

- I. Personal failure,
- II. God’s success.

Grace and peace to you from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

What do we need in life? Yes, food, clothing, shelter, love, and a stable job. These are some of the essential things that governed our daily lives and made us happy. But are these enough? Many people feel one of the greatest needs in life is success because without it life is meaningless. So how do people measure success? Some define it as earning a lot of money, living in million-dollar mansions or driving expensive cars such as Mercedes Benz. For some, success is simply accomplishing the goals they have set. But what happens when people could not live up to their expectations? They would get frustrated, upset, confused, and eventually they would label themselves as failure. But is this always the case? Take Christopher Columbus for example; he thought he was a failure when he failed to establish the trade route to the East Indies. However, his mistake made people praise him for the discovery of America. Others measure success by numbers. Whenever there is growth that is a sign of success, but when there is no growth that means failure. Again, is that always true?

Success and failure are difficult to define. And we can see that in our Christian lives. Our society is now following a path different than that of the truth in God’s Word. Abortions, sexual immorality and sin of all sorts are now becoming acceptable behaviors. Even some of God’s most devoted servants are joining with the flow. It would be easy to conclude that Christianity has failed.

So does that mean we failed individually and as a church body because we could not bring our relatives, friends, neighbors, and the people in our community into God’s family? Have we failed because we lack the abilities to convince the people into believing Christianity like that of the mega churches? How do we measure success as Christians and as a church body? The answers to these questions lie in the life of Elijah. We will explore God’s measure of success through Elijah’s personal failure and how God uses that for his own success.

Let me read to you what the text says in **1 Kings 19:9-21**,

There he went into a cave and spent the night. And the word of the LORD came to him: "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He replied, "I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too." The LORD said, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by." Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave. Then a voice said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He replied, "I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too." The LORD said to him, "Go back the way you came, and go to the Desert of Damascus. When you get there, anoint Hazael king over Aram. Also, anoint Jehu son of Nimshi king over Israel, and anoint Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel Meholah to succeed you as prophet. Jehu will put to death any who escape the sword of Hazael, and Elisha will put to death any who escape the sword of Jehu. Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel -- all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and all whose mouths have not kissed him."

Prior to this text, Elijah had a big showdown with 950 prophets of Baal and Asherah where he demonstrated the power of God. He challenged them and the nation of Israel with these words: **“If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him” (1 Ki 18:21)**. More like the idea of winner takes all. Elijah gave them every advantage by letting them go first. And to make matters worse he even soaked his bull and the fire woods with water, making everything seem impossible to win the contest. When he asked his God, the real answer came. God sent fire to consume Elijah’s water-soaked sacrifice and everything else next to the altar of sacrifice. That night not only did Elijah claim his victory and success, but he also brought many believers to Lord.

Right after this event is where our text comes in. Rather than see Elijah doing his victory dance and smiling, we see him fleeing the scene from the wicked Queen Jezebel. He has just slaughtered 950 of her best prophets, and now she wanted his head to avenge for their deaths. You would think that a person who is as devoted to God as Elijah would never deserted the Lord, but in fact he did. He ran south like a wanted criminal that tried everything to evade his capture. When he came to Mt. Horeb, the same mountain where God appeared to Moses, he complained to the Lord that nothing has changed. ***"I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too."*** Just like a defeated soldier, Elijah is ready to raise a white flag and surrender. He said, ***"I have had enough, LORD, Take my life"*** (1 Ki 19:4).

Do you see any similarities between us and Elijah? We all are God's children who have been called to carry out Christ's great commission, and that is to preach the Gospel to every creature and to proclaim his Word to the modern day Baal worshippers. Jesus said to you and me, ***"You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world"*** (Matthew 5:13,14). We are to show that light through our faith, the word we preach and the deeds we do—basically be witnesses for our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit uses us as God's instrument to make that happen.

But despite all the works we have done, it seems like they are in vain. We have preached about sin, the sanctity of marriage, god-pleasing family, murder, immorality, and more. Yet, statistics still show that 79% of women engage in sex before marriage, 4 out of 10 marriages ended in divorce, and 1.5 million abortions are performed in the US each year. There is a murder in every 27 minutes. And don't forget about same-sex marriage! It too is trying to destroy the very core in which we and our Lord Jesus Christ worked so hard to preserve. We try to raise our voices in concern through teaching and preaching, but no one cares--nothing has changed.

This is just on the broad spectrum, but what about within our church? We see delinquent members who choose to come to church at their own time. The relatives and friends we have been working for months and even years are not closing their doors on us. At time this can make us frustrated and might even tempt us to follow Elijah's example and say, "It's no use, let's give up." We too may flee into our own caves: our homes, and church where we refuse to talk about our Savior and share our faith with anyone who is outside of our circles. Eventually we may come out of the shell and join the sinful people by accepting their ideas and beliefs since we could not beat them.

Brothers and sisters, stand firm in faith despite our personal failures, and the pressure the world put on us. Don't dwell on all the frustration and headaches. Leave the burden to Lord Jesus Christ. He has done this through all the insults, beatings and sufferings on his way onto the cross. Keep on testifying for our Lord. He said, ***"Don't be afraid, keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city"***. (Acts 18:9-10)

God still kept to his promise; the promise that he will let us see his Measure of Success in spite of our personal failures. When Elijah was about to quit, God didn't let it happen. He disciplined Elijah with this simple question, ***"What are you doing here, Elijah?"*** The Lord had given Elijah a mission, and was expecting him to complete his assigned task. But Elijah hid in the cave waiting for God's sympathy because he thought he had failed the mission. He had forgotten that God was in control of everything, and he was just the servant called to do a duty.

Let this not only be Elijah's first lesson, but ours also. When God calls us by Spirit to work faith in his Church, he simply tells us to speak his Word, to proclaim that Jesus is the world's only Savior from sin, death and hell. He does not want us to add or subtract anything from the scripture just so the Word would be more effective. He does not want us to be discouraged either when we see people rejecting the Gospel or denying him as the Savior. God success doesn't come from our own abilities, but above. Neither Elijah nor we have the wisdom to judge the outcome of our work.

Let's look at the second lesson God shows Elijah. Elijah looked for signs by which the world measures success such as power, glory and fame to judge his success. When they did not turn out the way Elijah expected, he felt God had deserted him. God has to reassure him that it is not all about power or prestige that made people listen. It is the gentle whisper of the Lord that actually brought down on their knees.

What does that mean for us? When confronting people, we don't need to be loud and tough, but simply

address the law and gospel. They are what give Elijah the strength to get up and stay focus on his work. They are the power that can free people and us from the slavery of sin. And the only power that gives forgiveness to all. We have received this power through the word and sacraments. They give us hope, courage and heal the wounds that sin had caused us. ***“Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave.***

Even though the Word may seem foolish and weak to the world and us at times, but we must remain strong. ***Paul said, “The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Corinthians 1:18).*** The world may think we are using poor tools to win the sin of this world. And the death of our Lord Jesus on the cross doesn’t seem like the most impressive success story. But remain strong and follow the example of the apostle Paul, ***“I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes” (Romans 1:16).***

Don’t doubt that the Word will have any effect on the modern day Baal worshippers and be ready to give up. In God’s eyes there is no failure. When Elijah left the cave with that gentle whisper, he left with success. The word Elijah once preached had gone far beyond what he had imagined. It gave rise to seminaries and produced more disciples to carry out the Lord’s work in seasons and out of seasons. Now there are disciples all over the world, speaking the very same message in different tongues from the plains to the mountains. Trust the Lord that he may turn our weaknesses into his success. We too, may succeed with that same Word, the Word that assures us of forgiveness. In that Word we can see “God’s Measure of Success.” Amen.