

When Obedience Brings Disappointment

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March 2004

In military combat there are inevitably going to be heroes. World War II produced an outstanding American hero named Audie Murphy. Here is an excerpt from a newspaper article describing his heroism against the German army in France.

“On Jan 26, 1945, Audie Murphy climbed aboard a burning tank destroyer and fought off six [German] Tiger tanks and two reinforced rifle companies, earning what is still considered today as the most famous Medal of Honor act in World War II.¹

By the end of the war Murphy received every decoration for valor that the United States had to offer plus five decorations presented to him by France and Belgium. His acts of heroism earned him the title of the most decorated American hero of World War II.

But worthy as they are, what none of these citations mention is the fact that there were many others who performed similar acts but who never received any medals for their valor. In fact, countless soldiers were severely wounded or died in their efforts and received no recognition.

I have used this illustration from the natural world’s history to draw a parallel point in the spiritual kingdom of God. We all admire St. Augustine, Tertullian, Hus, Luther, Calvin, Wesley, Wycliffe, Knox, Moody, and many other famous heroes of the faith. We love to look at our heroes of the past and glory in their achievements. All of these men attained their lofty status through obedience to the Lord in what He directed them to do.

But in this teaching I want to draw attention to the fact that, like the unsung, fallen heroes of combat mentioned above, there are literally thousands of others who also obey what God has called them to do but are never recognized here on earth for their obedience. In every generation countless servants of God set out in their ministry call with great zeal only to discover that, as the years pass, what they have accomplished is not what they had imagined in the beginning. So many of God’s ministers look back on their ministry and because they haven’t soared to what they viewed as success, they imagine themselves to be a failure. But are they really failures?

[Please note that some, indeed, are failures. I refer to those who through laziness, sin, and lack of discipline fail to truly fulfill their call. But for the purpose of this

teaching, I am referring to those men and women called by God who, to the best of their ability, obeyed every word spoken to them by God, yet end up in a “less-than-spectacular” place of ministry.]

Responding to God’s Call

Let me make it clear that in a very real sense every Christian is called to the ministry. God has called every believer to spread the good news of the gospel to those he or she comes in contact with on a daily basis. That means if you are a shop keeper, a student, a farmer, a policeman, a full-time home maker, or whatever, you have a call on your life to tell others about Jesus. Most Christians fulfill their call out in the world earning a living in secular jobs.

But there are those Christians who are called to the ministry as a vocation. Their main life’s work is their ministry. These are the people to whom I am writing this teaching.

Expectations Arise

When we enter into the call of God on our lives, most of us do so with great zeal and high expectations. There is something in the human soul that causes us to always imagine ourselves excelling, or being very good at what we do. We think, if not now, certainly in the future, I will really succeed! We almost subconsciously begin to fixate on ministers whom we regard as “successful”! A young West African Bible school student may imagine himself in years to come as another Idahosa, or Reinhard Bonnke, or perhaps some local pastor who has a large church, or some outstanding preacher in his or her area. In our initial years we all look up to those who have a reputation for success with a strong desire to be like them. I will become like so and so . . . This ambition to succeed becomes a driving force within us.

Training

Because of that driving force, we eagerly enter training in the form of Bible school, Bible courses, seminars, theological books, and so on. We gladly do whatever it takes because we believe that when we have attained our learning goals, then success is certainly on our horizon.

God’s Specific Direction

Until now I have described a general call. We know God has called us to be a pastor, teacher, evangelist, or whatever. It is usually during the training phase that the Lord begins to give us a specific task such as, “start a church in Blantyre,” or “begin a Bible study in your home inviting your friends and neighbors.” When the Lord gives us a particular task it becomes a desire in our heart to go and do it. As we pray and seek the Lord, or discuss with

¹ *An American Hero Makes Famous One-Man Stand*, by Philip T. Washburn, TEXCOM/Public Affairs, Printed by the Fort Hood Sentinel, January 23, 1997.

other mature Christians the various possibilities of ministry, the decisions we reach are often the word of the Lord to us. Regardless of what each of us is specifically called to do, one common thread runs through us all. We eagerly receive the word of the Lord with the full intent of being a success.

Defining Success

In Paul's letter to Timothy he made a seemingly obscure comment which should be the basis for *all* of God's work. In Paul's letter to Timothy he tells us that *God's work is by faith*. ". . . rather than *God's work—which is by faith*." (1 Ti 1:4 NIV, emphasis added.) But when we see what appears to be a "successful" work or ministry, we don't really know if it was produced by 1) faith, or 2) by *some other means*. If it was produced by faith then Paul tells us that it is truly successful. But if it is produced by any other means, it is, in the words of 1 Corinthians 3:12, "wood, hay or straw" even though in man's eyes it is tremendously successful! How can this be?

Many in the ministry rush headlong into what God has directed them to do trying to accomplish the task in their human strength. They mistakenly view that effort as obedience. People who are naturally talented and resourceful can literally go for years using their own strength, will, and ideas, never truly relying on God, by faith, for supply or guidance. From the outside their considerable accomplishments can be seen as successful.

But according to Paul, the key to our *true success* in God's eyes is obedience to what God called us to do *in His time and with His resources which we obtain by faith*. Does that mean that our fellow Christians are always going to be able to look at our work and view it as either successful or a failure? The answer is a resounding, "NO!" Read on.

Consequences of Obedience

Of all the Bible characters we read about in Scripture, perhaps no one surpasses the Apostle Paul in true obedience in doing things God's way, in His timing, and with resources obtained by faith. Yet Scripture makes it clear that some of Paul's fellow Christians did not regard his ministry as successful! In fact, some Christians in Corinth didn't think Paul was much at all. They said, "His letters are weighty and forceful, but in person he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing."! (2 Co 10:10 NIV)

Paul was publicly beaten and thrown in jail in Philippi. (Acts 16) He created such a disturbance that the governor of the city of Damascus tried to arrest him. He had to escape through a window in the city wall. (2 Cor 11:32) Paul was beaten by the Jews in Jerusalem and arrested by the Romans for simply going to the Temple to worship. (Acts 21:27)

There are many more negative incidents in the life of Paul we could list, but these three make the point. In the

eyes of many Christians of his day, the Apostle Paul was not seen as a success.

In fact, I think that if Paul were to somehow appear in today's church and do the same things he did in Scripture, very few of today's Christians would regard him as a success. Why? *Because the world's standards of success have crept into today's church*. I believe that in most nations of the world, the world's standards of success have become the standard by which Christians and non-Christians alike judge a ministry.

I am absolutely sure that we have literally thousands of God's ministers today who are laboring under a secret, inward belief that they have somehow failed God because they are not "successful" by the church/world's standards.

Personal Suffering

As we have already seen, Paul suffered much personal pain, misunderstanding, and sorrow because of his obedience. But let's list some more examples of those who fully obeyed God and suffered because of their obedience.

The Apostle John - exiled to the Isle of Patmos as a criminal for preaching the word of God. (See Rev. 1:9.)

The Apostles Peter and John - arrested and beaten by the Jews for preaching and teaching in the name of Jesus. (See Acts 4.)

The Prophet Jeremiah - suffered immensely at the hands of the Jews for proclaiming the Lord's words. In fact, Jeremiah suffered so much because of his obedience to the Lord, at one time he said, "I will not mention him or speak any more in his name . . ." But he went on to acknowledge, "his word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed I cannot." (20:9 NIV) Jeremiah was lowered into a cistern for days, imprisoned and ridiculed *all because he obeyed the word of the Lord!*

The Prophet Elijah - prophesied a three and a half year drought in Israel. Not only did he suffer along with everyone else because of the drought, the king sought to kill him because he had given the prophecy. (See 1 Ki 17.) That's certainly not a successful ministry by today's standards, is it?

Now that we have examined numerous scriptural examples, let me summarize my points so far concerning obedience to God's specific word to you.

Because of the human soul's innate quest for success by human standards and our tendency to overlay that goal on our ministry call, we invariably tend to measure our ministry by man's rather than God's standards. His standard is simple. "Did you, by faith, obey my word to you?" If you can truly answer, "yes" then you are successful regardless of the visible outcome.

Moreover, Scripture makes it abundantly clear that more often than not, those whom God calls to a specific work will suffer for his or her obedience. Yet many Christians view such ministries as a failure when, in fact, in the spirit realm they are a glowing success because they were wrought through obedience to God's word!

The Bigger Picture

Only God sees the whole. Scripture says, "For we know in part and we prophecy in part . . ." (1 Co 13:9 NIV) Since God sees the bigger picture and we see only part of it, our understanding is limited to the scope of what we see. It is impossible for us to fully understand what He is doing. Most often His instructions to us involve only a small part of that work. Then we go about looking to "succeed" at what He sends us to do, not knowing or understanding what He wants to ultimately accomplish.

For example, sometimes God sends His servants to preach in a certain place so on Judgment Day that preaching will be a witness against those who heard but did not obey. Look at what Joshua told the people of Israel after they made solemn vows.

"And Joshua recorded these things in the Book of the Law of God. Then he took a large stone and set it up there under the oak near the holy place of the Lord. "See!" he said to all the people. "This stone will be a witness against us. It has heard all the words the Lord has said to us. It will be a witness against you if you are untrue to your God." (Jos 24:26,27 NIV)

Yet the one who obediently did the preaching but saw no immediate fruit could well conclude the effort a failure. This is only one example. In God's eternal purpose it is clear that He sends His servants on missions that are not intended to succeed by man's standards.

One May Never Understand

Many of the Lord's servants down through the pages of history have lived, ministered, and died not really understanding that they were a small part of God's bigger plan. They never knew here on earth that they were very successful in what they did in obedience to the Lord. Our fleshly tendency is always to look at larger, more accomplished ministers and compare ourselves to what they have accomplished. Scripture specifically admonishes us not to do that.

"We do not dare to classify or compare ourselves with some who commend themselves. When they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are not wise." (2 Co 10:12 NIV)

We are only to compare ourselves with what God has told us to do. (Let me say here that I am not in any way speaking against those who have large successful ministries. I rejoice in every work accomplished for the

kingdom of God by whomever and wherever it may be! Praise God for it! My purpose in writing this teaching is simply to clarify and focus on the true meaning of success from a scriptural viewpoint.)

Are You Disappointed with Your Ministry?

If you are inwardly disappointed with the status of your ministry, then prayerfully follow these steps:

- 1. Review Your Ministry Call** – Mentally review exactly what God called you to do. Go to the Lord and ask Him to help you. Don't try to include what you are doing now. You are seeking information from the Lord. Once you have that firmly in mind, write out exactly what God called you to do. Don't rush this process. It may take some weeks.
- 2. Compare Your Call to Your Present Ministry** – Ask yourself if what you are presently doing is included in that call or are you doing something unrelated to the call? If, in your prayer and communion with the Lord, you see where you have failed to measure up, simply ask His forgiveness. He will turn the clock back and permit you to start anew! That's the kind of God we serve!
- 3. If You Are On Track** – If, after the above examination, you determine that you are exactly where God called you to be, then the only change necessary is in your *perspective*, not in your ministry. By this I mean you need to change your view and opinion of what success is. Success is obeying God by faith. It is not conforming to man's opinion of success. You need to realize that you are a success in God's eyes!

On that Day, those who have been faithful to obey God's word by faith will hear, "Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!" (Mat 25:21 NIV)

Present Rewards

Once you have examined your calling in light of what you are doing and made any necessary changes, you can freely enter into a place of renewed confidence in the Lord. His peace becomes yours. Oh, you may still not like where you are or what He has you doing, but *you know full well you are in His perfect will*. Now a divine confidence rises in your spirit. You move among your peers with an inward confidence, knowing you are God's man or woman on a divine mission!

We may rest assured that our faithful obedience is rewarded even here on earth. Isaiah, speaking to the Lord,

wrote these words, "You will keep in perfect peace him whose mind is steadfast, because he trusts in you. Trust in the Lord forever, for the Lord, the Lord, is the Rock eternal."! (Isa 26:3 NIV) So, even in the midst of the disappointment of seeming outward failure, there is the *perfect peace* of the Lord available to us.

Eternal Rewards

We know from Scripture that God is keeping a record of all we do. Paul told the Corinthians that we will stand before the Judgment seat of Christ. (See 1 Co 3:11-15, 2 Co 5:10.) Gold, silver and costly stones represent those works we did by faith in obedience to His word to us. Wood, hay and straw represent those works produced by human effort and flesh, and the fire will consume it.

On that Day all who, by faith, obey God's word to them will stand before the Judgment seat of Christ with a large pile of gold, silver and costly stones in front of them. Great will be the rejoicing!

Conclusion

It is my solemn belief that many of the Lord's servants today labor under the false belief that they are a failure. Around the world, so many ministers quit the ministry each year because they think they have failed. This should not be. For those of you who read this teaching and have already entertained thoughts of quitting the ministry, please don't. Romans 11:29 says, "for God's gifts and his call are irrevokable." (NIV) So quitting certainly isn't God's best for any of us.

Heavenly Father, I pray for every reader of this teaching. I ask that Your Spirit lovingly point out the shortcomings of those who have tried to succeed on their own abilities. Grant them forgiveness upon their repentance. And, Father, for those who have labored in obedience in hard places, seemingly without success, please grant them spiritual eyes to see their labors from Your viewpoint. Oh Lord, lift them up into the heavenly places in Christ Jesus so they may see that their labors have not been in vain.

I also pray for those who are considering dropping out of ministry. Re-energize them with a fresh anointing! Open their eyes as You did for Elisha's servant when he prayed for him! Let them see that they and their ministry work are surrounded by horses and chariots of fire! Cause them to understand that, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" I know that You are for everyone whom You have called into Your service. Grant, Father, these requests in the name above every name, Jesus our Lord and Savior.

I. An American Hero Makes Famous One-Man Stand, by Philip T. Washburn, TEXCOM\Public Affairs, Printed by the Fort Hood Sentinel, January 23, 1997.

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