

What is Success?

Joshua 1:7–9—Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go. Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful. Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.”

For many Christians, Joshua 1:7–9 is a favorite Scripture passage to quote when they speak about “success.” The “prosperity” preachers quote these verses to convince believers that God wants us all to be “prosperous and successful,” that He does not want us to fail. So, according to their teaching, you can have large bungalows, luxury cars, gigantic bank accounts, etc. Not only that, you will enjoy good health, for sickness is not your portion. You will be wealthy, because poverty is not God’s will. The sky will always be blue. Preachers will have big churches, high salaries, big retirement accounts, etc.

But is this what the Lord has in mind when He speaks to Joshua? What is “success”? How do you define it? What does the Lord consider “success”? What does He mean by “prosperous and successful”?

To properly understand the words, we must first determine the “context” in which they are used. Unfortunately, most interpretations do not consider context, and are thus likely to misinterpret the words. What is the context of the words, “prosperous and successful”?

Moses has just died, and Joshua is about to take over the helm of leadership. God says to Joshua, “Moses my servant is dead. Now then, you and all these people, get ready to cross the Jordan River into the land I am about to give to them—to the Israelites. I will give you every place where you set your foot, as I promised Moses. Your territory will extend from the desert to Lebanon, and from the great river, the Euphrates—all the Hittite country—to the

Mediterranean Sea in the west. No one will be able to stand against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you. Be strong and courageous, because you will lead these people to inherit the land I swore to their ancestors to give them.” (Joshua 1:2–6)

Here, God is telling Joshua to lead the people into the Promised Land, to occupy the new territories which He has promised him.

God promises Joshua that (1) He will give him every place Joshua set his foot on, (2) no one is able to stand against him all the days of his life, and (3) God will be with him, will never leave or forsake him. God tells Joshua His promises. God will do His part.

Now, Joshua is to do his part: (1) Be strong and courageous. (2) Be obedient to the Law: “Be careful to obey all the law that His servant Moses gave, do not turn from it to the right or to the left.” Then He repeats the need for obedience: “Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it.” When Joshua does his part, God gives him this promise: “You will be successful...you will be prosperous and successful.” Prosperous and successful in what?

There are three models of application for Joshua 1:7–9. The first is to apply the verses “materially.” That is, God will give us material prosperity and success if we obey His Word. This application is off-target because this is not what Joshua has in mind.

The second applicational model is to apply the verses “spiritually.” That is, God will give us “spiritual” victory over our enemies when we obey His Word. A case may be made for “spiritual” application since Joshua will be victorious over his enemies in the conquest of the land. God promises Joshua, “No one will be able to stand up against you all the days of your life.” (Joshua 1:5) Therefore, we can be victorious over Satan and his spiritual forces when we obey God’s Word.

The “spiritual” application at least comes closer to the text, but I think that a “missiological” application is truer to the text.

The context makes it clear that when Joshua obeys the Law, he will be successful in conquering the land, in occupying the new frontier. Note the repetition of the word “land” in verses 2, 6, and 10, and also in the verses before and after Joshua 1:7–9. The eyes of the people are on the land, God’s promises concern the land, and they are to go in to occupy the land.

Their success and prosperity is to be defined by the extent to which they have occupied the Promised Land, or the new frontier that God has promised. Anything short of full occupation of the land is short of “success.”

“Success,” in context, is not about our material well-being, it is about the extent to which God’s purpose is fulfilled. In the case of Joshua, success is irrevocably tied to the occupation of the “land.”

God gives a promise to Joshua that He does not give to us: possession of the Promised Land. His promise to us is that there will be “a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb...wearing white robes and...holding palm branches in their hands.” (Rev. 7:9)

Joshua was to occupy new frontiers. We too are to occupy new frontiers, to go after the unreached peoples and lands where the Name of Christ has not been named. Unreached peoples in unreached places--these are the new frontiers we need to occupy for Jesus.

Paul says, “It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known.” (Rom. 15:20) Paul was focused on reaching the unreached for Christ, and he ventured into new frontiers, to occupy new territories for Him.

In our text, Joshua is commanded to be strong and courageous, and to obey the Law. Applied directly to us, this means that we are to be strong and courageous and to obey the Word of God. For Joshua, he is to be strong and courageous in taking the land. For us, we are to be strong and courageous in taking the Gospel to every nation, tribe, people and language. We are to “make disciples of every nation” (Matt. 28:19) so that the promise of “every nation, tribe, people

and language” will be fulfilled.

To be successful, then, is to occupy new frontiers for Him in reaching the unreached (just as Joshua reached the unreached Promised Land). Thus, we would define success in terms of the extent to which the unreached have been reached or new territories have come under the influence of the Gospel.

I was having lunch with the President of a major Christian organization with BIG budgets and BIG buildings. He asked me, "how do you define success in your ministry?" I replied, "Besides being faithful to the Lord for the ministry He has entrusted to us, I define 'success' as the extent to which the unreached peoples have been reached for Christ. If an unreached people has now only 0.01% believers, and if by the grace of God, that percentage increased to 10%, at least it is 'success'--that is succeeding in reaching the unreached for Christ." My friend, however, defines "success" in terms of budget, building, books, personnel. I find myself in "cordial" disagreement with him.

I do not object to Christians using other biblical texts to speak about “success” in their spiritual lives (whatever that means). But I believe that Joshua 1:7-9 speaks to more than spiritual success--it speaks about the conquest of new territories for Him.

What is the closest application for us today? It is this conquest of new territories, or unreached lands and peoples, so that they come under the influence of the Gospel.

Ultimately, then, God is concerned more about the salvation of people than anything else. “The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.” (2 Peter 3:9)

Since Joshua 1:7-9 is a missiological text, therefore, it must be applied missiologically, rather than spiritually, or materially. With that in mind, let us be busy in proclaiming the Gospel--especially to those who have never heard--and in bringing the unreached to Him.