

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Distinguishing things that differ: Success or faithfulness in God's work

Good morning and welcome to 'Truth for Today'. This is the third in our series of talks on 'Distinguishing things that differ'. Our subject, 'Success or faithfulness in God's work' is one over which many servants of God have agonised through succeeding generations.

It was a cold, dark winter's night at a bleak moorland station. The snow was falling heavily and was being whipped into drifts by the bitter east wind. The last train of the day had just left, leaving behind a large number of passengers all wanting to get home as quickly as possible. At the exit, the ticket collector was carefully inspecting each person's ticket before letting them through the barrier. There were murmurings from the people in the queue. "Why doesn't he just let us through the barrier on a night like this?" When this was put to the inspector, he pointed to the station master looking through the window in his room upstairs and replied, "Whatever the people in the queue think, it's what 'the man' up there thinks that matters!" He might not have much success in dealing with the queue, but the station master could see that he was doing his job faithfully.

Of course, success and faithfulness in God's work are not mutually exclusive. It would be as wrong to say that my lack of success is because I am being faithful as it would be to say that I can only be successful if I cease to be faithful to God's word. God may choose to crown His servant's faithfulness with success.

We live in a world which applauds success. The Olympic athlete with his or her gold, silver or bronze medal enjoys the world's applause and rightly so. The runners up who have faithfully carried out their training programmes over months and years are largely unrecognised. This worship of success surely challenges us as Christians as to where our priorities lie. Speaking reverently, is our priority what the Man up there, God Himself, thinks of our service for Him? Dietrich Bonhoeffer, executed by Hitler during World War II, wrote, "The figure of the Crucified invalidates all thought which takes success for its standard."

It is interesting that the word 'success' occurs only once in the Bible in Joshua 1:8. On the death of Moses, Joshua was God's appointed leader of the children of Israel. Just before the momentous task of leading the people into the promised land, God spoke to Joshua, "*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.*" Faithfulness to God's word would bring its own success. It is true that in the Authorised (King James) Version of the Bible, the word 'succeed' occurs once, in Deuteronomy 25:6 and has the sense of 'following on', whether one nation taking over the place of another or a family member moving up the hierarchy.

By contrast, the word 'faithful' or 'faithfulness' occurs a little over 100 times. This almost total silence of Scripture on the subject of success compared with this emphasis on faithfulness must surely indicate where God's priorities lie! However, while the word 'success' occurs so seldom, there are occasions in Scripture of what today might be described as successful ventures. This morning, I want to look at just three such examples to see what we might learn from them. They are:

1. David's victory over Goliath (1 Samuel 17:1-58);
2. Peter's preaching on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:14-39); and
3. Philip's encounter with the Ethiopian treasurer (Acts 8:26-40).

1. David's victory over Goliath

At your leisure, please read 1 Samuel 17:1-58. The story of David's success in killing the giant, Goliath, and so winning the victory for the Israelites is probably a familiar one. As we read the story carefully, we find, however, that one recurring theme is David's faithfulness. It was David's faithfulness to his father's command that brought him to the battlefield: "*Then Jesse said to his son David, 'Take now for your brothers an ephah of this dried grain and these ten loaves, and run to your brothers at the camp. And carry these ten cheeses to the captain of their thousand, and see how your brothers fare, and bring back news of them' ... So David rose early in the morning ... and came to the camp*" (1 Samuel 17:17-20).

His older brother, Eliab, scorned his arrival in the camp, saying, *"Why did you come down here? ... I know your pride and the insolence of your heart, for you have come down to see the battle"* (1 Samuel 17:28). But David replied, *"What have I done now? Is there not a cause?"* (1 Samuel 17:29).

Above all, faithfulness to God was the moving characteristic of David's heart. Even King Saul, a man who stood head and shoulders above all his subjects, was too afraid to face Goliath. David had to say to Saul, *"This uncircumcised Philistine ... has defied the armies of the living God"* (1 Samuel 17:36). It was David's concern for the honour of his God that moved him, with only his sling and his stones, to face Goliath. Listen to David's confident challenge to Goliath: *"You come to me with a sword, with a spear, and with a javelin. But I come to you in the name of the LORD of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This day the LORD will deliver you into my hand...that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel"* (1 Samuel 17:45-46). Little wonder that later David would be described *"as a man after God's own heart"* (Acts 13:22).

Goliath was defeated and the army of the Philistines was destroyed. So great was the victory that the women sang, *"Saul has slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands"* (1 Samuel 18:7). As a result, Saul was moved to jealousy and tried to kill David who was forced to escape for his life. There came a day when David and his men were hiding at the back of a cave when Saul stood in the front of the cave. David's men thought that this was the perfect opportunity for David to kill Saul and be safe for ever. But David's faithfulness to God still prevailed. He said to his men, *"The LORD forbid that I should do this thing to my master, the LORD'S anointed, to stretch out my hand against him, seeing he is the anointed of the LORD"* (see 1 Samuel 24:1-6).

2. Peter's preaching on the day of Pentecost

Ten days after the ascension of the Lord Jesus (Acts 1:9-11), as promised (Acts 1:4-8), He sent down the Holy Spirit to indwell His disciples. On that day of Pentecost, the apostles and the other followers of Jesus numbered around 120. The coming of the Holy Spirit marked the birthday of the Church. It also transformed those disciples from a bunch of frightened believers, hiding away in an upper room lest they suffer the same fate as their Master, into a group of confident believers who were ready to stand up and be counted for their Master.

As the spokesman of the group, Peter stood up and preached to the multitudes still in Jerusalem (Acts 2:14-39). But what would he say that would lead to the growth of the Church? Would he speak with honeyed words to attract the crowds? Faithfulness to his Lord moved Peter to challenge the crowds: *"Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a Man attested by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs which God did through Him in your midst, as you yourselves also know - Him, being delivered by the determined counsel and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death"* (Acts 2:22-24). Hardly words to endear an audience, you might think!

But what was the result? Those listening to Peter's message were cut to the heart and asked, *"What shall we do?"* Acts 2:38-42 then tells us, *"Peter said to them, 'Repent, and let every one of you be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins ...' Then those who gladly received his word were baptised; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them. And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers."* On the birthday of the Church, the number of believers dramatically shot up from 120 to more than 3,000! (see acts 2:41). God crowned Peter's faithful preaching with success.

3. Philip's encounter with the Ethiopian treasurer

For the last of our successful ventures, we will now look at Philip's encounter with the Ethiopian treasurer. After this broadcast, you may like to read the story in Acts 8:1-40.

It was not long after the birthday of the Church that, as a result of persecution, the believers were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Among them was Philip who, incidentally, is the only person specifically named as an evangelist in Scripture (Acts 21:8), although it is clear that many of those early disciples were active evangelists.

We read, *"Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria and preached Christ to them. And the multitudes with one accord heeded the things spoken by Philip, hearing and seeing the miracles which he did. For unclean spirits, crying with a loud voice, came out of many who were possessed; and many who were paralysed and lame were healed. And there was great joy in that city"* (Acts 8:5-8). It is clear that Philip was in the middle of what today would be described as a very successful Gospel campaign.

What happened next? We read, *"Now an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip saying, 'Arise and go toward the south along the road which goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza. This is desert'"* (Acts 8:26). Philip might well have wondered what God was up to! Here he was being asked to leave a successful Gospel campaign, where many were

being blessed, to go south to Jerusalem, about 40 miles away, and then proceed along the road to Gaza, another 60 miles away! The bleakness of this new situation is further emphasised, *"This is desert!"*

Who was Philip likely to meet in this unlikely situation? It is a tribute to Philip's faithfulness to his Lord that we read, *"So he arose and went, And behold, a man of Ethiopia, a eunuch of great authority under Candace the queen of the Ethiopians, who had charge of all her treasury, and had come to Jerusalem to worship, was returning. And sitting in his chariot, he was reading Isaiah the prophet. Then the Spirit said to Philip, 'Go near and overtake this chariot'"* (Acts 8:27-29).

Once again we see Philip's faithfulness to the Lord. Would he be rebuffed if he approached this complete stranger? We read, *"So Philip ran to him, and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah, and said, 'Do you understand what you are reading?' And he said, 'How can I, unless someone guides me?' And he asked Philip to come up and sit with him. The place in the scripture which he read was this, 'He was led as a sheep to the slaughter; and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so He opened not His mouth. In His humiliation His justice was taken away, and who will declare His generation? For His life is taken from the earth.' So the eunuch answered Philip and said, 'I ask you, of whom does the prophet say this, of himself or of some other man?' Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning at this Scripture, preached Jesus to him. Now as they went down the road, they came to some water. And the eunuch said, 'See, here is water. What hinders me from being baptised?' Then Philip said, 'If you believe with all your heart, you may.' And he answered and said, 'I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.' So he commanded the chariot to stand still. And both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptised him"* (Acts 8:30-38).

What an amazing sequence of events! Philip by himself on a lonely road; a high up Ethiopian official clearly searching after God; their paths just happening to cross in that desert; the Ethiopian coming to faith in Christ. Did it all happen by chance? Not a bit of it! God again was crowning the faithfulness of His servant with success! Scripture does not tell us more but tradition has it that this was the beginning of Christianity in Ethiopia. The command of the Lord Jesus to His disciples, *"You shall be witnesses unto Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth"* (Acts 1:8) was being literally fulfilled.

The Lord's teaching on faithfulness and success

We need now to consider the teaching of the Lord Jesus Himself on this subject of faithfulness and success. He told a parable of a master who entrusted his servants with varying sums of money before leaving on an extended trip. On his return, he called his servants to him to give account. We read, *"So he who had received five talents came and brought five other talents, saying, 'Lord, you delivered to me five talents; look, I have gained five more talents besides them.' His lord said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.' He also who had received two talents came and said, 'Lord, you delivered to me two talents; look, I have gained two more talents besides them.' His lord said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a few things. I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord'"* (Matthew 25:14-30).

Three things should be noticed about this important parable:

1. No comment is made about the success of these servants;
2. The lord's comment was concerned only with the faithfulness of his servants; and
3. The lord's praise of each servant was the same, despite their different degrees of success.

Conclusion

In closing, two other scriptures should be noticed. *"It is required in stewards that one be found faithful"* (1 Corinthians 4:2). Here, as in the parable, the emphasis is on faithfulness. The church in Smyrna, towards the end of the first century, was undergoing a time of severe persecution. The Lord's message to them was: *"Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life"* (Revelation 2:10). Being thrown into prison, facing possible martyrdom, might not be regarded as a very successful end to one's life's work, but God promises to His faithful servants the reward of success - the crown of life!

It is important to stress that our view of success may be different from God's view. As creatures of time, we can be very much concerned with the here and now. We want to see success and we want to see it now. God, with whom *"...one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day"* (2 Peter 3:8b) is able to take a much longer view of things.

May we all be encouraged to continue in faithful service for our Lord and Master, the Lord Jesus Christ, and leave with Him what success He may choose to add to that service! William Wilberforce, a leading campaigner in the abolition of

slavery, wrote, "Our motto must continue to be perseverance. And ultimately I trust the Almighty will crown our efforts with success." Such perseverance is, of course, an important element of faithfulness.

Thank you for listening.

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