

How Do We Measure Success?

Part II

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In Part I of this series, I reviewed accounts from the book of Daniel concerning the witness of Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. On three separate occasions – on the matter of their food and drink, concerning worshipping other gods and bowing down to idols, and praying to any god or man save King Darius - these young Hebrew men remained faithful to God despite daunting and undeniably undesirable consequences. And, at each test, God delivered them. Their simple diet proved superior to the rich food and drink offered them from the King's table; the fiery furnace failed to even singe their clothing; and Daniel emerged from the lion's den without a scratch. These narratives inspire and challenge me as I consider the ongoing call to public witness in a society which is estranged from the gospel.

Last month I left you with three questions: a) as we see public policy stray further and further from the truth of Scripture, what can we learn from Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah about remaining faithful? b) how do we measure success? and c) how does God measure success?

We don't have time for a detailed study of the book of Daniel here, but I want to highlight some lessons which I think are just as applicable to us today as they were for these Hebrew men almost 600 years before the Word became flesh. As you read and ponder these things, keep in mind that Babylon (now southeastern Iraq) was a pagan society. Kings came and went. As the book of Daniel opens, the Babylonians, under King Nebuchadnezzar, have captured Judah. Babylon is at its zenith. Political authority – typically achieved through conquest – is maintained by military might and political cunning. Decrees are issued and the consequences for disobedience are swift and unforgiving. And into the midst of this thoroughly human system, God sends His witnesses.

Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah are living in exile. Babylon is a foreign land. The customs, beliefs and practices of the Hebrews are out of place. Round pegs in square holes. I suppose Daniel and his friends could have gone on a hunger strike, or plotted against the King, or given into this new culture. It's not like they didn't have a choice in the matter. The more I think about it, the more impressed I am by their constancy. They simply did not seem to be distracted by the alternatives but steadfastly set their eyes on God and did what they had been taught to do. It doesn't appear that they wasted time or energy in strategizing or even in reflecting on the success of their actions. It seems that they simply knew who they were and what God expected of them. And they did it.

Can this be a model for us? What does this kind of obedience look like in our society today? How do we measure success? Is our aim to have our government issue a decree that acknowledges that in every part of Canada people must fear and reverence our God? Do we measure our success by evaluating public policy as a reflection of state recognition of our God and the ethics of His Kingdom?

This was, by the way, a consequence of Daniel's obedience. When Daniel was lifted out of the lion's den, King Darius was so overwhelmed by the power of Daniel's god that he declared: "he is the living God and he endures forever; his kingdom will not be destroyed, his dominion will never end" (Daniel 6:26b). It certainly sounds like his eyes were opened and he clearly saw the sovereignty of God. Daniel didn't demand this, or even ask for it. It was all God – God strengthened Daniel to enable him to pray as usual despite the King's decree; God shut the mouths of the lions; God opened Darius' eyes and revealed Himself to this earthly king.

In our efforts to be faithful witnesses in our society, we must be careful to leave room for God's activity in our lives and in the lives of secular authorities. We must resist the "make it happen" attitude – the approach which essentially says that we can't wait for God but must take matters into our own hands. This approach can sound spiritual and even biblical, but is it? Or is it a way of thinking that reflects our trust in ourselves more than trust in God?

How do we measure success? For me, it's all about obedience and living according to the teaching of Jesus, even in the midst of this land for which the truth of the gospel is foreign. It is about letting God be God and displaying His authority in diverse and marvelous ways. It is about being apprenticed to Jesus in the 21st century in such a way that the Christian community in Canada becomes an effective and vibrant counter-culture, living witnesses to the fact that Jesus really did mean that we should live according to His instructions and example. As Dallas Willard taught us at Convention Assembly, not so much focused on doing the things that Jesus said to do but rather, becoming the kind of people who would naturally do those things.

How does God measure success? Maybe He doesn't.