

Acts 13:44–52: God’s Sovereignty, Human Responsibility: Successes or Failures?

OT: Isa 49:1–16

Gospel: Luk 9:1–6

Psa 24

Introduction

Successes and failures are two of the most impactful events in a person’s life. Ask a person about their history and after they tell you about where they grew up, their life story is often a litany of things they did well and things they did poorly.

Self-esteem — one of the most sought after feelings in life today — is wrapped up in whether we think of ourselves as successes or failures. Confidence and self-respect seem to be based on how well we do in life and how others perceive us.

Success can bring wealth, influence, and relationships. But mostly, we hope that whatever we perceive as success will bring a sense of self satisfaction. Failure can bring loneliness, depression, and anxiety.

How do we define success and failure? What framework can we use to understand success and failure? Here’s what’s even more important. Do successes or failures define *us*? I would argue that they do, but ought not.

Turn with me to Acts 13:44, where we see both success and failure. And most importantly, we are given a framework by which to understand such events. We’ll discover that our understanding of success and failure are reflective of our understanding of God and ourselves, his plans and ours.

God's Sovereignty

There are two particularly interesting clauses in the section that was read this morning, because they seem out of place. This first is 48: *as many as were appointed to eternal life believed*. Why did Luke write about the Gentiles conversion this way, “as many as were appointed”?

At the heart of this short phrase is expressed a fundamental aspect of God's nature: that he is sovereign over events, time, space, and people ... all of creation. How do I get all that from this short phrase?

Like a layer cake, there are three levels of perspective going on here, which we could call past, present, and personal.

Past: Prophecies and Promises Made

The first is past.

Paul has pointed out that there is a larger story being told than just that moment: a “meta-narrative”. That means that each event in Scripture — whether about Abraham in the OT or Jesus in the Gospels — is telling us not only about the moment being described, but also is a link in the chain of God's plan that began before time, and extends after time.

We see Paul explicitly reference the intention of God from of old in 40–41, when he warns:

*beware ... lest what is said in the Prophets should come about: look, you scoffers, be astounded and perish; for I am doing a work in your days, a work that you will not believe, even if one tells it to you.*¹

Paul is saying, “God has spoken. You know God's intent. There's nothing new here. Are you listening?”

It has always been God's purpose to take his servants and through them reach the whole world. From the curse on the serpent in Genesis,² to the remnant family of Noah, to Abraham,³ and Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, the Judges, Esther, Ruth, and David, God has ordered, ordained, and appointed.

¹ See Habbakuk 1:5.

² Genesis 3:15.

³ Genesis 22:17.

After the dividing of David's kingdom, God's plans and promises remained; and even as David's offspring descended into paganism and his kingdom was taken into exile, God's purpose still continued and was made clear in the prophets.

God's had stirred, directed, appointed beginning long ago.

Present: Prophecies and Promises Fulfilled

But this moment in Acts 13 isn't just about promises made long ago in dusty history. All of history has a start, a middle, and an end, and God is directing all of it. This is the Christian view of history, quite different from that of the atheist, or the materialist. See vss 46–47.

It was necessary that the word of God be spoken first to you. Since you thrust it aside and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles. For so the Lord has commanded us, saying, "I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth."⁴

Paul is saying that this event in Acts 13 is an evidence of past promises being carried out in the present. The meta-narrative — the larger story — is being played out right before the eyes of the Jewish leaders. Paul is saying that the larger story about which he had spoken earlier in chapter 13 was happening in that moment.

Now comes the verse with which I started: 48.

And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed.⁵

Personal: Paul's role

Finally, it was personal for Paul. Remember when Ananias was given the command to baptize Paul after his conversion, he hesitated because of Paul's bloody reputation. But,

the Lord said to him, 'Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel.'⁶

⁴ See Isaiah 49:6.

⁵ There are also hints of this Gentile involvement in vss 43 and 44.

⁶ Acts 9:15.

This statement *about* Paul is applied *to* Paul.

God's Sovereignty Over Us

All of these outcomes were far outside of any human control. The promises covered thousands of years, multiple cultures, hundreds of personalities and languages. Nothing in this text makes sense if God were not sovereign, under God's authority.

And it's no less true for us. We are part of God's bigger story, his meta-narrative. Every event, even the bad ones, are under his authority.

I know that the last statement raises hard questions about the problem of evil, a topic that is too vast for this sermon. But let me observe this: if God were not sovereign, Joseph could never have said to his brothers,

*You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.*⁷

If God were not sovereign, none of your hardships could be made redemptive in your life. You could never be assured that your trials will have any meaning at all!

Human Responsibility

Think about the events in chapter 13.

Paul and Barnabas had a modicum of success with the Gentiles, but very little with the Jewish leaders. They have been persecuted. They have been angrily abused and insulted. The fact that they are being driven out of Pisidian Antioch strongly suggests that their physical well-being has been threatened. Overall, it appears that they failed.

Now, if God is sovereign, why did they work so hard, endure so much abuse, and risk such harm to themselves? And in light of these failures, why were they "filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit" (52)?

It's because they were responsible for their actions and attitudes.

⁷ Genesis 50:20.

Responsible for Actions

Being aware of God's sovereignty over the situation did not dampen their desire to be obedient. If anything, being aware of God's sovereignty stoked the fires of their zeal.

They did what they were called and commanded to do.

- Paul preached a thorough, moving, even risky sermon, boldly proclaiming the Gospel.
- He and Barnabas made themselves available to others when they wanted to carry on further conversation.
- When the Jewish leaders showed that they were antagonistic to the truth, instead of being frightened away, Paul and Barnabas gave their attention to the Gentiles.

They were responsible for their actions and obedient servants of Christ.

Responsible for Attitudes

They were also responsible for their attitudes.

In spite of their best efforts, the jealous Jewish leaders "incited the devout women of high standing and the leading men of the city" to persecute Paul and Barnabas and drive them out (50). They had just gotten some traction with the Gentiles, but they are soon chased out of town without being able to finish their work.

A natural response would've been one of disgust, perhaps even a flavor of righteous retribution: "fine, they've chosen God's wrath, so God, let 'em have it!" It seems unnatural in the midst of pronouncing judgment on hardhearted people, to also be able to have joy in the Holy Spirit.

And yet they rejoiced. They were obedient to Jesus' command in the beatitudes.

*"Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you."*⁸

⁸ Matthew 5:11–12.

Understanding Success and Failure

Let's get back to the matter of success and failure.

First, were the events of this text successes or failures? *Both*.

Second: what then were Paul and Barnabas? Successes or failures? *Neither!*

Because of the interrelationship between God's sovereignty and human responsibility, outcomes and performance can be separated.

Because of God's sovereignty, could Paul and Barnabas simply sit back and wait and see what might happen? Or because of their responsibility, did they spin into deep depression because of their failures?

Success needs to be redefined for the Christian as simply being faithfulness to God. Faithfulness means taking responsibility for my actions and attitudes.

Outcomes are God's business.

Paul makes this principle clear several times. For example,

*I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor. For we are God's fellow workers. You are **God's field, God's building.**⁹*

It is required of stewards that they be found faithful. But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself.¹⁰

Indeed, sometimes success in God's economy looks like failure and folly. The cross is proof of that!

In my own life, some of the times that I feel I have been most faithful and most closely walking with God is when I also felt most beaten up! And yet, in the economy of eternity, humility, even humiliation, can actually be a hand of strength. Wisdom and success in the world's economy is folly and failure in God's kingdom. And wisdom and success in the kingdom and eternity will often look like folly and failure in the world.

Again: faithfulness is success; outcomes are God's business.

⁹ 1 Corinthians 3:6–9.

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 4:2–3.

What gives me hope: how strange it is that the epitome of a Jew, the best educated of the Jews, the most Jewish of all the Jews whom we meet, becomes primarily an apostle to Gentiles! There's no "playing to one's strengths" here. If this were not a matter of God's appointment in time and place, this could have been characterized as one of the biggest management mistakes in all of history!

That give's me hope!

Successes and failures — however we estimate such things — do not define *us* as successes or failures.

This can give us both discipline, courage, hope.

- Discipline: because we are responsible for our actions and attitudes and God holds us accountable.
- Courage: because when our intentions are maligned, we doubt our abilities, are stymied by our circumstances, the outcomes are in God's hands.
- Hope: because even if we haven't done the best possible job of parenting, being disciples, or whatever we set our hand to, God redeems our messes.

*Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.*¹¹

¹¹ Philippians 2:12–13.