



“Overcoming Creating the Fear of Success”

1 Kings 19:1-3a; Jeremiah 29:11; 2 Corinthians 4:7-8

Last week, we examined the fear of failure. That one I understood, at least in part. But, the fear of success?! What does that bring to mind? Are we talking about the ways we might sabotage ourselves when we think we are pursuing success? We’ve all known people who seemed to do just that. Or could we be talking about the fear of what is demanded of us if we truly seek to be “successful”

disciples? Both of those fears are fears to be overcome. But perhaps we also need to consider the fear of big-money-fast-car success, a fear that we need not so much to overcome, as to create.

The consequences of Elijah’s success

Elijah was a prophet. It was his vocation. His “job” was to bring God’s word to the community and, in particular, its leader, the king. Bringing God’s word to the people of God meant that the prophet was usually a bearer of what seemed to be bad news, for the track record of the Israelites was not good. They had a way of wandering from God time and time again, insisting upon doing the very things that God warned them against doing.

Thus, there were consequences to being a true prophet of God. A true prophet might be ignored, banished, or worse. After all, what king wants to be told he is doing evil, that he is leading his people toward destruction? The more successful Elijah became, the more he had to fear. And, wow, was he successful!

Speaking for the LORD God, Elijah confronted Ahab over his and Jezebel’s worship of Baal, supreme deity in the Canaanite pantheon. Elijah directly challenged the priests of Baal to a contest. It would be the LORD God v. Baal. But the contest was not really a contest at all. Since Baal was no more than a figment of the Canaanite spiritual imagination, Baal was, of course, a complete no-show. On that day, in a spectacular display of God’s power and presence, Elijah showed all those who had ears to hear and eyes to see that the LORD God was not merely the best god on the block, the LORD was the only God, the creator and ruler of all that was, is, or will be.

Elijah could not have been more successful in the contest that day on Mt. Carmel. God had delivered on every promise Elijah had made. Since hundreds of assorted priests of Baal and devotees of Queen Jezebel were killed that day, it isn’t surprising that the King and Queen set about to track down and kill Elijah. It is perhaps more surprising that Elijah simply fled. From the triumph on Mt. Carmel, Elijah headed to a cave to hide. He seems ready to quit at the slightest sign of a reversal of fortune. He is exhausted, burned out. On the way to the cave, an angel has to remind him to eat. Despite his success, Elijah is a clay jar like the

Elijah, Ahab, and Jezebel

After the death of Solomon nearly a thousand years before Jesus, the united kingdom of Israel split in two: Israel in the north and Judah in the south. From 1 Kings 11 forward, the book of Kings traces the history of the two kingdoms. The successive kings of each kingdom are named and most get a report card from God! Nearly all the kings got a failing grade – they did what was evil in the sight of God (e.g., see 1 Kings 15:25). Only a few did what was right in God’s sight (e.g., 2 Kings 22:1-2). Though the kingdoms would enjoy periods of peace and prosperity, both were on a path toward destruction and death.

In 869BC, Ahab ascended to the throne of Israel, the northern kingdom. Though most of Israel’s kings before and after Ahab “did evil” in God’s sight, Ahab was about the worst of the bunch. As the writer of the book of Kings put it, Ahab “did evil in the sight of the LORD more than all who were before him” (1 Kings 16:30).

Ahab married Jezebel, a foreigner, and turned to the worship of Baal, the supreme god of the Canaanites. It is here that we meet the prophet Elijah, who intervened in the religious crisis brought on by Ahab and Jezebel. The story of Elijah’s confrontation with Jezebel and with the priests of Baal is one of the great biblical narratives. In all the Bible, Elijah is the only person who does not die. Instead, he is taken to heaven in a whirlwind, riding a chariot of fire. Elijah’s prophetic successor was Elisha, whose ministry to the kingdom of Israel lasted nearly fifty years, to 800BC or so.

MARKS OF A TRUE PROPHET

Evidently, there was no shortage of prophets during the age of the kings. 1 Kings 22 tells of what seems to be hundreds of prophets in the court of King Jehoshaphat. The entire retinue told Jehoshaphat what he wanted to hear – that the king would enjoy victory in battle. However, one prophet, Micaiah, insisted upon telling the truth – Jehoshaphat would fail in battle. With so many self-professed prophets running around, how could anyone tell a true prophet of God from a false one? One mark of a true prophet of God, like Elijah or Micaiah, was a willingness to tell the king or the entire community the truth they did not want to hear, regardless of the consequences to the prophet. They could not allow their fear of the consequences of success to silence their voices.

In his notes on Kings in the New Interpreter's Study Bible, Claude Mariottini outlines several tests that separate true prophets from false prophets. These include (1) is the prophet willing to tell the community what they don't want to hear? (2) Is the prophet vindicated by what happens? And (3) Does the prophet lead people toward or away from worship of the one true God? Finally, "the most trustworthy prophet is the one who will seek guidance from the LORD; who will share with the community what has been seen and heard; and who will continue with the community to test and clarify the word, open always to further guidance" (p. 523).

rest of us. Despite the extraordinary power of God that worked through him, it is as if his confidence in the Lord has simply left him. And indeed, Elijah will soon pass his mantle on to Elisha, whose own prophetic ministry will last nearly fifty years.

The consequences of our own success

We all seek success. And for many of us, success is defined as something like this: getting straight-A's, making the varsity, keeping a well-paid job with good benefits, staying happily married to one person for your whole life, having well-adjusted children who are themselves successful, staying thin, and, of course, the big house and SUV.

There is nothing wrong with any of this. But still, Jesus often warns the wealthy and powerful about the dangers of their success. Why? Because such success can feed our delusions about self-reliance and independence. Wealth and status can cause us to believe our own press, that we actually are kings of the world. But the path of discipleship leads us toward the recognition that we are dependent upon God, that all our treasured stuff and the success that bought it, is a gift from God. This is why many Christians come to true faith in Christ at a difficult time, at a time when it seems that we've been afflicted by life, when all our delusions of independence have been shattered. With apologies to Jack and to James Cameron (*Titanic*), there is only one king of this world and he is Jesus.

Perhaps success, worldly success, is a little like fire. My dad often talked about visiting the 1964 New York World's Fair and seeing an amazing exhibit that depicted two cavemen discovering fire—though I bet it was the women who figured out what to do with it. Learning to control fire transformed humankind, but fire is dangerous. We teach our children to fear it. We fear it ourselves. The successful attainment of social standing, a nice home, and a big car is not a bad thing, but it is a dangerous thing. Not only can we be tempted to make many bad choices on our way to such success, success itself can lead us away from God. Perhaps creating a healthy fear of success isn't quite as odd a notion as I first thought.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. In a small group you might begin by discussing what the phrase "the fear of success" suggests. It certainly generated a lot of discussion among some friends as I worked on this series. In writing this study, I chose to go in the direction of fearing the big-money-fast-car success that so much of culture tries to sell us. In the American culture of 2024, what do you think constitutes success for many people? What do advertisers and Hollywood say to us about success? What do they say to our youth?
2. It is easy to focus on the problems caused by our pursuit of affluent success and by its attainment. But you might first discuss the good of our affluence. Is there good in what we can do with our affluence? Is there good in the delight we can find in our affluence? If there is good in our affluence, how are disciples of Jesus to go about becoming successful and affluent? Can it be a goal or merely an outcome?
3. Of course, we have our homes and cars and vacations. Many of us live in a way that our parents could hardly imagine. All of us live in a way that only the very rich lived a hundred years ago. With all that we have, what do you think God hopes for us? Many of us are parents. What do we, as loving parents, hope for our own children? What really constitutes "success"?