

A Biblical Interrogation of “Success” and “Failure”: A Prelude

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For kingdom workers among the nations, the words “success” and “failure” carry cultural, emotional, and theological weight. We are spiritually and physically invested in laboring and longing for the successful advance of God’s good news in our least-reached corners of the world. At the same time, we wrestle with both the possibility and reality of falling short of our ministry dreams. This might spark learning and transformation; it might also generate disappointment and fear.

The stakes of the task we labor at, and the immense challenges involved in this task, stimulate questions about how we define and navigate both “success” and “failure.” What truly counts as “success” and “failure” in the frontier mission task? What kind of metrics best measure the advance of God’s kingdom and our contribution to it? How do we respond to inevitable failures in which we fall short of our goals and dreams of what we hoped God would accomplish through us? When do we adjust our practice, and when do we press on in faithfulness?

In this *Seedbed* issue, practitioners in least-reached contexts explore the dynamics of “success” and “failure” from various vantage points:

- Should we pursue success through fruitful practice of faithful obedience?
- What elements of ministry progress should we track and why?
- Can ministry research help us learn from successes and failures?
- Ought we imitate success stories or discover new practical pathways for our specific contexts?
- How do we stay encouraged when we do not see visible results?
- What do we learn from successes and failures in the “Lost History of Christianity”?
- What does health innovation look like in our teams and organizations?
- How shall we think about martyrdom?

The articles and reviews wrestling with these questions are not exhaustive but are intended to provoke fresh thinking and discussion around our theme.¹

As a prelude to these practitioner reflections, I offer the following theological meditation on “success” and “failure” in light of a big-picture view of Scripture and Mark’s gospel in particular. Whatever cultural or emotional baggage we bring to these terms, it is the Scriptural story that ought to fill our imagination, transforming how we pursue, achieve, and fall short of our expectations and goals in least-reached communities.

The Success of God and the Failure of Man

God, in his limitless power and wisdom, has specific goals for this world which he will certainly and perfectly accomplish.

- “*I will build my church*” (Matt. 16:18).
- “*The earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea*” (Hab. 2:14).

1 In our “Continuing Conversations” segment, we also feature a [new piece](#) which picks up a theme discussed previously on the the topic of [Identity and Access of Workers](#) (Nov 2023).

- *“The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this” (Isa. 9:7).*

When the work is finished, the Lamb of God will alone be worthy to conclude human history to the resounding praise for the magnificent work that he has *successfully* achieved (Rev. 5:4–5). Ultimate success, like salvation, belongs to our God (Rev. 7:10).

The success of God, however, takes place against the backdrop of the failure of humanity. Beginning with our first failure in Eden, and continuing through the patriarchs, the history of Israel, and into the age of the church, we have continued to fail to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our Creator (Micah 6:8). Moreover, these failures often threaten to hinder God’s good purposes and goals to win back and redeem his fallen creation.

At times, our shortcomings are not moral failures at all but are simply the result of limitations involved in being space-and-time-bound creatures. Limitations of knowledge, awareness, capacity, and skill are not moral offenses against God or others, though they can lead to functional obstacles and hindrances to contributing to God’s good ends.

But the good news is that human failure—whether sin or human limitation—will not prevent God from finally reconciling all things to himself in Christ (Col. 1:20). Whether the failures of Adam, Israel, or the church, nothing can keep Jesus from successfully redeeming people from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation (Rev. 7:9–10). No failure—whether moral or otherwise—is beyond the reach of God’s grace. The worst of sinners and the most terrible of failures are outweighed by the cross laid on our Savior’s shoulders. Jesus succeeded where no man previously did, obeying his Father’s will to perfection while carrying the full weight of human limitation and failure, and thereby forging a new path of eternal success for humankind (Isa. 53:3–5).

When we honestly confess our failures and accept God’s achievement on the cross, we are invited, by a sheer gift of grace, into God’s success story of pursuing and wooing his fallen creation. Although he could do it on his own, God in his infinite wisdom allows fallible, limited, not-ful-

ly-sanctified humans to participate in the gathering of his church on the way to making all things new (2 Cor. 5:17–20). Though God guarantees ultimate success, he gives us agency such that our decisions materially matter in the here and now—our behavior can contribute to or detract from God’s goals; our actions have real effects on lives and on eternity (1 Cor. 3:10–17). And one day, we will give an account to God for how we stewarded the opportunity to participate in his story of the healing of the nations (2 Cor. 5:10, Rev. 22:2).

Learning about Failure from the Gospel of Mark

It is a wonder how Scripture includes human failure as an integral part of God’s success story of making all things new in Christ. The Gospel of Mark serves as just one powerful example of the intertwining of failure and success in the drama of redemption and of our lives. While other gospels writers also allude to it, Mark more than others emphasizes the utter failure of the twelve disciples to believe (4:40), to understand (8:17), and to obey (14:37).² Jesus’ three predictions of his impending death are met with the disciples’ failure to understand the cross-shaped nature of God’s kingdom (8:31–38, 9:31–35, 10:32–45). The climax, of course, is the disciples’ failure at the hour of testing, in which they disappoint (14:37), disown (14:66–72), and abandon their Master (14:50).

To drive his point home, Mark ends his gospel abruptly, not with a picture of joyful disciples triumphantly announcing the resurrection, but with cowering disciples fearfully silent at the empty tomb (Mark 16:8).³ Other gospel narratives complete the picture with the fuller transformation of the apostles, but Mark’s gospel for some reason impresses upon

2 I credit the late Dr. Grant Osborne for memorably highlighting for me this theme of “discipleship failure” in the gospel of Mark in his lectures at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.

3 The earliest Greek manuscripts end at Mark 16:8 (France 2002, 685–88). Most biblical scholars today believe the “longer ending” (Mark 16:9–20) was added later, perhaps because later copyists felt Mark’s original ending was incomplete (ibid., 687). Some believe that Mark intended to complete his gospel but never did (ibid., 684), while others believe a closer reading might be an intentional decision of Mark in line with his theological emphasis in his gospel (ibid., 670–71).

us the fact that before they became the victorious apostles and pillars of the church, his closest followers failed dramatically.⁴

Mark's thematic emphasis on disciple failure gains another dimension when we consider how tradition traces the origin of this gospel to the preaching of Simon Peter (France 2002, 38). If Mark's gospel was shaped by Peter's preaching, the great leader of the apostles likely proclaimed a gospel which publicly and permanently exposed his own profound failures. One wonders the impact of such preaching on a young John Mark, the one-time "deserter" of Paul and Barnabas mid-mission, which itself catalyzed the first failure to resolve a missionary team rift (Acts 15:38). How might have Peter's honest owning of his past failures contributed to Mark's own journey from "deserter" to once again "useful" in ministry (2 Tim. 4:11)? How might it have contributed to Mark's own later success in founding the great church of Alexandria?⁵

Implications for our Theology of Success and Failure

As I ponder these questions, I perceive promising insights for frontier church planters struggling in the winds of success and failure. In the gospel of Mark, as in the larger biblical story, human failure is not the end of the story. What might appear to be an utter failure in one moment—surely what the disciples felt the day after Jesus was crucified—is just one episode in an unfolding drama. The *apparent* failure of Jesus to defeat his enemies, and the *temporary* failure of the disciples in the hour of trial, were just that—apparent and temporary. Next came the resurrection and Pentecost. What looked like a victory for Satan turned out to be the triumph of Christ and his people (Col. 3:12–15). The pitiful group of ragtag failures ended up turning the Roman Empire upside down

4 Although it is true that the initial fearful silence of the women eventually gave way to joyful announcement (Matt. 28:8), John's gospel shows that Mark was correct that the initial response was one of fear and failure to believe (John 20:1–2, 11–15). Whether or not Mark intended it this way, the original text that he left us leads us to pause in the fear and failure of the disciples.

5 Schaff 1910, para. 5307.

and courageously contributing to the Spirit's unleashing of a movement of disciples and churches radiating from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth.

This is no easy triumphalism. The great success story that is the book of Acts is a selective narrative which leaves out many hard, depressing episodes which happened between and betwixt all the magnificent victories. As the church rapidly spread throughout the Roman Empire, Peter compromised the gospel (Gal. 2:11–14), Paul and Barnabas broke up (Acts 15:36–40), and Paul's churches nearly imploded (Gal. 1:6–7, cf. entire letter of 1 Corinthians). Paul's epistles and the Revelation likewise give an honest picture of the warts, mishaps, and failures of Christ's church (cf. Rev. 2–3)—i.e., the same church which Luke celebrates with great gusto as triumphantly advancing to the ends of the earth (cf. Acts 6:7). Both surprising success and nagging failure exist side by side in this age, which temper both our triumphalism and our defeatism. This calls us into a productive, creative tension in which we are called neither to naively expect perfect success, nor to expect forever failure, but rather to patiently endure, seek God's grace, run with endurance, and fight the good fight of faith until our last breath—by the grace and power God gives us.

As we do, we might ponder the change in the fearful, bumbling disciples in Mark's gospel to the bold, faith-filled apostles in the book of Acts. What turned their failure into Spirit-driven success? Among other things, it was a change in understanding of success itself. The disciples' failure was partly rooted in falling captive to a worldly vision of success, entranced by visions of a military Messiah which blinded them to the cross-shaped, upside-down way that God's kingdom successfully upends Satan's (Mark 8:31–33, 14:47; cf. Acts 1:6). Once they recognized that the road to true success is the road of suffering, mistreatment, and persecution—the way of the cross—they were liberated to boldly spread the yeast of God's kingdom from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth.

As disciple makers, the biblical story honestly tells us that we will face a kind of "defeat"—a cross, even. Our God-honoring goals of making disciples and planting churches *will* at times be opposed and thwarted by persecution—opposition from Satan and earthly powers. Some will fail

morally; others will fall to suffering and untimely death. Yet it is precisely in and through the way of the cross—an apparent failure in the eyes of the world—that God’s resounding victory comes. “*They will overcome by the blood of the Lamb and the word of their testimony, for they did not love their lives even to death*” (Rev. 12:11).

Failure and success are indeed intermingled in the biblical story in the mystery of God’s redemptive plan. As we engage in the task of making disciples in nations among whom Christ has not yet been named, we do so not with secular expectations of worldly success easily managed and manufactured, nor with a defeatism that plays it safe by simply expecting the status quo. Rather, we do so with the hope of sure success guaranteed by God, a success which in the present age is mysteriously intermingled with human limitations and failures. This helps us face our failures honestly with the grace of God and a lightness of heart. It enables us to embrace whatever cross the Lord calls us to carry and to savor whatever measure of success the Lord allows us to see, while we long for the Lord’s successful renewal of all things, looking forward to his good surprises for us—even today.

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