

Looking to Jesus, Not to Our Success (Psalm 73)

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Do you want to be successful? Raise your hand if you want to be a success.

Now here is the next obvious question: What is success? In a moment, we're going to hear about the huge gap between God's view of success and the world's view of success. But to get our wheels turning, I'd like us to start by thinking about how our American culture defines it. How does American culture most frequently and most visibly define success? (Ask).

- We've heard a variety of answers, but many of them are related: [what I acquire; what I achieve in my job with my intelligence and technical skills]

Turn with me to Psalm 73, and we will see how this a very old question. Psalm 73 is a song that tells a story, a testimony, really, of a man named Asaph who felt pulled apart by two competing views of a successful life. Listen for his struggle as I read: [Read Psalm 73]

We should long for a truly successful life, and Psalm 73 shows us what that means by showing us two things: (1) an illusion of success that attracts us, and (2) true success that satisfies us.

1. Asaph begins his story with an illusion of success that deeply attracted him.

One reason that I love this psalm is that the psalmist is so honest about his doubt and struggle to believe. Belief in God, obeying God just didn't seem worth it to him, and he almost gave it up: vv. 2-3: "My feet had almost stumbled, my steps had nearly slipped. For I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked." And even more strongly in v. 13: "All in vain have I kept my heart clean."

You see, the Bible does not teach us to bury our doubts in silence and shame but to speak about them with God and with others. All of us have doubts of various kinds, and this psalm shows us that the church is not supposed to be a doubt-free zone; rather, it is the place to face doubts with reason, and patience, and love. If you have doubts about God, the Bible, and Christianity in general, I want you to know that you are welcome here. I would be glad to offer you free meal or coffee just to be able to listen and understand your story.

Asaph doubts because something doesn't compute for him: the people who appear to be the most successful and attractive have no use for God and seem to suffer no bad consequences at all. Who are these people that he envies?

wealth: v. 3: they have "prosperity" & v. 12 repeats this: they "increase in riches";

health: v. 4: "they have no pangs until death"; "their bodies are fat and sleek," which means that they are free from hunger and have everything they want;

ease: v. 5: they "are not in trouble as others are; they are not stricken like the rest of mankind."

v. 12: they are "always at ease"

This is so relevant it could have been written yesterday. What does this image of success look like in the modern world? You see it every day in the images of people who seem to have everything. They are celebrities on talk shows. They appear on the covers of magazines and on billboards and in ads and commercials. They have large houses that overflow with expensive things. Their clothes are beautiful and always stylish. Everything always seems to go their way, and they are always shown to be cool and confident. Their way of living large is paraded and celebrated in movies and songs. It's on Facebook and Instagram and Pinterest: images of lives that always seem healthier, wealthier, and more exciting than ours, and we have fear of missing out. Asaph admitted that he envied them. Can you admit that you envy them, too? At least a little bit?

Now, envy is always bad, but the bigger danger is that we will be fooled by the images to think and act as if the truly successful life simply ignores God entirely, which is a way of life that comes all-too-easily for people who have health and wealth and ease. The people that Asaph envies are people who are so confident in their self-sufficiency that they can act however they want, and treat people as violently, rudely, and dismissively as they want. And it all comes from a confidence that God is absent from the world: v. 11: they say, "How can God know? Is there knowledge in the Most High?" And so, v. 9: they even "set their mouths against the heavens, and their tongue struts through the earth." (If only the psalmist could see how literally this is true with social media!) But note, this is not some kind of New Atheist attack that argues and rages against God; rather, it is the casual assumption that God is absent.

While this was a serious temptation for Asaph, the casual assumption that God is absent and irrelevant to life has become a dominant fact of life for us. It is so common in western cultures that we hardly even notice it at all. In his book *The Divine Conspiracy*, philosopher Dallas Willard notes how our culture disconnects God from any standard of success:

"there is no field of expertise in human affairs where interaction with God is a part of the subject matter or practice that must be mastered in order to be judged competent. This is true of chemistry and public administration, but it is also true of education, nursing, police work, marriage, and parenting . . . We live by our competencies. Our souls are, accordingly, soaked with secularity" (pp. 90-91).

In the words of philosopher Jamie Smith, everyone in western culture has been spiritually formed by secular liturgies, by all the practices and structures of the modern world that just assume and portray a secular story of the world. It is the story implied in virtually every advertisement you see and every show you watch and every daily schedule you keep where there is no functional place for communion with God. The world of modernity is a social world organized to function on the assumption that God is so weightless and insignificant that a successful life can forget and ignore him in every decision and every setting of any real importance to us.

It is rarely argued or demonstrated. This secular assumption gets its culture-forming power mostly from the fact that it is simply assumed without argument or evidence. Indeed, on the rare occasions when people do think critically about this secular assumption, its lack of foundation often becomes apparent. Dallas Willard notes:

“The powerful though vague and unsubstantiated presumption is that something has been found out that renders a spiritual understanding of reality . . . simply foolish to those who are ‘in the know.’ But when it comes time to say exactly what it is that has been found out, nothing of substance is forthcoming.”

(There are arguments to consider, of course, but what Willard is getting at is that most people who live according to the secular assumption spend very little time thinking about defending that assumption with any substantial evidence or argument.)

How modern western cultures got this way is a complicated history. I am not here blaming some group of atheists or secular thinkers out there somewhere. Rather, I am simply noting that this is a fact of life for us. It affects all of us. It is the air we breathe and the water in which we swim, constantly. We not only envy the images of health and wealth and ease that surround us all the time but we are also easily lulled by that envy into a secular way of living without thinking about it or examining what is happening to us. So the problem, and the warning, and the hope in this psalm are our problem, and our warning, and our hope, too.

The problem for Asaph and for us is that the secular assumption and way of life seems to work just fine. People live without caring about God and yet enjoy health, wealth, and ease. So why take the costly step of committing yourself to God and obeying God if you can have a confident, comfortable, prosperous life of ease without any thought of God at all? Why sacrifice to follow God if those who appear to have the most successful lives do not? This question almost led Asaph to abandon God, and it is a question that we must answer if our faith in God is to have any credibility at all.

Asaph got to the edge of the cliff, but he didn't jump. He turned back. What happened?

2. In God, he found a truly successful life that satisfies forever.

Did you spot the turning point in Asaph's story? V. 16: “When I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task, until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their end.” The sanctuary refers to the Temple in Jerusalem, the place where he served as a professional musician in leading Israel when people assembled to worship God together. Asaph didn't find understanding and wisdom until he went to church. Many people today ask, “Why should I go to church on Sunday? Isn't religion just a private, personal matter of my own heart?” Asaph gives us one very good reason why we need the gift of worship with the whole church. On his own, he was adrift and lost in the swirl of his own thoughts and emotions, but it was the experience of worship with the whole church that God used to draw him out of himself, out of his internal darkness and out of his collapsing faith, so that he could recover his balance and stand on solid ground.

Why did that happen in corporate worship? There is a kind of encounter with God that you can only have when you experience worship among the gathered people of God. It is a whole-bodied experience by which God guides us to meet him, to understand that he is the

source and the purpose of a truly good life, a truly successful life. And in corporate worship he does this with clarity, depth, and fullness unlike anywhere else:

- when words of Scripture are read aloud and resound in us and come out of us amplified as we sing together words carefully crafted to echo our response to Scripture,
- when music accompanies that song to lend it glory and power,
- when Christ gives himself to us not simply in spoken words but through the thick and storied symbols of baptism and bread and cup given and received with prayer and blessing,
- when the very structure of the cross-shaped, colored, and highly crafted room amplifies the gospel and the glory of God for our sense of sight and our sensitivity to beauty.

It is the convergence of these things in corporate worship that can open up for us a powerful view of the cosmic story of God's work, a view of God as the ground and the goal of our lives and of all history and all things.

This is the eternal perspective and understanding that Asaph got: V. 17-18: "then I discerned their end. Truly you set them in slippery places; you make them fall to ruin." Beauty is fleeting, for our bodies wrinkle and die. Wealth can disappear in an instant, and you can't take it with you in death. The types of success that made him envy are fleeting and fragile. As the book of James says, that type of success is a mist, a puff of smoke that you cannot grasp and vanishes as quickly as it comes. And when death comes, and we are reduced to weakness, where then is boasting? and pride? and self-sufficiency? And what comes after is even more humbling: because we live in a moral universe, we will face our Creator as our Judge, and we will discover that there is indeed knowledge in the Most High. And if we have only lived according to the secular story, it will all come crashing down, and there will be no hope.

But in God there is eternal life that satisfies forever: see vv. 23-26, 28.

So you see that Psalm 73 teaches that a truly successful life is lived knowing that God is everything that the secular story assumes that God is not:

- A truly successful life is lived knowing that the God is ever-present, and that he is continually with us anywhere we go in the cosmos, and that we can draw near to him (v. 23, 28).
- A truly successful life is lived knowing that the God is strong and always active, that he is the unending fountain of life that gives strength to our heart forever (v. 26).
- A truly successful life is lived knowing that the God is the source of all good and all beauty, the giver of every good gift, and so there is nothing that can satisfy our deepest desires more fully than God, the one who made us to enter his joy (v. 25).

To paraphrase C. S. Lewis, compared to this God, compared to the eternal life that God offers, all other types of success, the illusory images and counterfeits of success offered by TV and Netflix and sports and advertisements and the mall, all of this is like mud in a dirty alley. To think that the ultimate success is achieving those things is like being content to make mudpies in an alley when God offers you a resort and a feast in his castle by the sea. We were made for eternal pleasures beyond all we can ask or imagine, and yet we spend our lives competing for trinkets and trophies. We were made for so much more. The problem is not that our desires for success are too strong; the problem is that our desires for a truly successful life are far too weak.

The choice before us is this: ignore God and reject God and make the best of enjoying whatever health and prosperity you can find in this life, and then lose it all in just a few decades, and lose God, the source of all good, forever, or (2) seek God, follow God, and entrust your life into God's hands and God's mission and receive supernatural guidance and strength to endure the suffering of this present age, and then enter eternal life in the age to come in the presence of God where (as Psalm 16 says) there is fullness of joy and eternal pleasures forevermore (Ps. 16). Missionary Jim Elliot: "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."

If you choose true success in knowing and following God, you will find a supernatural ability to live a truly successful life with courage and peace and purpose that are strong and beautiful beyond anything the world can inspire.

- It will make you like Queen Esther, who was made queen of all Persia, who had the courage in God to risk her life to challenge the king and his chief advisor and save her whole nation.
- It will make you like Robertson McQuilken, the president of the Christian college Columbia International University, who had the faithfulness and steadfast love of God to resign with at least 10 years of service left in order to keep his marriage vows to the end and provide round-the-clock care for his wife who had developed Alzheimers.
- It will make you like Martin Luther King Jr., who had the patience and strength in God to respond to contempt and hatred and seek justice with peace.
- It will make you like Jesus, who lived the truly successful life for us, who laid down his life and took the whole weight of human evil upon himself in love. Because of Jesus, we know that Asaph's trust in God is not merely wishful thinking. In him, we can discern the end, for in Jesus, the end of the world has already begun as a fact of history we can know. The resurrection of Jesus is the beginning of the final resurrection when God will make all things new and rid his creation of sin and death, when he will receive us into glory (v. 24). Do you want to be successful? You won't find it by pursuing what the world calls success in this dying age. You will only find it by looking to Jesus, who has swallowed up death's sting by his strength, and who will satisfy our deepest desires forever and ever as he makes all things new.