

# Human Success and Human Support

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Preacher: Cedric Moss

[ 0 : 00 ] Although we're a diverse group this morning, there are some things I know that we all have in common. And one of those is that we want to be successful. I think every single person in this room, no matter how you may define success, because we do define it differently, we want to be successful.

We want to achieve whatever it is we consider to be success. And we all know that success doesn't just drop in our laps. We're told that we must work for success. We must work hard to achieve it. Those of us who work are told to work hard on our jobs. Those who are students are told to work hard in the classroom for academic success. Athletes are told to work hard on the field or on the court or in the pool or wherever they compete.

But there's an untold aspect of success, a part that we rarely ever hear about. And oftentimes being unaware of this aspect of success leads to a lot of disappointment to many people on their road to success.

They're disappointed when they fail to achieve success. They're disappointed when they fail to achieve the success they had hoped for, the success they had been told they would get if they do certain things, if they follow the rules.

[ 1 : 35 ] Another thing I know that we all have in common is that we all want to be supported. We all rather be supported than opposed by people.

And this is true on all fronts. It's true whether in our homes. We want support in our workplaces. It's true in politics. It is true in the church.

It's true in any context where there are human relationships. We want people to appreciate us. We want them to support us in our efforts.

And we don't want them to be ungrateful towards us. And if you're halfway paying attention, you would recognize that the information space is filled with all kinds of advice.

We want people to support us, books and programs and relationship gurus giving us advice on how to win the support of other people to ourselves and to our ideas.

[ 2 : 34 ] They psychoanalyze people and tell us how various kinds of people are motivated and what we need to do to win their support. But again, there's an aspect of human support that is really talked about.

And not knowing it is really a major source of disappointment for many people when the human support they once enjoyed is lost.

Well, the passage that we have come to this morning in our sermon series in Ecclesiastes speaks directly to these issues of human success and human support.

And in particular, they're rarely talked about aspects that are sources of disappointment for many people. And so if you've not done so yet, would you kindly turn in your Bible to Ecclesiastes chapter 9.

This morning we begin reading at verse 11 and we will read through to verse 18. Ecclesiastes chapter 9 verses 11 through 18.

[ 3 : 55 ] Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to those with knowledge.

But time and chance happen to them all. For man does not know his time. Like fish that are taken in an evil net, and like birds that are caught in a snare.

So the children of man are snared at an evil time when it suddenly falls upon them. I've also seen this example of wisdom under the sun and it seemed great to me there was a little city with few men in it and a great king came against it and besieged it building great siege works against it for there was found in it a poor wise man and he by his wisdom delivered the city yet no one remembered

that poor man but I say that wisdom is better than might though the poor man's wisdom is despised and his words are not heard the words of the wise heard and quiet are better than the shouting of a ruler among fools wisdom is better than weapons of war but one sinner destroys much good let's pray together father we pause in this moment first of all to thank you for your word we thank you for your holy word that you have preserved and watched over over the ages for the good and care of your people and Lord we ask in this moment that you would bring your word to bear upon our hearts and our lives

Lord we trust your dealings with us we trust your leading of us that the word that we will hear today is timely for us as a church and for us as individuals Lord you know the circumstances in which we find ourselves today and so we ask that you would speak your word to us in those circumstances and tailor your word to our lives Father I ask publicly as I have done privately that you would pour out your spirit and your grace upon me this morning that I might care for these who are gathered these whom I love but whom you love even more and Lord would you use your word to build the church would you sanctify us with your word because your word is truth would you cause worldly ideas to be washed away and to be replaced with the unchanging truth of your word

Lord speak to your people now care for your people in this moment I pray in Jesus name Amen in this text before us we've come face to face with two observations made by the preacher and being the thoughtful wise man that he was the preacher took the time to think about them and his words remind us that despite our best efforts human success and human support are not guaranteed as we live in this world this world under the sun despite our best efforts giving it our all human success and human support are not guaranteed as true as this is this is really shared

[ 8 : 41 ] I've never spoken at a graduation but I think if I were to speak at a graduation this is perhaps one of the things that I would talk about and I know many would not be happy but it's true I've been to graduations where they tell kids you can do whatever you want to do you can be whatever you want to be it's not true it's not true despite our best efforts human success and human support are not guaranteed in our remaining time I want to consider these two observations in life that the preacher addresses in this text before us I want to begin with the first observation human success the preacher addresses human success in verses 11 and 12 and in a nutshell he says that human ability is no guarantee of success notice again how he says it in verse 11 again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift nor the battle to the strong nor bread to the wise nor riches to the intelligent nor favor to those with knowledge that's how he says it the preacher observes that having ability does not necessarily result in success and the list of abilities that the preacher gives is representative it's not exhaustive but it's representative and no doubt it was representative of what was highly valued in his day and I would dare say it's applicable to our day as well athletic ability military power wisdom intelligence and being knowledgeable but the preacher says not so human ability does not automatically translate to human success now those of you who keep up with sports or halfway keep up with sports may be aware that on Thursday in the U.S. Open

Serena Williams the number one ranked tennis player in the world was defeated by a player who was ranked number 11 and this is a position that Serena Williams had held for 186 consecutive week straight she was number one in the world sitting there for more than three and a half years and on Thursday passed she fell to a relatively unknown person who actually was in the finals yesterday and actually lost but nonetheless hardly known and Serena Williams was expected to win this match hands down but she didn't and it reminds us in this case that the match doesn't go to the highest rank doesn't necessarily go to the one guaranteed by people expected to win now why is this success why is it that human ability does not guarantee human success well the reason is that there's more to success than human ability there's more to success than how good we are and how well we do what we do and that's the reason that ability in and of itself will not guarantee a particular outcome and the preacher tells us in the latter part of verse 11 that there are two other factors that are beyond human control and they affect success as well they affect the outcomes that we actually achieve they are what the preacher calls time and chance he says time and chance happens to them all now what does the preacher mean by time and chance well we encountered the word time for the first time in ecclesiastes in chapter three it's in that well known passage where we read for everything there's a season and a time for every matter under heaven and there in chapter three the preacher points out that God is the one who ordains times and seasons it is he who ordains when a person is to be born and when that person dies and so on and on the other hand this is the first time we're encountering this word chance in the book of ecclesiastes and I know for us when

we hear that word chance we think about something that is random or something that is pure luck something that's not based on any kind of human manipulation it just happens cannot be controlled now you think that things in this world happen by chance then clearly you don't understand the world and more important than that you don't understand God's world because what seems to be a chance event is not a chance event at all but ultimately is controlled by God and what the preacher is referring to when he refers to chance is actually what we call God's providence do you know that when somebody takes a set of dice and they throw them do you know that God is the one who determines the outcome it's not just some random kind of mystery that it just happens to go one way or the other and

there's nothing in the universe that determines how those dice fall no God is the one who determines how a set of dice would fall when they are rolled so in a strict sense although there's probably a lot of greed going on in all kinds of gambling activities on this island and on the other island ultimately God is the one who determines outcomes you know in the Bible there was this practice called the casting of lots and it's very similar to throwing dice although when we read it in the Bible it's mentioned some 70 times in scripture like 7 times in the New Testament in particular and we don't know because scripture doesn't tell us what these lots looked like some people speculated they were stones some speculated they were sticks but the Bible doesn't really say what they were but they were some kind of a mechanism that were designed to get some seemingly random outcome that a person could not say you brought about this result so when they needed to make decisions and they weren't sure what to do they would cast these lots believing that God did control the outcome and whatever the outcome was that that was really the will of God that's the way they selected the replacement for Judas in Acts chapter chapter 1 in Proverbs 16 33 here's what we read we read the lot is cast in the lap but it's every decision is from the Lord the lot is cast in the lap but it's every decision is from the Lord and what we see as pure chance through human eyes is really divine providence it is God superintending over the details of this life here's a way when Grudem defines providence in his systematic theology he says it's the doctrine that God is continually involved with all created things in such a way that he one keeps them existing and maintaining the properties with which he created them and two cooperates with created things in every action directing their distinctive properties to cause them to act as they do and three directs them to fulfill his purposes now I know that's a kind of thick definition but the condensed version of that really is that

God is involved with his creation and the things that happen in this world are not based on chance they are the result of his providence and his superintendence over all things and see think about it if there's any particular event or outcome in life that God is not over it means that God is not sovereign for God to be sovereign he has to be sovereign over every single thing if one small little thing was outside of the scope of his sovereignty then he's not sovereign because that thing is on its own and can go wherever it wants to go and God has no control over it and I think this is easier to accept than understand that makes sense that if we believe that there's a sovereign God then there's nothing outside of his absolute control now that raises a lot of questions for us and not just for us it's been for millennia that theologians have been trying to sort out many many implications from that but I think it's sufficient this morning for us to simply accept that if God is truly sovereign then he's sovereign over all things and because he is not some distant

[ 19 : 25 ] God he is providentially involved with his creation not leaving us to ourselves so God is the one who sets times and seasons and he is the one who sets times and moments it's not based on luck not based on chance now again why is this and why does ability not guarantee success because there's a sovereign God who is determined to remind us that he has not left us to ourselves and at the end of the day all outcomes are in his providential and sovereign hand and this should bring us comfort this should not bring us fear this should bring us comfort that we have a God who is sovereign over all and who ordains all that comes to pass in verse 12 the preacher helps us to see that we are unlike

God he reminds us that we have no knowledge or control over our time and upsetting events sometimes come our way and they beset us and in that regard we are no different from fish or bird trapped in a trap or that would walk into a trap and cause them their very lives I think we all would agree that if we knew in advance what was going to happen and that some of our endeavors will not end in success we wouldn't pursue them or we would make adjustments seeking to get a better outcome but we don't know but on the other hand God knows but more than that not only does he

know he is sovereign over our outcomes and determines the boundaries of our lives now I wonder this morning how does this truth hit you how does this truth land on your soul that human ability does not guarantee human success

I think some people would respond by saying well why even try then I mean just que sera sera whatever will be will be why even make any effort well that's what we call fatalism the view that whatever is going to be is going to be so you don't even need to do anything because it's going to happen anyway but that's not what the preacher is saying that's not what scripture is teaching the preacher is not saying that speed and strength and wisdom and intelligence and having knowledge don't matter he's not saying that at all instead he is saying that they are not all that matter God's sovereignty and God's providence matter as well and so our response should be that we should still work hard at running fast and being strong and being wise and being intelligent and acquiring knowledge we should still do that but at the same time we should remember that God is sovereign over all outcomes and the circumstances that produce those outcomes interestingly

Serena Williams attributes her loss to a knee injury that she has been ailing with and no doubt that is the case but God is sovereign over knee injuries and he is sovereign over the timing of knee injuries and her knee injury could have been some other time as opposed to at this particular time so the preacher is not advocating that we abdicate to fatalism but the preacher is instead saying to us is that we need to humble ourselves and as we pursue the betterment of ourselves and as we pursue the development of our abilities we do so mindful of a sovereign God who is all wise and who is all good and who works out his purposes in and through our lives for his own glory and for reasons that sometimes we don't understand in the moment so as we prepare for success we must be mindful of

God's providence his providential working and we need to look to him and we need to trust in him so the preacher's point is that human ability does not automatically translate into human success in addition to making an observation about human success the preacher makes an observation about human support which is my second and final point let's again read what the preacher says in verses 13 through 16 he writes I've also seen this example of wisdom under the sun and it seemed great to me there was a little city with few men in it and a great king came against it and besieged it building great siege works against it there was found in it a poor wise man and he by his wisdom delivered the city yet no one remembered that poor man but I say that wisdom is better than might though the poor man's wisdom is despised and his words are not heard this poor wise man delivers this city that was doomed for destruction and in the end he was unappreciated and unremembered

[ 25 : 39 ] I don't think it's hard to imagine the kind of jubilation that must have been in the city on the day that this poor wise man rose up and he was able with his wisdom to deliver the city we don't know how he did that but we know that the end result was that he was able to stave off this absolute destruction that they faced and I can imagine that people being people some of the men probably grabbed him and hoisted him on their shoulders and just walked him and paraded him around the city celebrating the deliverance that they got no doubt the women were impressed with him and greatly admired him but eventually it all ceased they eventually forgot the poor wise man and the lesson is that human support no matter how strong is fickle it is fickle appreciate it but don't depend on it it is subject to change sooner or later and in many cases sooner than later now in this case why was this poor wise man despised after the danger had passed why did people forget him the reason they forgot him is because they did not value wisdom what they valued was deliverance no doubt the man thought they valued his wisdom and no doubt he thought they would have seen his usefulness beyond that one event if

I can do this well then you know I must be pretty useful and so he was probably identifying the support that he got from the wisdom that he had but the people didn't value his wisdom the people valued deliverance and so when the threat passed!

so did the support of and the appreciation for the poor wise man and that's the point that the preacher underscores in verse 16 when he says but I say that wisdom is better than might though the poor man's wisdom is despised and his words aren't heard and the preacher seems to be hinting to us that he's not talking so much about an event that's totally passed but that he's even observing now that the poor wise man who delivered this city he's there but he's not being heeded not being regarded not being appreciated not being remembered and so the preacher is saying even though this happened the people aren't remembering this man not listening to his wisdom he says I say wisdom is better than weapons of war but to put it another way if a man of military might

was to arise in that city and show some promise that he could protect them in future military threats the people would have valued him over the poor wise man and the reason is because they did not realize the point that the preacher was making and that point is that wisdom is better than might and wisdom is better than the weapons of war the other point that he makes in verse 18 now saying this is one thing believing it is another saying wisdom is better than might is easier said than done or the other point that the preacher makes in verse 18 that wisdom is better than weapons of war if you had two people or if you had two rooms with people filled in them and the preacher is making this point in verse 17 when he talks about the words of the wise heard and quiet are better than the shouting of a ruler among fools if you had two rooms and one room had some people in it and in there there was maybe someone to the front who was just calmly talking and sharing and then there was another room that was filled with people as well and there is some individual there's a lot of noise and there's some individual who is up front he is very confident he's speaking loudly and sharing ideas and you had people walking in by human nature most people would gravitate towards the loud room gravitate to the room where there's this ruler this person who's supposed to know something has some kind of influence and who is speaking loudly and speaking confidently and among fools seeming to get a whole lot of support the implication is that the quiet room has few people and the loud room is filled with people supposedly who support this ruler but in context what the preacher is helping us to see is the support is fickle perhaps the preacher is making the point that the poor wise man was a humble quiet man so no one listened to him probably just read about his business and wasn't trying to jockey for a position after his usefulness had come to an end and so no one listened

to him and in contrast to the people who despise his wisdom he says once again in verse 18 wisdom is better than weapons of war when I asked you this morning whether you're convinced of this if you were offered you can have wisdom or you can have military might not both of them but one or the other who would you choose left to ourselves we'll all choose military might because it takes something other than what we of ourselves are capable of to see the value of wisdom to see wisdom for its true worth and for its true value we would be no different from the people in that city who only wanted deliverance but did not value wisdom left to ourselves we would always choose the weapons of war over wisdom that ultimately comes from the

Lord he is the one who is to open our eyes to see the value of wisdom above might and above wealth and above everything else that this world offers in verse 18 the preacher could have said although I have seen that wisdom is better than the weapons of war I have also seen that one sinner destroys much good the preacher begins in verse 11 with what he saw he also begins in verse 13 with what he saw he doesn't do the same in verse 18 the latter part of it where he says but one sinner destroys much good I believe the preacher though he doesn't preface it with what he saw the preacher was speaking from what he had seen he had seen that one sinner destroys much good in other words wisdom can prevent great destruction wisdom is better than weapons of war so it can prevent great destruction can stave it off he says but one sinner can cause much destruction and if we're thoughtful we should ask why why is there war why is there sin and its destructive consequences and why is it that any one of us can produce so much destruction destruction [ 34 : 45 ] I mentioned earlier that today is September 11th and today one of the most repeated names as the horrific events of September 11th 2001 are recounted one of the most repeated names will be the name Osama bin Laden the individual who led the Al-Qaeda group and who was the mastermind behind those attacks that day that resulted in 2,996 persons losing their lives and some 6,000 others injured the Institute for the Analysis of Global Security estimates that the financial cost to the United States on that day was somewhere in the range of 2 trillion dollars that's just to the U.S.

that's not considering other countries whose stock markets crashed whose air traffic came to a halt or at least to a crawl one man essentially destroyed the lives of so many and destroyed so much good we also think of Adolf Hitler a man who was primarily responsible for the murder of between 6 to 11 million Jews there are others over human history individuals people don't even use their names to call a dog because they have inflicted so much damage and so much harm on humanity but you know as horrific as these events are and as terrible as these individuals who masterminded them are it is sobering to consider that every single one of us is capable of being a Bin Laden or Hitler not that we will do what they did but we're certainly capable and if we don't believe that if we don't understand that we don't understand ourselves and we don't understand the

depth of sin we don't understand the capabilities that we have because of sin and so the preacher soberly says one sinner destroys much good when I read the last part of verse 18 that tells us about this one sinner who destroys so much good it brings to mind ultimately the iconic sinner who destroyed much good and that is Adam God placed him in an abundant garden permitted them to eat from all the trees that he had created and prohibited them from eating off one of them and

Ab and Eve were not satisfied with the abundance that God permitted them to partake of and they disobeyed and here's what the apostle Paul describes Adam's act of disobedience that destroyed so much good in Romans 5 12 through 14 he writes therefore just as sin came into the world through one man and death through sin and so death spread to all men because all sinned for sin indeed was in the world before the law was given but sin is not counted where there is no law yet death reigned from Adam to Moses even over those whose sinning was not like the transgression of Adam who's a type of the one who was to come again notice what Paul says in verse 12 he says Adam's sin brought about death and death spread to all men one man one sinner destroyed so much good and in verse 14 he says that Adam was a type Adam was a type and in the Bible a type is a prophetic symbol of someone or something that is in the future someone or something that is yet to come and Adam was a type a prophetic symbol of Jesus and we read this in 1 Corinthians 15 45 where Jesus is referred to as the last Adam the sin of Adam produced death and the sacrifice of Christ the last Adam produced life and here's how Paul goes on to explain this life that the last Adam brings in verses 15 through 17 he writes but the gift sorry but the free gift is not like the trespass for if many died through one man's trespass much more have the grace of

[ 40 : 31 ] God and the free gift of the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many and the free gift is not like the result of that one man's sin for the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation but the free gift following many trespasses brought justification if because of one man's trespass death reigned through that one man much more all those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ brothers and sisters the good news this morning is that the one sinner has produced so much destruction has destroyed so much good that one sinner Adam his type the last

Adam through his obedient life and through his sacrificial death he has produced so much more life and forgiveness and grace that overshadows the great destructive trespass of Adam we sing that song joy to the world and the lyric that says that his grace goes as far as the curse is found as far as the curse is found and that's the good news for us this morning that though one sinner has destroyed so much good there is a righteous man the man Christ Jesus who in his life and in his death has produced much more good and not just good but righteousness and grace that enables us to reign in life as heirs of life through

Jesus Christ friends all of us are sinners and as such all of us are capable of destroying much good but those of us who come to Jesus Christ repenting of our sin and trusting in his sacrifice can be forgiven and empowered to turn from sin and to live lives of righteousness though we are capable of destroying much good by the grace of God by the power of the Holy Spirit we're able to fight sin and overcome sin and live lives of righteousness that are pleasing to the Lord but away from that without that mortifying power to fight sin we are walking around and absolutely in a very real way so capable of much destruction and you know this morning

I think perhaps every single person in this room maybe the youngest child perhaps maybe not so much but every single one of us is aware where we stand before the Lord this morning those of you who know that Jesus Christ is not your Lord not your Savior not serving him not living a life that's pleasing in his sight hear the words of the preacher one sinner destroyed so much good and I encourage you to turn to Jesus the only one who can through his grace and mercy cause us to be instruments of his righteousness that though still indwelling sin in us left to ourselves we are capable of much destruction but as long as he is Lord over our lives that would not be our lot instead we would be walking in the line of the last

Adam a line of light and a line of life and a line of righteousness as opposed to the first Adam destruction and disobedience and self centeredness and all that goes with that and this morning I'm going to close in prayer but before I do I want us to just take a moment I want us to pause and those of us who know in our hearts that Jesus Christ has rescued us that the last Adam has given us grace and mercy I want us to be thankful to God thankful to God that because of the restraining work of the spirit in our lives this will not be the testimony of us living lives of destruction destroying

much good and we can give thanks for that this morning but for those who are outside of Jesus [ 46 : 10 ] Christ and you know that Jesus is not your Lord I pray that you are sobered by this and I pray that you see your need for Jesus and right where you are seated this morning that you would cry out to him and ask for mercy and grace and forgiveness and for transformation that only Christ can bring let's just bow in a moment and just where you're seated would you pray to God thank him for mercy and grace in your life if you know that you've trusted Christ thank him that destructive acts that you could have committed and left to yourself would have committed have been allayed by the mercy and grace of God in your life and for those of you who do not know

Jesus Christ I urge you to come to Jesus I urge you to turn from your sin I urge you to throw yourself on the mercy of God and ask him to have mercy on you a sinner a sinner who is capable of much destruction multiplication