

DEREK PRINCE MINISTRIES

TEACHING LETTER

The Hardest Test of All

In my two previous letters my focus has been: TESTING. First, *the purpose of testing*; then, *how to respond to testing*. In this final letter on testing, my theme is: *the hardest test of all*.

If I were to ask each one of you individually, *What would you consider the hardest test that Christians face?*, I would probably receive a variety of different answers. My own answer may surprise many of you, but it is based on more than fifty years in full time Christian ministry. I believe that the hardest test we are likely to face—and the one we are least likely to pass—is SUCCESS.

Solomon warns us: *The end of a thing is better than its beginning, and the patient in spirit better than the proud in spirit*¹. To put it another way: it is not how you start a race that makes you a winner, but how you finish it.

A veteran Chinese pastor, who spent more than 20 years in prison for his faith and recently went to be with the Lord, made this personal comment: “I have seen many people have good beginnings, but few have good endings.” I can say the same.

As examples of men who have achieved success, we will consider some of the kings of Israel.

The First Three Kings

The first king, Saul, was a strong, outstanding young man, who early in his career gained various military victories. But when sent by God on a mission against the Amalekites, he allowed fear of the people to keep him from full obedience to God’s command. As a result, the prophet Samuel came to him with a message that God had rejected him as king.

Saul’s root problem was summed up in Samuel’s message: *“When you were little in your own eyes, were you not head of the tribes of Israel?”*² As long as Saul remained humble, God could bless him. But when he became proud, God had to set him aside.

This applies to all of us. When we are little in our own eyes, we have room for the greatness of God. But when we become great in our own eyes, we leave no room for God to manifest His greatness through us.

Saul’s pride drove him to a tragic end. The last night of his life he consulted a witch, and the next day he committed suicide on the battlefield.

The next king, David, was a man after God's heart. For years he had to live as a fugitive, persecuted and hounded by King Saul. Yet, he came through it all victoriously and eventually he had a wonderful testimony:

*The LORD rewarded me according to my righteousness;
According to the cleanness of my hands He has recompensed me.
For I have kept the ways of the LORD,
And have not wickedly departed from my God.³*

But later David changed, and so did his language:

*Have mercy upon me, O God,
According to Your lovingkindness;
According to the multitude of Your tender mercies,
Blot out my transgressions.
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
And cleanse me from my sin.⁴*

What had happened? Why the change? David had experienced total *success*. Established as king over all Israel, victorious over all his enemies, he was enjoying the fruits of success. He no longer went out to battle. He remained at home in Jerusalem, free to indulge in all that took his fancy.

So he did not hesitate to seduce Bathsheba, the wife of his neighbor, Uriah. Nor to procure the murder of Uriah to cover up his sin. In David's time of success, he forgot the principles he lived by before he became king.

Thank God that David eventually repented and God forgave his sin. Nevertheless, David's sin cast a dark shadow over his descendants from generation to generation. God warned him: "Now therefore, the sword shall never depart from your house. . . ."⁵ It is important for all of us to remember that God's *forgiveness* does not necessarily cancel all the *consequences* of our sins.

David's son, Solomon, who succeeded him as king, was beloved and chosen by God. Because he humbly acknowledged his need of wisdom, God also gave him riches and honor. He became the wisest, richest and most famous of all Israel's kings.

Yet in spite of all his wisdom, Solomon did not pass the test of *success*.

For it was so, when Solomon was old, that his wives turned his heart after other gods. . . .

For Solomon went after Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians, and after Milcom the abomination of the Ammonites. Solomon did evil in the sight of the LORD . . .⁶

In spite of his glorious beginning, Solomon died an idolater.

Two Other Kings

Following Solomon, the kingdom was divided. *All* the kings of Israel, the northern kingdom, became idolaters and were rejected by the LORD. Many of the kings of the southern kingdom,

Judah, also turned away from the LORD into idolatry. There were, however, some truly righteous kings in Judah. Yet none of them fully passed the test of *success*.

Hezekiah, for example, introduced sweeping reforms and re-established the true worship of Jehovah. When Sennacherib, king of Assyria, laid siege to Jerusalem, the LORD intervened and granted a miraculous deliverance to Hezekiah and his people.

Later, when Hezekiah was sick to the point of death, God not merely healed him, but granted him a miraculous sign by reversing the course of the sun. He also promised Hezekiah fifteen extra years of life.

The miraculous sign in the sun extended Hezekiah's fame to other nations. As a result, ambassadors came from Babylon. Flattered by their attention, Hezekiah showed them everything of value in his whole kingdom. But he did not give God the glory!

Scripture provides two illuminating comments on Hezekiah's conduct:

But Hezekiah did not repay according to the favor shown him, for his heart was lifted up [he became proud] . . .⁷

However, regarding the ambassadors of the princes of Babylon, whom they sent to him to inquire about the wonder that was done in the land, God withdrew from him, in order to test him, that He might know all that was in his heart.⁸

From Hezekiah we can learn two things:

First, if God grants you some special miracle, that does not make you a special person; it only means that you have a special God.

Second, if God withdraws His presence and does not seem to be actively at work in your life, it can mean that He is testing you to see how you will behave when left to yourself.

Later in Judah's history there arose another righteous king—Josiah. Like Hezekiah, Josiah also introduced radical reforms and restored the true worship of Jehovah. He also destroyed the idolatrous altar at Bethel in the northern kingdom.

But, Josiah's successes made him self-confident, and he became rash. Without consulting the Lord and in the face of solemn warning, he opposed Pharaoh Necho, king of Egypt, and was killed in battle. With him the last flicker of hope for Judah died also.

Successful Men in the New Testament

What about the New Testament? Does it provide different standards? Let us look at the foremost personalities: Jesus Himself, and three of His leading disciples, Peter, John and Paul. What about their endings?

Jesus, of course, is unique—the perfect, sinless Son of God. He never experienced failure. Yet He ended His life hanging naked on a cross, exposed to mocking sinners. That was the last the world saw of Jesus. His subsequent resurrection, and the glory that followed, were revealed only to “witnesses chosen before by God.”⁹ As far as the world is concerned, however, God has never sought to set the record straight.

What about Peter, the leader of the twelve apostles? According to reliable tradition, Peter, too, ended his life on a cross—crucified head downward, at his own request, because he did not feel worthy to suffer in the same way as his Lord.

We have no reliable record of the death of John. But we do know that in his old age he was banished to the barren, rocky island of Patmos, where he received the visions recorded in the book of Revelation.

What about Paul? We have his own record of how he and his fellow apostles lived:

To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless. We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; when we are slandered, we answer kindly. Up to this moment we have become the scum of the earth, the refuse of the world.¹⁰

Finally, after a powerful and miraculous ministry that opened up the Gentile world to the gospel, Paul ended in chains in a cold Roman dungeon, forsaken by some of his closest co-workers. From there he was taken out for public execution by beheading.

Do these records of Jesus, Peter, John and Paul mean that all committed Christians must necessarily die the death of martyrs? Or that no committed Christian could ever be wealthy? No! But they do enforce one extremely important point: *we must never let the world entice us into accepting its standards of success.* We must never seek the world's approval. The desire for popularity is always dangerous.

Jesus gave some strong warnings against this. To the Pharisees He said: *“For what is highly esteemed among men is abomination in the sight of God.”¹¹* To His own disciples He said: *“Woe to you when all men speak well of you. For so did their fathers to the false prophets.”¹²*

The Key to True Success

Mentally I contrasted the endings of those five kings in the Old Testament with those of Jesus and His disciples. What is the key—I asked—to achieving enduring success?

The Lord directed me to two scriptures. First, the words of Paul in 1 Corinthians 7:25: *I give my judgment, as one that hath obtained mercy of the Lord to be faithful (KJV).*

I saw that to be faithful *I must be totally dependent on the Lord's mercy.* I cannot rely on anything else: my academic background, my spiritual gifts, my past achievements, my years in Christian service. There is only one thing that can keep me faithful: *the mercy of God.*

I must make it the central purpose of my life to be consciously and continually dependent on God's mercy. I must be on my guard against anything that would blur or dull my sense of dependence. Particularly, I must be watchful for any form of pride, which is, in essence, self-dependence.

Second, the words of Jesus in John 4:34: *“My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to finish His work.”* Jesus' food—the source of His life and strength—was His single-minded

determination to do God's will right through to the end of His life. That is the *true success* you and I must aim for.

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- ¹ Ecclesiastes 7:8
² 1 Samuel 15:17
³ Psalm 18:20–21
⁴ Psalm 51:1–2
⁵ 2 Samuel 12:10
⁶ 1 Kings 11:4–6
⁷ 2 Chronicles 32:25
⁸ 2 Chronicles 32:31
⁹ Acts 10:41
¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 4:11–13 (NIV)
¹¹ Luke 16:15
¹² Luke 6:26

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