

HUMAN VOCATION: Study 5

Accomplishment, Inability and Failure

Introduction:

The one person who has loved human beings above all others—Jesus of Nazareth—was unjustly condemned, scourged with bone-in-whip, nailed to a wooden cross, and crucified at 33 years of age.

Only with hindsight—in the full light of his resurrection, ascension, and his current reign —could the disciples see that the accomplishments of Jesus earthy life and ministry were full and complete, and that the way of his sufferings were in fact, the central part of his fruitful life. His final words, ‘It is finished’ (John 19:30) we now know were filled with meaning beyond our grasp.¹

We now consider his life with the eyes of faith and not merely by sight. Faith, together with the gift of the Holy Spirit enables us to see things about his life that were hidden at the time. *He bore our sins in his body on the Tree. God has reconciled the world to himself*, through Jesus Christ.²

The human vocation given to Jesus was unique. He fulfilled his calling, blessing the human race. He, *the Living God, is the Saviour of all people, especially of those who believe* (1Tim 4:10). As prophesied, he can see *the fruit of the travail of his soul* and be *satisfied* (Isaiah 53:11). Through his self-giving love, his suffering and sin-bearing death, a *river of life* flows out today, to others.³

According to Scripture, tradition, and legend we hear that many, if not most of the apostles died in unpleasant, and sometimes violent circumstances. The gift, and the message of God’s redeeming love for creation and for humanity, has come to us freely—and yet at a price. That of suffering love.

How should we think now of our own vocation? We are exhorted to make the most of the time because the days are evil (Ephesians 5:16). And we are urged to be steadfast, abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord our labour is not in vain (1Cor. 15:58). Perhaps best of all, we should remember some of the things Paul said in what was probably his final letter: the One who began a good work in you, *will carry it through to completion* on the day of Christ Jesus (Philippians 1:6). Since Jesus is *the author and finisher of our life of faith* (Hebrews 12:2), *we press on toward the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus* (Phil. 3:14) always looking to the interests of others (Phil. 2:4). Whatever is honourable, whatever is commendable *think about these things* (Phil 4:8).

It should be helpful then, to consider the matters of vocational accomplishment, inability, and failure.

A Sense of Accomplishment

Many people love reading a wide range of biographies and autobiographies. Queen Elizabeth and Nelson Mandela are among those people who are greatly admired for their achievements. Some years ago, I particularly enjoyed the insight into the lives of others, through ABC interviews conducted by **Andrew Denton**.⁴ Other interviewers of note, like **David Frost**, **Michael Parkinson** and **Oprah Winfrey** have brought outstanding people into our lounge-rooms. In recent times I have enjoyed listening to podcast interviews, especially *Conversations* with **Richard Fidler** and **Sarah Kanowski** on ABC radio.⁵ I mentioned earlier the deeds of **Anh Do** the painter, author, and thoughtful interviewer.

¹ Acts 2:23 tells us the death of Jesus Christ was according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God.

² 1Peter 2:24; 2Corinthians 5

³ John 7:37-39

⁴ Andrew Denton’s push for euthanasia was disappointing.

⁵ <https://www.abc.net.au/radio/programs/conversations>

Much can be gleaned and gained from the pages of the lives of others. Since every human being is created in the image and likeness of God, we should not be surprised if they accomplish interesting, amazing, and kindly deeds. We note however, that the side-effects of sin reverberating through every life, tend to be downplayed, denied, or disguised.

Christian literature provides us with much that is devotionally fortifying, and inspiring. Some great autobiographies that come to mind include *Born Again* by **Charles Colson**, and *My Story* by **Selwyn Hughes**. Moving biographies of noble service, great suffering and joy, include that of **Takashi Nagai**, in *A Song for Nagasaki*, by Paul Glynn, and *A heart set free: The life of Charles Wesley*, by Arnold Dallimore. Many Christian lives given to overseas Christian Missions, can be wondered at, in *From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya*, by **Ruth A. Tucker**. Some of those she includes are **David Livingstone**, **Hudson Taylor**, **Gladys Aylward**, and **John and Betty Stam**. All of this, is of course, showing us but snippets of what **Jesus** has done, and is continuing to do among us! Sometimes it is visible success.

The abolitionist William Wilberforce was blessed with a great triumph in his vocation. In 1814 he petitioned the House of Commons to end human slavery in Britain. Almost 20 year later in 1833 he witnessed the *Emancipation Act* that was to ensure the end of the slave trade in the British Empire. Three days later, he died. With the help of many others—what a fine accomplishment.

If every life of faith was documented, *the world itself could not contain the books that would be written* (John 21:25). Success and achievement are a real part of God's story. (Not so, with hagiography).

A Sense of Failure

Some of God's finest servants have endured life with a sense of inability and failure. Some 'went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented—of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground' (Heb. 11:37b-8).

The well-known evangelical preacher, John Stott wrote over 50 books, the final one being *The Radical Disciple*, IVP, 2010. In a Postscript Farewell, he said that the ongoing royalties from his books would go to Langham Literature, to provide books for pastors and Christian workers in the poorer areas of the world. This we see as a sense of achievement. He is however the same preacher who wrote:

'Seldom if ever do I leave the pulpit without a sense of partial failure, a mood of penitence, a cry to God for forgiveness, and a resolve to look to him for grace to do better in the future'.⁶

For many, daily life and vocation conclude in a similar way. While the Apostle Paul said that he had learned how to be content in all circumstances (Phil 4:11-13), he also had times when he 'despaired of life itself' (2Cor. 1:8). I am sure that many people, when learning of their impending death, perhaps through a terminal disease, or simply in the normal course of old age are overcome by a sense of sadness, that hopes and dreams and vocational plans have not been fully realised. Perhaps a major plan clearly remains unfinished. Disappointment and failure are part of the story. Without being able to see all things from God's grand and wise perspective, there is much in life that is perplexing.

A Sense of Inability

The famous author of *The Lord of the Rings*, J.R.R. Tolkien was a perfectionist, and as such was often weighed down in his work, by procrastination. Late in 1940, his work of writing halted for almost a year. When the work resumed, he figured he only had a few chapters to go. But by 1943, he admitted that he was 'dead stuck' in the writing process. In order to give credibility and depth to his mythology, he had to spend much time inventing new languages, sketch-maps and cultures. It was fun doing all

⁶ John Stott, *I believe in Preaching*, Hodder & Stoughton, 1983, p. 9

this, but seriously sapped his time. *He was fifty-one, tired, and fearful that in the end he would achieve nothing.*⁷ All this was taking place during the uncertainties, impending darkness, and doom of World War Two. Tolkien had already known the horror of the first world war. His work may never be seen.

‘One morning [Tolkien] woke up with a short story in his head and scribbled it down. It was the tale of a painter name Niggle, a man who, like Tolkien, ‘niggled’ over details: ‘He used to spend a long time on a single leaf, trying to catch its shape, and its sheen, and the glistening of dewdrops on its edges. Yet he wanted to paint a huge tree.’⁸

Tolkien wrote up this short story called “*Leaf by Niggle*”. Niggle had ‘a long journey’ to make. A euphemism for death. And he didn’t want to go on it. He wanted to finish his picture. Even so, he wasted time doing leaves, because he was not so good at doing the actual tree. As well as this, Niggle had “a kind heart”. He was always helping his neighbour Parish, who had no real appreciation of Niggle’s project and desires. One night, Niggle goes out into the cold and wet, to help Parish find a doctor for his sick wife. Unfortunately Niggle catches a chill and fever, and while working hard to finish his picture the Driver comes to take him away on his ‘long journey’. ‘Oh dear’ he weeps. ‘It’s not even finished!’. Niggle goes. Sad as it is, other people buy his house and notice on an old canvas picture that there is ‘one beautiful leaf’. It is gathered up, framed and given to the Town Museum and there this little picture of a leaf hung for a long time, noticed by just a few people. It was called ‘Leaf: by Niggle’. In the meantime, Niggle is put on a train to the mountains – he’s off to the afterlife. Here, in this new world something catches Niggles attention. He runs to it.

‘Before him stood the Tree, his Tree, finished; its leaves opening, its branches growing and bending in the wind that Niggle had so often felt or guessed, and yet had so often failed to catch. He gazed at his Tree, and slowly he lifted his arms and opened them wide, “It is a gift!” he said’.⁹

Niggle finds his Tree finished, and learns that it is indeed a real tree, ‘a true part of creation’. Tolkien’s story of *Leaf by Niggle*, conveys to us the wonderful reality that our lives in the Risen Christ, are not are waste of time, nor a mere marking of time, nor are they lived in vain. In fact, they are ‘hidden with Christ in God’ (Colossians 3:3). Commenting on the character of Niggle, Tim Keller reminds us:

‘But really—everyone is Niggle. Everyone imagines accomplishing things, and everyone finds him – or herself largely incapable of producing them. Everyone wants to be successful rather than forgotten, and everyone wants to make a difference in life. But that is beyond the control of any of us.... Everyone will be forgotten...all good endeavours, even the best, will come to naught. Unless there is a God...’¹⁰

And since there is a Living God, who has our lives in his good care, to redeem, and make new, it seems right that we who know God’s love, should indeed ‘hope all things’. Christ turns water into wine.

The story ‘Leaf by Niggle’ was a significant part of Tolkien’s life. It was a building block. It was a call to press on. For he did get back to work, with some extra prodding from C.S. Lewis, and some angst and uncomfortable competitiveness as well. Tolkien had written *The Hobbit* in 1936. Finally, in 1949, after getting ‘dead stuck’ in 1943, as he put it, he went on with tears of joy, to finish *The Lord of the Rings*. His stories, under Peter Jackson went on to become the greatest and most influential film series ever

⁷ Humphrey Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography*, Allen & Unwin, 1977, p.195

⁸ Carpenter, p. 196

⁹ J.R.R. Tolkien, “Leaf by Niggle” in *Tree and Leaf* and *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth*, Harper Collins, 2011, p. 109-10

¹⁰ Timothy Keller, *Every Good Endeavour*, Hodder & Stoughton, 2012, p. 26-28

made, and the highest grossing film series of all time at \$2.991 billion in worldwide receipts (Wikipedia).

Summary

For all who have enjoyed success in life, *we rejoice with those who rejoice* (Romans 12:15).

For all of us who must face:

- that sense of success being beyond our grasp
- that sense of inability to accomplish much at all,
- who feel deeply the painful realities of indwelling sin, and 'this body of death' and the cry for deliverance from it (Romans 7:24),
- who still know as gospel believers, a fear of failure, or a dread of life as incomplete...

Remember:

We have as great comfort the ever-present Jesus as Lord, who takes our few loaves and fishes, and feeds a multitude of thousands.

We have as gift, the indwelling of the advocate, the justifying Holy Spirit.

We know the kind faithfulness of God our Father, with a future of incomparable glory set before us.

We also have as great comfort that vision and that certain Word of God in Christ Jesus, that '*all things have been created through him, and for him*', and that God through Jesus was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross (Colossians 1:15-20). In Jesus the co-creator, we have redemption, the buying back of that which was lost, and the glorification of the Triune God, of humanity and of all creation.

We give thanks dear God for your redeeming grace, your great mercy, and your unfailing love.

It should all work out OK.

I'm nothing. I'm nobody. No one.
But someone made something of me.
He put on my flesh and He walked in my bones,
And He saw all the grief that I see.

He knew what I know of tormentors.
This haunting and howling within.
The blood that can spill, and the bones that can break,
And the flesh with the nails driven in.

He hung on the cross as a creature,
Wearing my sin-spattered clothes.
And the pride in my flesh died with Him when He died,
And my raiment was new when He rose.

This clothing, I wear with a difference.
It's flesh that the King entered in.
And He put there His love and His almighty law,
And it never can be what it's been.

I'm nothing. I'm nobody. No one.
I'm something in Christ who's in me.
I'll put on His flesh and I'll walk in His bones,
And a part of His body I'll be.

—words by Helen Kromer