

Jesus Should Have Failed

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Introduction

Never has anyone on earth been more successful than Jesus of Nazareth. He accomplished exactly what He came to accomplish: “For the Son of man came to seek and to save that which was lost” (Luke 19:10). “I glorified thee on the earth, having accomplished the work which thou hast given me to do” (John 17:4). He confirmed His message, and He proved His identity to every objective observer by His mighty works (John 3:2; 20:30–31; Acts 2:22).

When humanistic philosophers see such things as His poverty level of existence, they brand Him a failure. His friends thought Him to be beside Himself (Mark 3:21). His own fleshly brethren rejected His claims (John 7:3–5). He was a rebel against the religio-political norms and leaders of His day; they constantly challenged and rejected Him and did all they could to discredit Him. At one point even many of His disciples turned back and “walked no more with him” (John 6:66). Finally, at the young age of thirty-three years, His enemies succeeded in nailing Him to a Roman cross, the execution reserved for the worst felons.

The bulk of humanity worships at the shrine of “me first” and “what’s in it for me?” To them, the only way to succeed is to abandon God, family, friends, scruples – anything that might impede their “progress” – and to do whatever it takes to “get ahead.”

What appear to be foremost concerns to worldlings cannot be found even in trace amounts in the sinless life of Jesus Christ. Could there be a lesson or two for all of us in the reasons Jesus should, by worldly standards, have failed, but did not?

Accumulation of Wealth

Wealth can be either a prodigious blessing or the worst of curses. Only fools will gainsay the inspired observation that “the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil” (1 Tim. 6:10). The world identifies “successful” people by that which their money provides (houses, lands, vehicles, clothes, jewelry, exotic vacations, entertainments, etc.). The bumper sticker that reads, “The one with the most toys wins,” is a sad reflection of the almost universal materialism that grips mankind; most folk cannot define success apart from dollars.

The pre-incarnate Word implicitly took a “vow of poverty” when He agreed to visit our planet, exchanging the wealth and glory of Heaven (John 1:1–3, 14; 17:5; Rev. 21:9–27) for

having not a place to lay His Divine head (Mat. 8:20). So far as we are told, His only worldly possessions at the time of His death were the clothes that accompanied Him to Calvary.

While it would be erroneous to say that He condemned all who were rich and forbade His disciples to be wealthy, He frequently and strongly warned of the dangers of riches (Mat. 6:19-21; Luke 12: 15-21; 16:19-31; et al.). True, He ordered the rich young ruler to sell all, give to the poor, and become a disciple (Luke 18:22), but He did not thus charge Matthew (Mat. 9:9) or Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-9). Wealth was the great stumbling block to the young ruler, while it apparently was not to the latter two. In the context of the young ruler's covetousness, Jesus stated the exceeding difficulty of the rich entering the kingdom (Luke 18:24-25). Without commanding her practice universally, He commended the generosity of the poor widow who gave all that she to God's work (Luke 21:1-4). The world would hardly call her "successful," but the Lord did.

Worldly standards of success grievously affect God's people; we anoint ourselves with luxuries and judge the success of others by what they have accumulated. Many demonstrate their materialism by their paltry offerings compared to their prosperity when the time comes to "lay by him in store, as he may prosper" (1 Cor. 16:2). Stingy saints should be ashamed to claim discipleship of the Christ Who unselfishly gave up everything for their salvation.

Elderships sometimes place exorbitant burdens upon their members by building extravagant edifices that preclude expenditure on much else. This behavior has brought some congregations to financial ruin. Many will never hear the saving Gospel because the resources that could (and should) have taken it to them were spent on recreational buildings and activities. Could anything be more unlike the lowly Galilean than such practices are? The world is going to Hell while many of Jesus' "disciples" wallow in misspent wealth. *Success* is hardly the word for such a tragic failure of duty. Jesus **should** have failed because he did not seek wealth, and in the eyes of His powerful and wealthy contemporaries, He did so. All **will** fail whose primary aim is the accumulation of wealth.

Attraction of Fame

Ego-inflating fame seems an almost sufficient end to many, even without the by-products that usually accompany it. But few fame-seekers will refuse the wealth and deference that it generally brings. Some would shoot their own mothers in the back without a second thought in order to achieve a taste of notoriety. One need only reflect on the degraded depths of

filth to which some in the TV, film, and music industries have plunged for their “moment in the sun.” Those who achieve worldly renown are stamped “successful” by a Godless society, regardless of the ruthless and immoral behavior required. Millions are all but addicted to the modern technological tools that serve the quest for fame that seems all but universal. The Internet and social media, accessed and utilized via phones, tablets, and computers have made it possible to make oneself known all over the world with a few keystrokes and mouse clicks.

Fame, like wealth, is not innately evil, if it is achieved while doing what is right. Jesus did not take, watch, or respond to opinion polls to determine where, what, or the way He would teach or behave. He was vastly popular with ordinary contemporaries during much of His three and one-half years of earthly work, but this outcome was not rooted in **seeking** popularity or fame.

On various occasions the press of the multitudes was so great that Jesus could hardly move about. Luke wrote that at one point “...the many thousands of the multitude were gathered together, insomuch that they trod one upon another...” in pursuit of the Lord (Luke 12:1). At times the people so pressed Him that He and the disciples could not even find time to eat (Mark 6:31). He once sought some respite outside of Palestine, but even there His fame had so preceded Him that “he could not be hid” from a foreigner (7:24-26). Although He attracted the masses, He never resorted to sideshow entertainment to do so (e.g., “Magic for the Master,” “Juggling for Jesus,” or “Gymnastics to the glory of God”). He rather did so by the power of His words and works. The world counts one a failure who does not capitalize on such fame.

The success cult in the church seems determined to make us believe that if we do not attract large crowds, we are miserable failures. Of course, preachers would much rather preach to a large number than a small one every time. Elders would much prefer the problem of overcrowding than having to rope off unused pews. However, when the primary motive of elders and preachers is to attract and hold crowds, they will often resort to bizarre, circus-like tricks to achieve their goals. One such misguided promoter attempted to justify his cheap antics by pointing to the miraculous phenomena on Pentecost as a precedent.

This cult is extremely image-conscious, bent on doing whatever is necessary to bring the church “fame” in the eyes of its counterfeit religious neighbors. It has been eager to abandon the Lord’s distinctive worship, work, and organization for His church in order to “blend in” with the larger fuzzy religious landscape. It does not mind ignoring the Lord’s lines of fellowship in its quest for the desired “image” among those who are not God’s people. What price fame!

Acquisition of Power

Power-seeking is a perennial temptation because it is principally driven by pride. Besides feeding the obese egos of its seekers, they revel in the usual accompaniments of prestige, fame, and wealth. The world into which Jesus came was fraught with power struggles. The political arena of our time seems filled at every level with men and women whose overriding aims are not to serve country and constituents or practice statesmanship, but to fulfill the raw lust to gain and hold power. *Politician* has become almost a synonym for corruption, dishonesty, hypocrisy, and amorality because so many in public office have been all too willing thus to behave in order to be in control. The same carnal craving can be seen in business, industry, education, and religion.

Our Lord was not a power-monger. He could have seized **all** power – far beyond what any army or empire of men possessed – had that been His ambition. He demonstrated His power over every force known to man, both seen and the unseen, yet His purpose was not merely to exercise power. On one occasion His countrymen sought to force a crown upon Him, but He refused it (John 6:15). The world calls one a fool who would surrender to His enemies when He could have prevented their seizure of Him, but He did so (John 10:17–18). Even at His arrest He could have called “more than twelve legions of angels” to rescue Him (Mat. 26:53). When Pilate reminded Jesus of his power to release or crucify Him, the Lord quickly corrected him: “Thou wouldest have no power against me, except it were given thee from above” (John 19:10–11). That which He did not seek or seize His Father freely gave Him. Among His last words on Earth was the declaration that His Father had given Him **all** authority in Heaven and on Earth (Mat. 28:18). He is thus the perfect embodiment of one of His own proverbs: “He that humbleth himself shall be exalted” (Luke 14:11).

We should not be surprised that the mania for power is often evident among the elect, since this spiritual virus sorely afflicted the apostles, even those within Jesus’ “inner circle” (Mark 10:35–37). Many congregations have suffered greatly at the hands of a wealthy man or woman who used their money to control others. Churches are sometimes rent asunder by one who, after achieving power and becoming disqualified to retain it, will not relinquish it. Some have sorely abused the authority God has given them to rule. More than one apparently meek and mild-mannered deacon has gone power-mad upon becoming an elder. Some preachers forget that their “authority” rests only in the faithful proclamation of the Word (Tit. 2:15), rather than in themselves. Sad to say, Diotrefes seems to reappear in every generation (3 John 9–10).

Such behavior is sensual and carnal, a diametric contradiction to the example and teaching of the humble Nazarene.

Conclusion

Jesus Christ was the antithesis of all the standards and expectations of the world's success experts – He should have miserably failed. All of these “wrong things” He did revolve around one bedrock attribute of His life: absolute unselfishness. Had He been motivated by selfishness He never would have assumed a fleshly existence in the first place (Phi. 2:7). He came on a totally unselfish mission: “...not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me” (John 6:38). He was perfectly sinless (John 8:46; Heb. 4:15; 9:14; 1 Pet. 2:21–23) because He was perfectly selfless. It is a faithful saying that all men are **sinful** in direct proportion to their **selfishness**.

Obviously, whether one fails or succeeds depends entirely on who is doing the measuring and what standards the measurer has used. Strange, is it not, that the name and fame of Jesus Christ live on while the names of those who label Him a failure can scarcely be remembered, even by their own ilk?

[Note: I wrote this MS, and it originally appeared as an “Editorial Perspective” in the December 2002 issue of *The Gospel Journal*, a 36-page monthly of which I was editor at the time.]

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