

Who Defines Success?

Genesis 39

Who gets to determine whether we live a successful life? By what standards do we define success? Is success ever really reached?

Trying to define success puts us in a bind.

Success cannot be self-ascribed. If we try to declare ourselves successful, this quickly collapses into things like self-deception and pride. In other words, success is really something that must come from the outside. What we really seek is validation from others.

Success in one area does not mean success in all areas. I once watched the testimony of a successful banker who had later become a Christian. He recalled his younger days when his family life fell apart. He said his lowest point was when “the ones who knew me the best liked me the least.” Cf. Paul Johnson’s *Intellectuals*

God grants a successful life (vv. 2-6).

Things go well for Joseph because of God’s grace. He “finds favor” with others because God is with him. The LORD “caused all that he did to succeed in his hands” (v. 3).

How does Joseph’s understanding of this theological truth help him in difficult situations?

“At the crucial moment of choice, most of the choosing is already done.” – Iris Murdoch

- a. Joseph resists temptation. We want to note the importance of verse 9. Joseph understands that a transgression is ultimately a violation of his relationship with God.

The use of our eyes plays a role when it comes to sexual transgression. It starts with a look (v. 7).

Joseph shows great endurance resisting her “day after day” (v. 10).

Real problems occur when Joseph and Potiphar’s wife are alone (v. 11).

We should note how the definition of masculinity has changed. Self-restraint (rather than conquest), is upheld as real manhood (Cf. *The Atlantic* Jan/Feb 2020).

- b. Joseph endures hardship and a professional setback (vv. 19–20). How do we prepare for sudden downturns?

We must learn to lean on God during times of disappointment. Joseph has gone from a pit, to slavery, to privilege, to prison.

A godly person can be successful no matter the setting.

Adversity is not a sign of God’s absence. Joseph was serving faithfully when he was falsely accused and imprisoned. Joseph’s success is about his faithfulness no matter the circumstances.

Joseph goes from being a “son,” having authority over all things in Potiphar’s house, to bondage. The Lord Jesus came to move us from bondage to sons and daughters.

Key Take-Away: We depend on God alone for our success.

Application Questions:

How can we help one another think differently about success?

How do we prepare now to resist the temptations of the future?

What themes in Joseph’s story will be repeated much later in the life of Jesus?