerusalem. By the world’s standards, that could never be considered a success story.

But from God’s perspective, Jesus was perfect. When Jesus was baptized, the heavens opened and God proclaimed, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased.” In all his life and ministry, through temptation in the wilderness, and opposition from the religious leaders, and persecution under the Roman authorities, never during any of these moments did Jesus sin against our heavenly Father. Everything Jesus did and said was good and right and true. Perfect! Consequently, on the night he was handed over to suffering and death, Jesus was able to say that he had accomplished the work that God had given him to do. (John 17:4). Then he went to the cross as a perfect man, the quintessential success story, to die as a failure in our place.

That's why Christians can say that when it comes to success, God is our greatest advocate and champion. God so wants us to succeed that he was willing to die in our place, to swap his life out for ours, so that the shame and loss of our failures might not be counted against us. Instead of having to hide all our failures, we bring them to him and ask him for forgiveness and restoration.

THE UNIVERSAL FELLOWSHIP OF SUCCESS

Throughout the New Testament, the writers affirm again and again that 3 days after Jesus' death, God brought him back to life, in order to declare to the world that Jesus' perfect life and sacrifice had achieved victory over sin and death for ever more. And then Jesus sent his followers out into the world, to share the good news of Jesus' victory, and to invite people of every tribe and tongue to participate in the universal fellowship of Jesus' success, including eternal life in him. This is the good news of Jesus: He succeeded where everyone else failed. Knowing Jesus brings freedom and relief from the treadmill. Knowing Jesus is like finally arriving to that oasis, and tasting the cool water, and resting in the shade of the trees, and knowing without a shadow of a doubt that it's not a mirage, but you've finally and forever arrived.

The Apostle Paul described this feeling in several places in his New Testament writings. By all accounts Paul was very successful, as a Roman citizen and a person of high birth and a scholar and the leader of a religious movement. Yet he gladly gave it all up, he counted it all as dung (Philippians 3). Why? "For the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord and the power of his resurrection."

CONCLUSION

Twentieth Century Christian missionary and martyr Jim Elliot said, "He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep in order to gain what he cannot lose."

There are countless self-help books that will tell you how to hang on to what you cannot keep by getting some exercise, adjusting your work-life balance, etc. And maybe some of these things are factors in the way we feel. But deep inside, we know there's got to be more.

What a relief and a joy it is to find Jesus in the midst of the desert. Jesus succeeded for the sake of all of us who have failed. Find him and put your faith in him, and then you'll know the joy of success.