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Faithful Is More Important Than Successful

By David Dunlap

I love the eleventh chapter of Hebrews. It contains God's biblical "Hall of Fame." It's filled with the stories of faithful heroes. It starts out listing the famous greats like Noah, Abraham, Joseph, and Moses. But toward the end of the chapter, there is a sudden shift. Instead of continuing to list the victorious heroes, the author turns his attention to those who didn't fare so well.

He speaks of faithful people who were rewarded with jeers, floggings, chains, and imprisonments. He points to others who were stoned, sawed in two, or killed by the sword. He recalls those who spent the bulk of their life destitute, wandering in deserts, or living in caves. Then he makes this shocking statement:

"These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised" (Hebrews 11:39NIV). In other words, their spiritual reward didn't come in their lifetime. It was found in the next.

An Important Biblical Admonition

There is always the danger in studying a victorious saint like Daniel, Joseph, or David because we can jump to the conclusion that if we do what they did, we will get the same amazing spiritual blessings. But that may not be true. "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, instruction in righteousness.."(2 Tim 3:16NKJV). The Bible gives us a template for living but doesn't come with the promise that we will all have the same results.

We may emerge victorious like Abraham, Joseph, Moses, or Daniel. Or we may be persecuted, martyred, marginalized, and exiled like the unnamed but faithful saints listed at the end of Hebrews 11. The ultimate outcome is up to God. It's out of our hands. Our job is not to win the battle; rather, it is to follow God's battle plan. There will be times when following God's plan doesn't seem to be working. But to those who are seeking to follow God's will, whether it works or not, it doesn't matter. Even when God's way seems to lead nowhere, it is still the right path to

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D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones
(1899-1981)

take. God is always right, even when we think He is wrong. That why we call Him God! Winning or losing is not the right scorecard. Obedience is all important. When we do the right thing, we are being faithful. Even if we get, what is from our human viewpoint, the wrong results.

Sometimes we hear preachers criticize the American evangelical church because of its waning influence. Others implore us to get right with God and then He will pour out spiritual revival on our nation. Is this kind of thinking on target? Is this the right scorecard?

Why Influence Is The Wrong Scorecard

I wish it worked that way. But it doesn't. Cultural influence has more to do with political power, those who design algorithms for social media, and those who control powerful entertainment companies, than whether or not the church is living up to its calling. And in times of unique visitation that we call spiritual revivals, their true source, have far more to do with God's sovereign grace than anything we do to produce it. It has been said, "God draws straight lines with crooked sticks. He always has." But it is foolish to give credit to the stick when God brings revival. To illustrate this point, the well-known preacher Dr. David Martyn Lloyd-Jones (1899-1981) often stated that revivals are a sovereign work of God. In his book *Preaching and Preachers*, he told the story of Welsh preacher David Morgan:

“David Morgan exercised the most remarkable and powerful ministry for about two years. What was the end of the story? Years later he said, ‘I went to bed one night still feeling like a lion, filled with a strange power that I enjoyed for two years. I woke up the next morning and found that I had become David Morgan once more.’ He lived for about fifteen years afterwards during which he exercised a most ordinary ministry. The power came, and the power was withdrawn. Such is the lordship of the Spirit! You cannot command this blessing you cannot order it; it is entirely the gift of God.”¹

Authentic Faith

We must always remember that authentic movements of God tend to be “organic.” That is; they are birthed by the Spirit and fueled by the Spirit. They are not dependent upon slick marketing, fancy church-planting philosophies, and fund-raising. That is not to say God can't use these things. He once spoke through a donkey. He collapsed the walls of a city with trumpet blasts. He can do whatever He wants! But so far, grandiose plans, team-building, and recruitment efforts haven't been his method of choice when it comes to revival and church-planting.

Authentic movements of God also tend to be unique. Even a cursory study of Scripture shows God seldom used the same method twice. Whether it was great miracles and battles of the Old Testament, the healings of Jesus day, or the miraculous expansion of the early church, there are not many molds that He used a second time. That is why church experts who study past revivals in the hopes of discovering and duplicating the recipe God

used in the past strikes me strange. The same goes for those who map out ambitious plans designed to mobilize Christians to plant hundreds of new churches, raise up hundreds of workers or impact the ungodly political decisions in Washington, DC.

That is not to say there is nothing to learn from studying how God worked in the past or that elaborate planning and prayer is a waste of time. It is simply to say that God seldom uses our game plan or follows our timetable. I have learned not to put my trust in any elaborate ministry plan, no matter how many folks jump on the bandwagon. I have found that the results never match the hype. At the end of the day, the success or failure of the Lord's work doesn't depend on human efforts. Indeed, in the work of the Lord, faithful is more important than successful.

The Example of the New Testament Church

We often look to the New Testament Church as a model of spiritual maturity and power. Yet it took a few hundred years for the early church to spread its influence to the point of significant cultural impact. During most of those first three centuries the New Testament Church was a persecuted minority. Don't miss that! We tend to think in terms of twenty to thirty years. But history is played out in centuries, not decades. What we might call failure might well be the foundation of what the Lord calls success. Moreover, what we call success might not be so great when we see it in the rearview mirror.

Powerful But Unfaithful

For instance, consider the final conquest of the Roman Empire by the early church. On the outside it looked like everything was great. The church's influence had finally reached a tipping point. The Roman emperor Constantine decreed an end to the persecution of Christians and made Christianity the de facto religion of the empire.

At that point it looked like a great victory. But in hindsight, the ascent to political and cultural power was actually a great tragedy. It weakened the church. The more powerful the church became, the more people joined in, not to follow Jesus, but to gain power and social acceptance. In other words, as the church grew more and more powerful, it became less and less faithful. Much the same thing holds true in the history of the American church. The periods of our greatest influence were not necessarily the periods of our greatest faithfulness.

Case Study: Jesus And His Apostles

On the other hand, Jesus and His apostles had little cultural influence. Of course, Jesus drew large crowds through His preaching and healing ministry. But by the time He ascended into heaven, His followers had dwindled to a few faithful disciples meeting in an upper room. As for the

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Apostles, all of them except one died a martyr's death. That's hardly winning over the culture. Yet they were as faithful as they come. Sometimes the culture positively responds to godly living and sometimes it doesn't. It's out of our hands. That is where the lives of believers like Daniel, Jeremiah, and Paul should be examined closely. These followers show us how to live in an ungodly world whether being promoted as Daniel or imprisoned like Joseph. The chief thing is to be faithful to God above all else.

Standing in The Gap

In the meantime, never underestimate the potential spiritual influence that just one faithful Daniel-like Christian can have. You might think you're insignificant. But you are not. Your role is far more important than you may realize. Sodom and Gomorrah would have been spared if there had been just ten faithful and righteous people living there (Genesis 18:20-33). Moses held back God's judgment on the Israelites when he stood in the breach pleading with God to spare them (Psalm 106:19-23). One lone believer in a family can influence all the family members powerfully for eternity (1 Corinthians 7:14).

Conclusion

Our God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked. He would much prefer they turn from their wicked ways and live. As He told Ezekiel, He is always looking for someone to stand in the gap and forestall His judgment. There is no reason that faithful follower cannot be you or me.

Endnotes

1. David Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers*, (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, MI, 1971), p. 323-324