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SO YOU ARE A SUCCESS?

Today's Text: Ezekiel Chaps 26-27

Extracts:

The word of the Lord came again to [Ezekiel], saying, “Now, son of man,... say to Tyre, ‘You who are situated at the entrance of the sea, merchant of the peoples on many coastlands. ... *Your borders are in the midst of the seas. Your builders have perfected your beauty. ... When your wares went out by sea, you satisfied many people; you enriched the kings of the earth with your many luxury goods and your merchandise. But you are broken by the seas in the depths of the waters; your merchandise and the entire company will fall in your midst. All the inhabitants of the isles will be astonished at you; their kings will be greatly afraid, and their countenance will be troubled. The merchants among the peoples will hiss at you; you will become a horror, and be no more forever*” [Ezek. 27: 1, 2, 4, 33-36]

Zach Johnson was the surprise winner of the 2007 Masters Golf tournament held in April in Augusta, Georgia, USA, beating Tiger Woods to the second place.¹ That win lifted the 31-year old American from the 56th to the 15th place in world rankings. When asked what accounted for his phenomenal success, he said, “I think I am mentally tough. And I had a game plan that I stuck to.” However, in the next two tournaments soon after Augusta, he came 84th and 6th respectively.

That story illustrates certain features of what we call success or how we react to it. When we succeed in something, we make superhuman claims for achieving it. For example, if Zach was always mentally tough, as he claimed after beating Tiger Woods at Augusta, why did it elude him in the subsequent tournaments? Did that victory make him mentally tougher than Tiger who at age 31 had already won 12 major tournaments? Can even Tiger himself claim to be a success in life just because he is a success in golf? Do we really know what success is all about? What is success in the eyes of God? Is it possible for us to have success God's way?

Those and more are the issues that we shall examine in today's lesson.

¹ Story based on the following sources: “Masters winner leaps up rankings,” <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/-/sport2/hi/golf/6538677.stm> of 2007/04/09; and “Zach Johnson,” <http://sports.espn.go.com/golf/players/profile?playerID=686>

1. Tyre's wealth among nations: Was it success or just five minutes in the sun?

Tyre (or Tyrus) was one of the Phoenician city-states in ancient times. Situated on the Eastern shores of the Mediterranean Sea, the Phoenician sea ports (now in modern Lebanon) controlled the trade between the then east and west. In the past, they had cordial relations with Israel. For example, during the construction of the temple and the king's palace in Jerusalem, it was Hiram the king of Tyre that supplied Solomon timber and skilled workmen [**1 Kgs 5: 1-11**].

In the days of Ezekiel, Tyre remained a strong sea port [**Ezek. 26: 17; 27: 3**] and centre of world trade that attracted merchants and professionals from all over the then known world [**Ezek. 27: 24-27**]. There was evidence of great riches and material success. They lived in "pleasant houses" from which rang out songs and the sound of harps [**Ezek. 26: 12, 13**]. They had seen their city as impregnable to foreign conquest because it sat "in the midst of the seas" [**27: 1-4**]. However, material affluence also brought out in Tyre the ugly side of success that can be summarized as follows:

a) *They taunted their less successful neighbours*

When Jerusalem was attacked and destroyed by the Babylonians, the city of Tyre rejoiced, saying, "Aha! She is broken who was the gateway of the peoples; *now she is turned over to me; I shall be filled; she is laid waste*" [**Ezek. 26: 2**].

When people attain success, they may not celebrate it until they know the impact it will have on their competitors or enemies. In an interesting article on "What comes after success?" Jim Thornton described the phenomenon as follows: "It's not enough that I succeed, but my friends must also fall."²

We have a good example of that from the book of Esther. Haman was the key adviser to King Ahasuerus, Queen Esther's husband, and he saw the queen's uncle, Mordecai, as a sworn enemy that had to be destroyed. Haman had great riches and the king had "promoted him and advanced him above the officials and servants of the king" but Mordecai was a humble gatekeeper who had nothing but his integrity based on the fear of God. One day, the queen feasted Haman and the king alone. Haman was thrilled and glad "but when (he) saw Mordecai in the king's gate, and that he did not stand or tremble before him, he was filled with indignation against Mordecai" [**Esth. 5: 1- 13**].

See the kind of stories that the Western media carry about the developing world. They concentrate on the hardships and the violence and the obvious statistical lie that a majority of the people there live on less than a dollar per

² http://men.msn.com/chan_printarticle.aspx?cp-documentid=4096352

day! They will never report on the significant strides in political reforms and economic development, especially in China, India, Brazil and Nigeria. That is a form of taunting bred by superiority complex.

b) *They were thus not prepared for their coming downfall!*

By focusing on their invincibility, they became swollen-headed and underrated competition. Therefore, as they taunted the people of God who were being punished for their sins of disobedience, God judged them. He showed the prophet Ezekiel what would befall Tyre in the future, how He would cause many nations to come up against and destroy it [**Ezek. 26: 3-21; 27: 24-36**]. Therefore, the material success that its citizens had thought would last forever would be destroyed. In deed, in due course, Alexander the Great came with his ferocious Greek troops and wiped out Tyre and other Phoenician cities. The Romans that came later tried to rebuild Tyre but it could not return to its old glory. The ruins can be found today in the Lebanese town of the same name.

2. The limitations of human-defined success

Tyre was not a success; it only had its five minutes in the sun like the rest of us who define success in human terms. Success so defined has the following limitations, among others:

a) *It is too materialistic*

Most of us define our self-worth by our *net worth*, that is, the size of our bank accounts, cars and houses. Therefore, we kill, steal or destroy in order to attain or maintain it. However, material wealth depletes or deteriorates over time. Sooner than later, we have little or nothing to show for it. That is why every generation produces its millionaires! The Rockefellers of the past have given way to the Bill Gates of the present.

Solomon was the richest man that ever lived. At a stage, the weight of gold that came to him every year was “six hundred and sixty-six talents of gold” [**1 Kgs 10: 14**], that is, close to US\$4 billion! If modern Israel still had that kind of money, why would it rely so heavily on American aid? That shows that material success cannot last. That is why the word of God says, “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where the thieves break in and steal” [**Matt. 6: 19**].

b) *It is too specific*

Most of us are successful only around our God-given talents and may be failures everywhere else. For example, in sports, Pele is known for soccer, Michael Jordan for basketball, Brian Lara for cricket, Tiger Woods for golf

and Muhammad Ali for boxing. How many of these great people can be your role-models in marriage or other aspects of life? Diego Maradona (the hero of Argentina's 1986 World Cup victory) is arguably the best dribbler in soccer but today, he is in and out of drug rehabilitation centres! Life is much bigger than one talent can satisfy. Therefore, success in life cannot be specific but total. That is why the word of God enjoins us to hold on to "the word of life" so that we may rejoice in the day of Christ that we have not run or laboured in vain [**Phil. 2: 16**].

c) *It ultimately frustrates!*

The biggest challenge with human success is how to maintain it. Tiger Woods has to keep winning otherwise the world will soon forget him. After winning all his epic battles in the boxing ring, Mohammed Ali now needs human support to walk steadily. After leading Britain to victory in the Second World War, Winston Churchill lost the next general elections! The world's richest man ever, King Solomon, wrote in frustration, "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity" [**Eccl. 1: 2**], and added, "for what has man for all his labour, and for the striving of his heart with which he has toiled under the sun? *For all his days are sorrowful, ... even in the night his heart takes no rest*" [**2: 22-23**].

UCLA clinical psychologist, Professor Steven Berglass, has published a study of highly successful people, ranging from *Fortune 500* CEOs to Olympic gold medalists.³ Most of these people suffered from what he has called "supernova burnout," that is, "a psychological disorder that results when very successful people feel anxiety, despondency, and depression over the fact that they are trapped in a career from which they can't escape but which no longer provides them psychological gratification." That disorder may in part explain why successful Hollywood stars go on to do bizarre things. For example, after making the epic movie, *The Passion of the Christ* [2004], Mel Gibson was arrested for drunk driving!

Clearly, if we are to continue to run after success that will satisfy, it must not be limited to earthly pursuits or be talent-specific. Otherwise, we shall continue to be frustrated because success so defined is a moving target. It is like constructing a road that leads no where and yet you cannot stop working! It can *never* satisfy.

3. Therefore, true success has to be God-centred!

Success has to be related to the purpose of our existence here on earth. After Solomon had reviewed the futility of human pursuits, he drew the following important conclusion: "*Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is man's all.* For God will bring every work into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil" [**Eccl. 12: 13-14**]. When God was encouraging Joshua before he

³ *Reclaiming the Fire: How Successful People Overcome Burnout* [Random House, 2001]

embarked on the conquest of the Promised Land, He said, “This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate in it day and night, that you may observe to do according to all that is written in it. *For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success* [Josh. 1: 8]. John, the disciple of the Lord, adds, “Beloved, I pray that you may prosper in all things and be in health, *just as your soul prospers*” [3Jn 2].

From those verses, we can postulate that true success has to be God-centred., with the following features:

a) *It is total*

It covers *both material and spiritual* success but you must put *the spiritual ahead of the material*. That was why Jesus told the people during the Sermon on the Mount to seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness and all the other (earthly) things shall be added [Matt. 6: 33]. When Peter asked Jesus what reward there was for those that had given up earthly pleasures to follow Him, He replied, “There is *no one* who has left house or parents or brothers or wife or children, *for the sake of the kingdom of God, who shall not receive many times more in this present time, and in the age to come eternal life*” [Lk 18: 28-29].

b) *It is futuristic*

You cannot say that you have succeeded in life *until after your death!* After all, what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose his soul in hell? Therefore, God-centred success is in your future, after your death. That gives you continuous challenge to strive for it and there is thus no room for frustration because there are always more or higher mountains to climb on the road to salvation.

Realizing that we are citizens of heaven [Phil. 3: 20], Paul wrote, “I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things behind, and reaching forward to those things which are ahead; *I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus*” [vv. 13-14].

c) *It is certain*

Success the human way is risky or unpredictable and largely uncertain and by chance. It is true that hard work or talent pays but it is hardly the hardest working or the most talented that is most successful [Eccl. 9: 11]! On the other hand, God-centred success is certain because Jesus has won the prize and He is waiting for us to come and join Him on the victory podium. When the seventy disciples that Jesus had sent returned, they rejoiced that they had been able to cast out demons and heal the sick in

His name. But He told them, “Do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you; but rather rejoice *because your names are written in heaven*” [Lk 10: 17-20]. Having seen a glimpse of the imperishable crown, Paul wrote, “I run thus: *not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air*” [1 Cor. 9: 26]. It is that sure!

d) *It satisfies!*

When you pursue success God’s way, you derive maximum satisfaction and inner peace [Is. 26: 3; Phil. 4: 6-7]. You do not need to compare your success with another person’s because every labourer in His vineyard will be paid a penny per day [Matt. 20: 1-16]! Whether you die young or old, you both receive salvation by Christ Jesus. Whether you lived a righteous life all your life or you received Christ at your death-bed, you would both enjoy the kingdom of God alike. Satisfaction, happiness or peace is indivisible!

4. Conclusion: True success means salvation by Christ Jesus!

Property (material wealth) is not the same thing as prosperity (the ability to enjoy material blessings). Prosperity is not success either because we came into the world naked and we shall return naked. Your success will be determined by where you *choose* to spend eternity. You must make the choice while you are still alive because after death, you shall face judgment [Heb. 9: 27]. *When you accept Jesus as your personal Lord and Saviour and live that way for the rest of your life, you are on the road to true success.* Anything else is vanity.

So, are you yet on God’s success path?