

Nehemiah 2:11-20¹
God Will Give Success

Introduction

ILLUSTRATION: Thomas Edison was a brilliant inventor. He had worked for and failed over 10 years to invent a storage battery.

One night on December 1914, fire broke out in his laboratory. Fire engines from eight surrounding towns arrived, but the heat was so intense and the water pressure so low that the attempt to douse the flames was futile. Everything was destroyed.

The inventor's son, Charles, searched frantically for his father. He finally found him, calmly watching the fire. "My heart ached for him," said Charles. "He was 67—no longer a young man—and everything was going up in flames."

The next morning, Edison looked at the ruins and said, "There is great value in disaster. All our mistakes are burned up. Thank God we can start anew."

When Edison stood before the burned down rubble and uttered these words, was he talking about failure or was he talking about faith?

Three weeks after the fire, Edison managed to deliver the first phonograph.

In Nehemiah 2:11-20, we see Nehemiah coming face-to-face with the ruins of the Jerusalem walls. And in v. 17, he said to the Jews in Jerusalem: "You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace."

In the face of these ruins, was Nehemiah talking about failure or about faith?

I believe faith is really fantasy if we don't admit, turn and learn from our failure. Edison did fail but he did learn from his many failures. That's why he was such a great inventor.

In the same way, Nehemiah did confess in Chapter 1 that the Jews did fail God. But he also believed that Jerusalem would one day rise out of her disgrace—that's his faith. As he sought the Lord, he was learning from the

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mistakes of unfaithfulness towards God. He was certain that the rebuilding of the walls would not only be possible after a lapse of 20 long years, but also turn the hearts of the people back to God. He had faith in the face of the ruins because the God of heaven was with him and the people.

That's why Nehemiah could say in v. 20, "The God of heaven will give us success." Yes, I have good news for you—as we serve God, He does grant us success—His success for us.

Let's now rewind the story back a little (to vv. 1-10) and see what actually happened before Nehemiah set foot in Jerusalem.

II. The Lord had kept Nehemiah waiting for four agonizing months before he came to Jerusalem (vv. 1-10). [Read verses]

Notice that Chapter 2 has a different date than that in Chapter 1. It is in the month of Nisan on the Hebrew calendar when Nehemiah finally has an opportunity to inform the king of his concern over Jerusalem. In Chapter 1, we have looked at what took place in the month of Kislev, which is approximately the same as our month of December. Nisan corresponds to our April, so there is a lapse of about four months between Chapters 1 and 2.

During these four months of waiting, we can presume that Nehemiah was praying for the opportunity to speak to the king. He was praying that the Lord would indicate to him the right time. And that time came in the month of Nisan.

Evidently, Nehemiah was deeply troubled over the state of Jerusalem. So much so that when he came before the king in the performance of his duties, his face showed his concern. The king noticed and asked him why he was so sad.

Nehemiah immediately sensed this as God's open door. And he tactfully asked the king to "send me to the city in Judah where my fathers are buried so that I can rebuild it". In fact, twice he did not refer to Jerusalem by name but as "the city" (vv. 3, 5).

Now understand that the name "Jerusalem" had a reputation as a troublesome city because it had been the source of rebellion in the empire before. So Nehemiah tactfully referred to Jerusalem as "the city where my fathers are buried". This is to allay the king's suspicion of him going to a "rebellious" place. Also, ancient kings were greatly concerned about their burial—they revered their burial ground. Hence, the king would be readily sympathetic to Nehemiah's desire to go and restore the city where his fathers were buried. He would probably not cry over the ruins of Jerusalem, but he would certainly show respect for the dead.

Nehemiah also asked the king for letters to the governors of the provinces that he would have to pass through, to provide safe travel for him. In fact, he

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was given diplomatic immunity because he was actually appointed as the governor of Judah (5:14).

Nehemiah knew too he would need some special supplies that only the king's authority could provide. He asked for special timbers to be cut for him out of the king's forest.

All this suggests that Nehemiah not only prayed for the opportunity, but also planned for the opportunity when it should come. If you want to pray to rebuild brokenness, you must also pray to seriously plan what it takes—often it's no easy stuff.

The king's response is evidence of the sovereignty of God at work. We expect God to work through a dedicated believer like Nehemiah, but we forget that God can also work through other people (even an unbeliever like Artaxerxes) to accomplish His will. God's choice can often surprise us indeed. So don't doubt anyone, including yourself, as to how the Lord can use you to do His will.

At the same time, two Gentile leaders (Sanballat and Tobiah) who were prospering themselves at the expense of the impoverished Jews in Jerusalem had heard about Nehemiah's coming. Verse 10 tells us that "they were disturbed that someone had come to promote the welfare of the Jews".

Whenever someone arises to answer the call to do God's will, the evil one will also arise and use others to stop him with fierce intensity.

II. Nehemiah found his resolve severely tested even before he started the rebuilding in Jerusalem (vv.11-19). [Read verses]

Nehemiah didn't want the enemy to know what he was doing, so he inspected the ruins by night. After the night inspection, Nehemiah gathered the Jewish nobles and said to them, "You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned by fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace" (v.17). He also told them about the gracious hand of God upon him that allowed him to come to Jerusalem well-authorized, well-supplied and well-escorted, and all under the auspices of the Persian king.

So in essence, he said to them these words, "You can see the ruins around you for so many years. That is long enough. It is disgraceful that nothing has been done until now. God is with us. He had moved the heart of the king. Now is the time to act."

The Jewish nobles responded to his rallying call with these words, "Let us start rebuilding." They did not remind Nehemiah that the Jews had once tried to repair the walls and were stopped (Ezra 4). They didn't say, "We tried that once and it didn't work."

The Jews had tried to rebuild their city in the time of Ezra. But they had failed because of some opposition. However, when Nehemiah challenged them again years later, they were not paralyzed by their bad experience of a previous failure. Rather, they responded, “Let us start rebuilding.”

Again the same thing occurred—i.e. whenever God’s people arise to answer the call to do God’s will, the evil one will also arise to stop them with fierce intensity. This time the opposition was in the persons of three men—Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem. They started off with ridicule—they laughed at and belittled the Jews. Then they attempted something even more damaging—they accused the Jews of wanting to rebel against the king.

Whenever anybody says, “I will arise and do God’s will,” Satan always replies, “Then I will arise and oppose.” You can almost count on it!

III. While the enemy spoke words of doom, Nehemiah replied with God’s promise of success (v. 20). [Read verse]

He answered the opposition, “The God of heaven will give us success. We his servants will start rebuilding, but as for you, you have no share in Jerusalem or any claim or historic right to it.”

Everyone wants success. No one purposely sets out to be a failure. This is why so much has been written on the topic “How to be a Success” and why these books are so popular. Failure is one of those ugly realities of life yet a common experience to all of us to some degree.

Thus, the ability to handle failure in its various forms and degrees is a vital part of the spiritual life and a sign of maturity. This was true of Abraham, Moses, Elijah, David, and Peter. Though they failed at some point, and often in significant ways, they not only recovered from their failure, but they used it as a tool of growth—they learned from their failure, confessed it to God, and were used in even greater ways.

They learned to know Him as “the God of the second chance”. A mature Christian is one who has grasped the truth that his or her failure is not the end of an effective life with and for the Lord.

The truth is there is a lot of failing in the Christian’s life because none of us will perfectly appropriate the victory over sin that Christ has accomplished for us. We don’t like to talk about it or admit it, but there is a lot of failing. Failure is a fact of life for the Christian community. But in our failure, we can find victory—our victory is that God’s grace is more than adequate to lift us up from the pit of any failure.

The fear of failure has many people in neutral or paralyzed or playing cover up. People believe if they fail they are “not good enough”, and even “not good people”. Failure becomes an immoral thing.

Sometimes God must engineer failure in us before He can bring about success with us. This does not mean that people must fail before they can be a success. But our failures, whether in the form of rebellion or foolish blunders or human limitations, can become tools of learning and stepping stones to success. The point is this—we should never allow our fear of failure to paralyze us from trying again.

Nor should we allow past failures to keep us down or keep us from recovering and moving on in the service of the Lord. The Bible says we are all sinners and prone to failure, but in Christ we can become over-comers.

Yes, God does promise us success, but on His terms. I want to point out one feature related to a mature understanding about success and failure—i.e. the mature believer is one who understands the importance of choosing the right standard to determine success and failure.

Comparing ourselves with others often comes with a distortion. Yes, we are to do our best according to the abilities God has given us, and we are right in using others as models of Christ-like character. But this is not the same as when we compare ourselves with other people from the standpoint of their gifts, abilities, bank accounts, possessions, position; and then attempt to determine our success or failure based on such comparisons.

If money is a basis of judging success or failure, it is obvious that Jesus Christ was a failure!

- He was born in a stable.
- He asked Peter to find a coin in a fish's mouth when asked to pay his tax. He didn't have a coin of His own. The fish was richer than Him!
- He did not have a home bed to lay down His head. Even the foxes have holes and the birds have nests.
- When he was about to be crucified, the soldiers cast lots for His garments. That was all He owned of this world's goods.

Of course, earning money (and even saving some) is both legitimate and necessary. But the amount we earn is not a barometer of God's blessing. The point is this—the absence or presence of money is not in itself proof of success or failure in God's eyes.

ILLUSTRATION: The papers this week (ST, Life! 7 July 08, p.4) carried an article about Pastor Lawrence Khong of Faith Community Baptist Church. He was once an adjunct instructor in preaching at the Baptist Theological Seminary of Singapore. He had blessed many students, including myself, with his passion and giftedness in preaching the Word.

In the newspaper article, he was quoted as saying this, “Pastors don’t take a vow of poverty. It’s not sinful to have a lot of money. It can be used to help other people. But we are against greed. If you’re rich and greedy, you will never be happy.”

“You can be rich yet not be greedy.” Is this statement true? This can be a true statement, depending who is saying it. Perhaps, Pastor Khong has that spiritual maturity and balance to handle riches in life. But not all people have that.

I am probably one of them. That’s why God has not made me rich. But I am grateful to Him for giving me more than enough according to the lifestyle I have chosen so that I can participate in His work of giving with all the joy in my heart. That indeed is a great blessing for me.

The comparison game reaches out to almost every area of life. It may involve comparing friends, like name-dropping to suggest that one is successful because he mixes with the right people. Or it may involve believers comparing the size of their respective churches. These things are in themselves not a proof of success in God’s eyes.

Remember what happened when Moses struck the rock when God had told him to only speak to it? Water flowed. The people were jubilant! Was Moses a success? Yes—in the eyes of men. But no—in the eyes of God! His disobedience brought water, but it also brought about his failure to personally lead the people into the promised land. He could only look at it from afar. But I expect to meet Moses in heaven for God’s grace is adequate to cover his failure.

My point is this—results (e.g. profits, numbers, awards) in themselves are not a proof that God is pleased. It is not enough to do God’s work and have results; it must be done in His way and for His glory.

ILLUSTRATION: Willow Creek Community Church located in suburban Chicago has become one of the most influential evangelical churches in America. Giving birth to the “seeker-sensitive” church model with its emphasis on attracting large numbers, it has helped shape the way of doing church for a generation of pastors and church leaders.

Recently, Willow Creek published the results of their 2004 congregational survey. The survey revealed some surprising results—i.e. Willow Creek “isn’t effective as we’d thought”. In a report, the Senior Pastor, Bill Hybels made an astonishing and humbling admission, “... parts of the research did not shine brightly on our church. Among the findings, nearly one out of every four people at Willow Creek were stalled in their spiritual growth or dissatisfied with the church—and many of them were considering leaving.”

In that report, Willow Creek acknowledges that they have long-employed “The Church Activity Model for Spiritual Growth”. Essentially, the premise was that as “a person far from God participates in church activities” he will eventually become “a person who loves God and loves others”.

Willow Creek asked and answered the question as follows: “Does increased attendance in ministry programmes automatically equate to spiritual growth? To be brutally honest: it does not ... Church activity alone made no direct impact on growing the heart ...”

Willow Creek has contributed much in terms of encouraging and challenging every Christian to remain relevant and reverent in the work of God’s Kingdom.

To be sure, Willow Creek is not purposely trying to undermine the church or water-down the gospel. Quite the contrary, their creative methods and techniques are genuinely motivated by a desire to “go out and make disciples”. Unfortunately, that has not been the case.

The Willow Creek’s confession sends a crucial warning to us—i.e. just being busy with church activities does not necessarily bring us closer to Christ, but may bring us closer to a spiritual meltdown instead.

(<http://www.christianpost.com/article/20071127/willow-creek's-confession.htm>)

Again, the point is this: results (like profits, numbers, awards) in themselves are not a proof that God is pleased. It is not enough to do God’s work and have results; it must be done in His way and for His glory.

Conclusion

God is adequate for all kinds of failures. He allows us to rebuild from the ruins of failure and helps us to success. But not all failures are rewritten as comeback stories. Some remain as failures because in the course of rebuilding, the focus and purpose become lost.

ILLUSTRATION: The Taj Mahal is one of the structural wonders of the world. Legend has it that in 1629, when the favourite wife of the Indian ruler Shah Jahan died, he ordered a magnificent tomb to be built as a memorial to her. The Shah placed his wife’s casket in the middle of a parcel of land and construction of the temple literally began around it. But several years later into the venture, the Shah’s grief for his wife gave way to a passion for the project.

One day, while surveying the site, he stumbled over a wooden box and he had some workers throw it out. It was months later that he realised his wife’s casket had been destroyed. The original purpose for the memorial tomb became lost in the passion of construction.

(Today, “Focus on the Family by Dr. James Dobson: The Legend of the Taj Mahal.” p.43)

God may have given us another chance to rebuild from the ruins of an earlier failure. But if we lose our focus along the way as we rebuild our dream wall or dream whatever, then we end up building or rebuilding for the wrong purpose or cause—we end up treasuring the project rather than people; the results rather than relationships.

God is adequate for all kind of failures. He allowed Nehemiah and the Jews to rebuild the broken walls. But the more important thing is that of rebuilding their broken relationship with the Lord.

It is the same today, if we are given another chance to rebuild from failure, God wants us to focus on rebuilding not just our physical/material well-being, but our relational well-being as well. If when the rebuilding has been completed but our relationships with God and with the significant people in our lives are not restored, we have not succeeded. We have remained in our failure and our finished project is like the sacred cow in Moses' time—we worship it as the god of our lives.

Yes, God will give success, but it is success on His terms.