

At the Corner of Success and God

Joshua 1:1-9

We're in a series called *At the Corner of Life and God* and we're looking at how God wants to intersect with our lives in the everyday-ness of our lives. This morning, we're going to meet at the corner of success and God.

Years ago Janice and I were invited to join a couple friends for an extended weekend in what they described as a beautiful log cabin some friends were letting them use in New Hampshire. It was late and we were looking for one more right turn and then the cabin was supposed to be the first house on the left. Sooner than we expected we saw the road and turned right onto a small, dark, totally isolated road. It was kinda creepy but according to the directions the log cabin should be just ahead on the left. Sure enough, not far down this creepy little road there was a house on the left, but it didn't look like a log cabin to me. It was this dark, broken down, sinister looking shack. There were no lights on – it was totally dark and we're thinking we'd at least expect our friends to have a light on and be waiting for us. It was foreboding. And then, to top it off, as we swung into the driveway, there in the backyard we could see two makeshift gravestones! That was all Janice and I needed to see – we were backing out of that driveway as fast as we could! Could that possibly have been this beautiful log cabin my friends were telling us about? Well, we drove back to the main road and kept driving and sure enough down the road a few miles, there was the same road again. It made a big loop and what they didn't tell us was we wanted the second time it intersected with the main road. This time as we made the right turn there, on a high hill, brightly lit, was a beautiful, welcoming log cabin, with our friends waiting for us!

As we meet at the corner of success and God, let's be careful that we don't make a wrong turn and end up at a destination marked success that isn't success at all. It's easy for many of us, when we hear the word success, to think of someone who is at the top of their game and has reached the pinnacle of their profession. Success is being applauded for our achievements, success is having a lot of what the world has to offer: money, fame, power, things. Success is being impressive in the eyes of others. Success is... successful.

Actually the Bible tells us it's very easy for us to stand at the wrong corner thinking it's the corner of success. From the Bible's framework, success isn't making a lot of money, or having a lot of power, or achieving a lot of fame, or possessing a lot of things or being impressive to others. Those things aren't necessarily bad or wrong in and of themselves, but it's wrong and misguided to equate them with success in life. Jesus puts all those things in perspective when he asked the question, *what does it profit a man to gain the whole world (have a lot of power, fame, money, or possessions) and lose his soul?* The answer is, it doesn't profit that man at all. Such a man's ledger is running seriously in the red because in the end what he gained was worth so much less than what he lost.

In the final ledger, it's where we stand with God that is the ultimate determiner of our success or failure. As George MacDonald pointed out, *"In whatever man does without God, he must [either] fail miserably or succeed more miserably."*

The good news is that with God, it is possible for anyone of us to succeed with what God calls *good success*. I think we get a good picture of what good success is in the story of Joshua. After Moses dies,

God comes to Joshua and commissions him to lead Israel into the land that God had promised to give them, and God tells Joshua that He will be with him and that, if he is careful to obey God's word, that he will have good success in all he does, and everywhere he goes. Now we need to be careful about taking specific promises that God gave to individuals in the Bible and cutting and pasting them to our lives, but this promise, that if we are careful to obey God's word we will enjoy good success is, I believe, a promise that every follower of Jesus Christ can claim for our lives.

Because the Bible doesn't define success as our being successful like Joshua – we aren't Joshuas! The corner of success and God is simply this: *doing what God has called us to do for the glory of God and for the blessing it brings to our lives*. To use the imagery in the book of Joshua, it is to "take the land" that God has called us take for the kingdom of God. Success isn't pursuing our promotion; it's pursuing God's purposes. The corner of success and God is the intersection of God's purposes and our lives.

Success begins in our lives when we place our faith in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, because it is at that moment that the purposes of God intersect with our lives with grace and mercy. That's not something we work at, Jesus did the work for us when he died on the cross. The ultimate success was won for us by the ultimate Joshua – Jesus - who succeeded where the lawgiver Moses could not and made it possible for us to be saved and enter the promised land of heaven by His glorious success on the cross.

But brothers and sisters, salvation is the beginning of God's plan for our lives, not the end. God has land He want us to take. He has purposes He wants to give us grace to achieve. He has good works He has prepared for us to walk in. He wants to advance His kingdom through you and through me, and it's good to be reminded that we should get up every day and hope for and aim for success – doing what God has called us to do - and then go for it! Aim for it!

So my prayer this morning is that the Lord stirs our hearts with a fresh sense of hope and a renewed commitment to aim for living successful lives. Not failure-free lives. We will all fail at times. Failure is actually an important tool of God in our lives and we're going to devote next week's message to the subject of failure. But while we will all fail, God hasn't called us to be failures, He calls us and wants us to succeed and so this morning I want us to look at four important components to Joshua's success that will help us as we make it our aim to be successful in life.

I. Success is fueled by an ambition for God's agenda

Why did God choose Joshua to lead the Israelites into the Promised Land? Because 40 years earlier, when Moses sent 12 spies into Canaan to spy out the land, ten of the spies came back with a fearful report that the inhabitants were too large for them to take and they said, it's good land, but we can't take it. But two spies, Joshua and Caleb, came back with an ambitious proposal: *"Let us go up at once and occupy it, for we are well able to overcome it."* (Numbers 13:30) Joshua wasn't a greedy land hog. He knew that God had promised it, he saw that it was good, and he was ambitious with a godly ambition for God's agenda. That ambition didn't die out over the forty years – it still burned inside of Joshua. Now God says, "it's time."

Sometimes we can think of ambition as a bad thing, and it can be a very bad thing when it's bent in on ourselves, something the Bible calls that "selfish ambition". James says that where there's selfish

ambition there will be disorder and *every evil practice*. Selfish ambition destroys lives, reputations, relationships, and churches.

But the Bible doesn't speak against *all* ambition. The truth is ambition is a God-given part of our humanity. One definition of ambition is *a strong desire to do or achieve something, typically requiring determination and hard work*. Without ambition, most of the great accomplishments in history wouldn't have happened. Hospitals wouldn't have been built, universities wouldn't have been opened, businesses that provide jobs to many people wouldn't have been started, churches wouldn't have been planted, missionaries wouldn't have left home and country to bring the gospel to nations that don't have the gospel. Ambition can be the fuel to accomplish great things!

Godly ambition is a kind of inner vision of where we want to go – where we feel the Lord is calling us to go. If we lose that we are in danger of slipping into a kind of “Christian malaise”. Our sense of purpose and our motivation to serve God can begin to dry up. A lot of times when we're in that place, sermons don't seem to lift the malaise for very long. Encouragement from other believers doesn't seem to lift it. Even Bible reading and prayer doesn't seem to dent it.

Why? Because, as one person put it, we are already educated way beyond the level of our obedience! *We don't need to know more, we need to do more*. What we already know will burn with fresh passion if we put it to use for God's purposes in our lives. So if you don't know what that is, ask God to show you. It doesn't need to be something big or great or impressive to anyone else – for most of us it probably won't be. But God delights to make eternally precious things out of small things. I heard someone recently give the illustration that a small amount of steel, the size of a pen, might be worth just a few dollars. But if that same amount of steel was used to make the tiny springs and gears that go into a fine Swiss watch, that same amount of steel could be worth several hundred thousand dollars.

So ask God to show you what He has for you to do. Not *if* He has something for you to do, *what* He has for you to do. Then consider what gift mix you have, what interests you have, and what land God has already put in front of you and let God put a vision in your soul that will burn with a fresh ambition to take the land for God's glory. Success is fueled by an ambition for God's agenda.

II. Success requires a confidence in God's faithfulness

God gives Joshua a lot of promises. He promises him good success. He promises He will give him the land. He promises that He will be with him. He promises that no man will be able to stand against him. With these promises He assures Joshua that he should not fear but should be strong and courageous.

God is dealing with Joshua's heart here. He knows that one of the biggest obstacles to Joshua enjoying success will be heart things like fear and discouragement and dismay and being overwhelmed. So the Lord strengthens Joshua's heart by promising His faithfulness and directing Joshua to be confident in Him.

It's the same with us – the greatest obstacles to our taking land that God wants to give us will be the inner voice that speaks discouragement: *why even try? You're going to fail*. Or fear: *there are giants in the land that will hurt or destroy you. If you try to do that, you will fail miserably and look foolish. You're much safer if you don't step out*.

Those voices will come to all of us. We will, all of us, be tempted to falter. It comes with the territory. Probably some here are hearing those voices in your life right now. We need to answer those voices with confidence, not in ourselves, but in God and His faithfulness. God loves it when we are confident in Him because He knows He is infinitely worthy of all our confidence. He never fails, never falls, never abandons us, and never makes a mistake. Be strong and take courage: what God has called you to do, where God has called you to go, He will give you all you need to succeed in it. Be confident, have faith, in God's faithfulness. Faith in God expresses itself in our lives is as a confidence in God.

III. Success is pressed into action by a commitment to forward movement

For forty years the Jews have been going nowhere – just wandering in the wilderness waiting for the older Jews who didn't believe God's promises to give them the land died off. That's a pretty clear picture of failure, non-success. They were just marking time until they died. But now they've all died off and it's time for the younger generation to enter the land and God immediately begins to talk of moving forward again. Listen to the forward movement in these verses:

Now therefore arise, go...Every place that the sole of your foot will tread...you may have good success wherever you go...for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go...

All that God had planned for them was to be achieved on the move! It's the same with us. God designed us for forward movement. We don't do well when we're standing still in life – in that sense we're like a bicycle. As long as we're moving forward – even if it's at a slow speed – we can keep our balance on a bike. But once we stop, it's impossible to keep our balance for long.

God promises Joshua "good success wherever you go." Good success in life isn't a destination, it's a journey. Guess what? Our Christian walk needs to *walk*! If we stop walking, we stop making progress. We can't stand still in Christ – we need to always be moving, taking on new land, new challenges, new ministry, new goals. It's in those places our faith is challenged, and like any muscle, faith needs to be challenged to grow. As we move into new land our confidence in God grows – because we see what He can do.

The other day Janice and I met with a couple who are in the process of starting a home for young girls who have been the victims of human trafficking. I am working on having her come and share with the church soon. But it was so cool to hear how as she put one foot in front of the other, she was seeing God move in amazing ways. That's how God works - He designed us for forward movement.

In the coming months I hope to be sharing with you new ways that we want to help you identify your spiritual gifts and interests and connect them with specific ministries in the church to make it easier for people to find ministry outlets for their gifts and passions. Not because we're desperate for more volunteers but because that is Jesus' model for the church: fivefold ministry equipping the saints for works of ministry.

But a lot of ministry doesn't need to be an official program of the church. You and I are surrounded by ministry waiting to happen right now. Let's dream about what God might do through our lives – not for our promotion but for His purposes (that's ambition for God's agenda), then let's move forward and put it into action. What has God put in your hand? Talent? Gift? Passion? Don't sit it out on the bench. Use what God has given you for the advance of Jesus' kingdom and watch how God multiplies it and gives you

good success. If you're not using your gifts, take a small step forward. God says move. Don't expect God to meet you in amazing ways while you're standing still. But that is also true for the many in this church who are using their gifts – we still need to move forward, to not be content to stay where we are, but take new steps and believe God for new land. Let's be committed to forward movement.

What does that mean for you? I really can't tell you, but ask God to fuel your heart with a godly ambition, then with confidence in God's faithfulness take a step forward. Don't have to move fast. Doesn't have to be a big step. Take a small step and see what God does. And that will encourage you to take the next step.

IV. Success demonstrates a rugged perseverance in the face of setbacks and failure (band)

Next week we'll take a look at our friend failure. But the more we step out, the more we will experience set backs, disappointments, and failure. If we're not prepared for them we will get discouraged and think "it's not working" and give up. We need to persevere in the face of setbacks and failure.

Joshua would know setbacks. He would know failure. He would know defeat. He would know confusion. But God was with him and taught him, and brought him through those things to the other side. As we close, let's believe that God wants to meet us at the corner of success and our lives and commit ourselves yet again to do what God has called us to do and go where God has called us to go. Let's pray!