

Exodus 5:1-7:7

The Blessings of not Achieving

Achieving is overrated. But Lee isn't there some value in accomplishing something? Of course, achieving some goals has value depending on what the achievement is. Certainly, becoming a follower of Jesus Christ, growing toward Christ-likeness and effectively using your spiritual gifts for the benefit of others are worthy achievements. Doing your best in school and work are noble goals. However, I would suggest that sometimes not achieving something is better than achieving it. Let me illustrate that. There was a young man in our church in Shullsburg, WI who was a very good football player for his small-town high school. He really wanted to play for the Wisconsin Badgers, so he joined the team as a walk on. But the Badger's medical staff discovered a skeletal abnormality which caused him to give up football. I won't give you the details, I will only say that it turned out for his best. I also experienced non-achievement. When I graduated from DTS I accepted the pastorate of a small store-front church in the greater St Louis metro area. I will spare you the details but to say the least it did not go well, and I left not seeing one thing I had achieved. But that experience led to a lifetime of pastoral ministry I treasure. Moses was a man like us. Moses wanted to help his people but after fleeing Egypt after his first failed attempt and after 40 years herding sheep for his nomadic father-in-law he had not achieved much. Then God called him from out of a burning bush to lead his people out of Egypt. Chapters 3 & 4 of Exodus record his five-fold objection to taking up the task. Then Exodus 5 records the story of his first confrontation with Pharaoh. To say the least the results were underwhelming and the goal of leading Israel out of bondage was not achieved. Moses' non-achievement shows us an unexpected truth. I would suggest to you that Moses' failure to convince Pharaoh to let the people go on his first attempt to do so was in the long run far better than if he had succeeded.

Non-achieving is one means God uses to develop us in character and worthy service. God sovereignly even uses our non-achievements to accomplish his plan for his glory.

Let me begin by setting these chapters in the context of Exodus. Chapter 5 is round # 1 of the confrontations between Moses and Pharaoh. Chapter 6:1-7:7 is an interlude preparing us for the second confrontation and the series of 10 plagues on Pharaoh and the Egyptians.

Let's look at the progression of the story and draw from it some lessons.

The Story 5:1-7:7

1) Moses spoke God's message to Pharaoh **[5:1]**. "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, let my people go, that they may hold a feast in my honor in the wilderness."

2) Pharaoh rejected the message. **[2-19]** Pharaoh did not accept the authority of the Lord. He asked, "Who is the Lord that I should obey his voice? I don't acknowledge him as one my gods." After all, in the Egyptian culture and in Pharaoh's thinking he himself was a god. Every nation had its gods, and the strength of those gods was ascertained by the military power of the nation and its leaders. Why should Pharaoh obey the god of an enslaved people? Their god must not be very powerful. Pharaoh will learn the hard way about the worthlessness of his puny gods and the power of Yahweh the one true God. Even when Moses and Aaron responded with a polite modest request in **verse 3** Pharaoh was obstinate. He believed that Moses and Aaron and the Israelites were just seeking a vacation from work. To discourage such ideas Pharaoh greatly increased their workload. He commanded their Egyptian taskmasters to tell the Hebrew foremen appointed over the people to stop giving them the chopped straw that was used as a binder in the making of bricks. Now the Israelites would have to gather

their own straw; yet the quota of bricks to be made did not change. The task was impossible. The Hebrew foremen were beaten and in response they complained to Pharaoh in v. 15-19. Moses failed on his first attempt to convince Pharaoh to let the people go

3) The Israelites complained to Moses. **[20-21]**

They basically said, “It is your fault. May God judge you for making our lives worse”.

4) Moses complained to God. **[22-23]**

Moses was upset. He brought an accusatory complaint to God. The Lord did not rebuke him for his unjustified accusations of failing to deliver the people as he had promised instead

5) God responded with a new message for the people. **[6:1-8]** It was a word of promise and encouragement. “I am just getting started dealing with Pharaoh. I am about to execute my plan”. His words were a reaffirmation of his promise beginning and ending with a reminder of who was speaking. “I am Yahweh”.

Verse 3 seems problematic in the ESV. Is God saying that the patriarchs did not know that his name was Yahweh? That can't be because they addressed him as Yahweh and called himself Yahweh. [Genesis 15:7-8] Douglas Stuart proposes a helpful suggestion that we should not read this as a statement but as a question. “By my name Yahweh did I not make known myself to them?”

Every name of God reveals something about his nature. The name Yahweh reveals his sovereign power and authority. And it is the name by which he reveals himself as their covenant redeemer. The fulfiller of his covenant promises. There are three parts to these promises:

- (1) Their deliverance from bondage in Egypt [6]
- (2) Their adoption as the nation of God [7]
- (3) The provision of the land of Canaan [8]

Their redemption from bondage in Egypt will become the future focus of their faith as celebrated in the Passover feast. This parallels the reality that it is our redemption at the cross that is now the focus of our faith we celebrate when we take Communion.

6) Moses spoke this new message to the people but was rejected. **[9]** The belief and worship they had expressed in 4:31 has turned to bitter complaint. Perhaps they had expected immediate deliverance.

7) God gave Moses a new command to go to Pharaoh which Moses debates. **[10-13]**

Chapter 6:14-7:7 is kind of an interlude explaining who Moses and Aaron were to authenticate their credentials to the future generations who would read these words, along with a summary of their task before the second confrontation with Pharaoh ending with the first plague which is narrated in 7:8-25

The second thing I want to do today is look at the lessons to be learned from Moses' non-achievement. This account shows us the blessings of non-achievement.

1) Non-achievement can make us willing and ready to obey God.

Pharaoh's negative reaction to the demand that he let the people go was instrumental in making the Israelites willing to leave Egypt. They were not yet prepared to leave their lives in Egypt despite its difficulties. The persecution enhanced by Moses' confrontation with Pharaoh would change their attitude, at least temporarily [Exodus 14:10-12, 16:3, Numbers 11:5]. Difficulties and failure in our lives should drive us to desire spiritual things. Failure shows us the futility of life just lived for earthy things. That may be why it is harder for prosperous people to consider the gospel and why poverty, ill-health, or disappointments in life can lead us to desire heavenly things. [Hebrews 11:13-16] Our failures to achieve should turn us to God. Every person must come to a place in life where he realizes that he is not

going to achieve all he set out to accomplish. The graduation ceremony mantra “You can be anything you want to be, though well-intended, is just not true.

2) Non-achievement humbles us by showing us our limitations.

Through Moses’ failures to convince Pharaoh God revealed his power and brought the miraculous plagues. God will achieve what Moses knew he could not achieve.

Twice in these chapters Moses says I am a man of “uncircumcised lips” [6:12, 30] What was Moses saying? An uncircumcised person was not qualified to be a part of the covenant community and its worship. Moses was saying, “I am unqualified to do this task”. None of us are wise enough or gifted enough to do God’s work in our own strength. We are unqualified. So

3) Non-achievement drives us to find wisdom and enablement in the Lord.

Failure drove Moses to the Lord for answers and enablement. Had Moses and Aaron been trying to do things in their own strength? Maybe. It was certainly true of Moses’ first attempt to help his people 40 years before. Not achieving our goals shows us that we can only succeed with God’s strength and wisdom. The Bible echoes this truth. [Zechariah 4:6, Romans 15:18, 2 Corinthians 3:4-6, John 15:5]

Our prayer must always be, “Lord, I need you. I need your wisdom and power and guidance.”

4) Non-achievement teaches us to be faithful to our calling despite the lack of visible results.

Every time Moses failed to convince Pharaoh, God told him to go again. Moses wanted to quit several times, but he didn’t. The author of Hebrews points this out about Moses. In Hebrews 3:2, 5 he says Moses was faithful. God does not call us to be successful; he calls us to be faithful. [1 Corinthians 4:1-2]

5) Non-achievement teaches us to evaluate. Lee, where did you find this principle in this story? Perhaps, it is an exegetical stretch to find it here. But after Pharaoh did not listen, Moses did question the mission and his part in it, perhaps to a fault. [5:22-23, 6:12,30,] “God, what is happening here? Why am I here? It’s not working.” At times we need to stop and ask ourselves serious questions. There are churches which have died because they refused to evaluate or change the way they did ministry. Certainly, not achieving our goals is a time for serious spiritual and personal reflection. The church response to an unmet need in Acts 6:1-7 is a great example of the value of evaluation.

6) Non-achievement builds character. To see this we need to grasp the whole story of Moses. By the time Moses had brought Israel to the edge of the Promised Land forty years later he was a changed man. He had learned to fear God. He had learned to be humble. He had learned to trust God. Let me read the first few lines of his farewell song in **Deuteronomy 32:1-4**. These are the words of a godly man.

As painful as it may feel when we experience failure, it has benefits that are good for us if we respond correctly. A great New Testament story of how God brought blessing out of failure is the story of John Mark. Paul and Barnabas had taken Mark with them on their first missionary journey, but Mark had deserted them. He had failed. When Paul and Barnabas began planning a second mission, they argued about taking Mark along. Barbabas said, “Give him another chance.” Paul said, “No way!” This led to the breakup on the missionary team. Who was right? The Bible doesn’t take sides in the debate. So, was God done with Mark? No. Near the end of Paul’s life we hear him say this, “Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry”. And early church tradition uniformly considered Mark to be the author of the second Gospel in our New Testament.

So, in a way, we should embrace failure to achieve as coming from the hand of God to conform us to the image of Jesus and prepare us to become more dependent, humble, useful servants.

I am not saying that we should downplay our failures in wisdom, trust or obedience as being of no consequence, but we should recognize that our failures to achieve can bring about good things in our lives by the grace of God who is working out his plan for our good and his glory. We have all failed both in moral matters and in ministries we attempted. But God can take our failures to achieve and bring about good from them as the rest of the story of Exodus will show us.

Now I have an admission to make: “Failure to achieve” is not the primary message of these chapters even though it is certainly there. The main truth delivered through the narrative of this story is **that God is at work to carry out his plan to deliver his people and unveil his power and glory even when obstinate unbelievers oppose him and his people doubt him.**

This is a truth which winds its way all the way to the cross of Jesus and all the way from the cross to Christ’s return in power and glory.

So how should we respond when we fail to achieve what we want to achieve in our lives?

We should learn obedience and humility. Our non-achievement should drive us to the Lord for his wisdom and enablement.

We should learn to be faithful to our calling, evaluate our lives and service, and allow our non-achievements to build our character.

Above all else we must not forget that that God is at work to carry out his plan to deliver his people and unveil his power and glory even when obstinate unbelievers oppose him and his people doubt him.

The apex of God’s plan was the coming of Jesus Christ to die for our sin and give eternal life to those who will place their trust in him. There is

only one way to achieve salvation and that is to put our trust alone in Jesus our atoning sacrifice. Christ alone achieved for us the salvation we could never achieve on our own. We often fail to achieve what we set out to do but God does not.