

The Book of Failure

What, may I ask, is "Success"?

"I want you to be a success." This was spoken to me by a friend, who happened to be my boss. At the time I thought of myself as successful. But changes in the corporation's methods had left me feeling useless, a window dressing, marginalized, a paid spectator. He suggested I try to reinvent myself, and I left hopeful. The reinvention sputtered, and I was on the street. But a door to the street opens to the entire world, and soon I had adventure and new employment that has challenged and used my abilities and reformed many very ways of thinking.

"What is success?" Is it the sweet glow of accomplishment, or is it more like a dandelion which blooms and then turns to a puffball that when the wind blows, it succeeds in seeding future generations? Success has many sides. Rembrandt, the artist, could handle a brush like no man ever, but he couldn't handle marriage or money, and died bankrupt - while today his works sell for millions, and often as not they are never for sale, because their owners find them too precious.

I am a baseball fan; White Sox. We had a great centerfielder, Jim Landis, who could run and leap like a deer. More than once, he would throw himself over the bullpen wall to snag a potential home run, with us bleacherites as witnesses. Late in his career, the Sox acquired a top-flight outfielder, Al Pilarcik, as backup. Eager to see the new guy's stuff, I watched a short fly ball come his way. He could not quite reach it, so he sensibly stutter-stepped to let it bounce to him. Twenty thousand Chicagoans began to boo in displeasure. "Landis would have dived for it." "Landis would have gotten his knees dirty." Al Pilarcik - winner or loser? I saw how mean people can get about success. We have an election year coming up. The question seems not to be "is this guy any good? Is he honest, is he decent, does he care about anyone besides himself?" Rather, it's "can this guy win? Can this guy... get elected?"

In elementary school we learned about our great, successful nation. "We" landed here at Plymouth Rock to escape persecution in England. We grew strong and finally took the courage to mount a revolution and send King George's soldiers back across the Pond for good; we pushed westward across the Appalachians

and the Ohio and Mississippi and the Great Plains and the Rockies, and finally Lewis and Clark stood at the mouth of the Columbia, Pacific breakers rolling in at their feet. *We* made settlements and signed treaties with the native people, but some attacked us, and we had to fight back. Except for poor ole Custer, *we* won. Success.

Then we went to high school, where our history books began to touch on failures, treachery and villains too subtle for the grade-school mind. In elementary school, we had been taught the "Spirit of Compromise" was the hallmark of a civilized society. That was good for settling the "yes/no!" arguments among children, but there was a dark side: compromise created a clause in our own Constitution (Article I, Section 2) which made any slave 3/5 of a person! Stubbornness, or cussedness, produced monstrosities such as the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which repealed the Missouri Compromise and left settlers in Bleeding Kansas to fight it out for supremacy in the matter of slavery. Treaties with the Indians were broken and entire populations forced to march to reservations: the Trail of Tears. We named our sports teams and cities for the native people, but forbade them to speak their own language, and hustled their kids off to boarding schools to learn to be successful, like us. The Industrial Revolution brought railroads and mining and gold and science, and tycoons who ruled finance and industry with iron fists. But oh, we were unlike the kingdoms of Europe. We elected our own leaders, and could get rid of bad ones and bad laws by voting them out. Ballots, not bullets. We were the envy of all Europe; and today most nations, even dictatorships, pay some sort of homage to the "democratic republic": whether they are egalitarian and democratic or totalitarian tyrannies, it seems not to matter. Democracy is still an ideal, a word which invites hope. The equation: Democracy plus capitalism = success.

In college we began to really study the really ugly details – tidal forces of capitalism pitting profit against benefit; a gang mentality, fueled by false concepts of Christianity, not just the KKK but a whole silently accepted system - that squashed basic civil rights for many Americans - segregation. We learned of children marching out from their church to join the protests, greeted by the sheriff who unleashed attack dogs and ordered the fire department to blast them with their hoses. We students felt we had been lied to. We got angry about successes that hurt people. Our heroes had clay feet and no backbones. Who was Julius Caesar? A great hero who carried law and art and science and civilization to Europe – or just another successful and especially cruel barbarian?

A History of Losers

“History is always written by the winners.” This is a half-truth. Official histories, yes; they are written in kings’ palaces, or in their modern equivalent - the comfort of ivied college offices, over cups of coffee and good wine. Sometimes winners are losers who, for awhile, managed to get a large following to play bully with them. For four centuries, Russia was ruled from Kyiv; today they bomb the Chicago-sized city, hoping to regain it and wipe out all things Ukrainian forever. The Magyars, the Saracens, the Byzantines, Parthians, Japanese, Scandinavia, Kush, Punt, Songhai, Ethiopia; and the great naval empires of Polynesia who established a language group over half the Pacific ocean – these who caused the world to tremble now appear as side-notes in your world history text. What high school graduate has not read "Ozymandias", by Percy Bysshe Shelley?

I met a traveller from an antique land
 Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
 Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,
 Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
 And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
 Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
 Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
 The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed:
 And on the pedestal these words appear:
 "My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
 Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!"
 Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
 Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
 The lone and level sands stretch far away.

The statement “History is written by the winners” deepest flaw is that it cares strictly about battles and economics and cultural flow. It cares little for personal history, and without people, you don't have history. It ignores the best-known history of all, a gift to the world - from big-time losers. The stories in that book outline, in grim and grisly detail, something called human nature, in a way so on-point that its ideas speak to all humanity. Its narratives repeat, over and over, the message: human beings are hard-wired to do what darn well pleases ourselves, and then we wonder why it works out so badly. When we fail at our crooked plans, we deflect the blame to others. I am using the word “we” a lot, because the book is written to us, for us, about us, meaning you and me.

This book and its writers and their book have been targeted, imprisoned, killed and ridiculed. Sometimes they have even been accused of not existing at all – such is the hatred let loose by truth - but the words are there, recording horrible errors, disgusting sins and the occasional success; but the writers make no excuse for those failures.

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The Big Fat Book
"Self-Help Guide to Becoming a Loser"

I own an extremely dog-eared, taped-together copy of an old book called the Bible. Actually, I own about twenty copies of it, in seven different languages, because I study its thoughts. I own a large dictionary containing every word in it, and dozens of books by authors of all stripes, who give their take on it and how its thought plays out or should play out in our world. The Bible is about a thousand pages long, containing not just the usual land battles, biography and cultural upheavals you expect from a history, but also samplings of poetry, romance, and teaching of the highest order. It was successful as a book in that billions of people own their own copies, read the, quote them, and structured their society around noble principles found in its pages. My purpose today is to examine it in terms of the question of "success."

It opens with a quick snapshot of the dawn of time, of a powerful Creator developing this world, populating it, and enjoying it. The narrative quickly zooms in a family of ancestral humans living in this pleasant habitat.

The first of these is "Red Handsome Earth Man". God gives him creative power in the form of language. The Creator is curious to see what his newly-minted Earthling would call the various creatures in his vicinity, so he has his creature name the other creatures! We have been trusted with the power of choice. We are not robots or toys. But this little drama takes a turn far off the normal course of human events. Here, Red still finds himself alone as a human; now God, who already created the other creatures in twos, takes a new step, the precursor of all cloning and stem cell miracles, fashioning a woman from part of the man himself. You would think Red would thank God forever!

The man hadn't even given his wife a name before the trouble happened. A sorry snake, a villainous viper, offers them a choice of a different sort. It stems

from God's single instruction not to eat a certain fruit, along with consequences ("or else you will die"). Once the wife is alone, the wily serpent gives his pitch: "Oh, you won't die, sweetie; in fact, your eyes will be opened and you will become just like God, knowing everything, both good and evil." Temptation comes like the pecan inside the chocolate, a nice surprise, a subtle accusation: God is keeping secrets! If they are going to satisfy their curiosity, Adam and Eve must also satisfy their jealousy. So this is about much more than eating an apple or a banana. The belly may be filled, but the hunger to aggrandize oneself gnaws on and on. Folks, it's crunch time!

They ate, and enjoyed for a moment. But that afternoon, the nicest part of the afternoon, was the time God liked to visit his couple.

"Where are you?"

"I hid because I was naked, and it made me afraid."

"Who told you that you were naked?"

Uh-oh. God saw the couple he had left in naked innocence in the morning now wearing fig-leaf skirts. And downhill it went from there. Big intelligent Red Handsome Earth Man, having been given a lovely wife, now used his creative mind to blame her for misleading him into eating the forbidden fruit. Well? What would happen if your boss found his private planning book on your desk, and then you lied about how it got there? Well? Sure enough, God fired his newly-hired gardeners, and placed an armed security guard on the Garden, leaving Red Man and the woman to forage for themselves. Work a lot, gather a little. The woman finally gets a name (Everybody's Mom, or "Eve") and they raise a family among thorns, thistles and poisonous snakes. And, oh yes, at the end of this trek, they get to die. But as it turned out, they lived long, hundreds of years, passing the torch to their many children.

That also failed. Did they try to help their children to do better? They had a sort of relationship with God, and even taught them religion. But they passed along jealousy and deception to their first child, who gave it a new twist: insolence. The younger son seemed to be getting on famously. He did so well that the older brother murdered him, offering God no apology, but instead a string of wheedling excuses. The murderer, having no plea, bargains for a better deal! Amazingly, God gave no death penalty, just banishment, with protection! Safe from revenge, this rat now builds a city and populates it with children worse than himself.

Reboot

With a few exceptions, the next six generations produced more violent, evil-minded people, such that God decided he had to reboot. Reboot the whole world by flooding it, then repopling it with the only decent family left – a faithful man, his wife, and small extended family. They were fertile enough, and the earth once again began to bulge with people – people who built kingdoms that fostered civilizations – meaning they fostered everything except mercy, truth, decency and love.

At the Flood, God had vowed “no reboot”. We fast-forward to around 1900 BC, and God finds the world again faithless. He located a capable but elderly man and called him to leave his home and found a new sort of clan, based on faithfulness. This man (Abraham) and his descendants were decent and kindly, but not immune from craven fear and deception. A long famine brought them all to live in Egypt. They prospered there, thriving as a nation within a nation, so strong that their hosts decided to make slaves of them. God felt for their misery and raised up another man to lead them out, and he did; but the virus of bad will was still alive in their midst. Sometimes God got so angry with his own people, he inspired nearby princes to ravage them with the sword, or he might summon locusts to devour their crops, as a huge object lesson. The people, instead, blamed their troubles on lack of leadership.

A pause to sum up:

We failed at innocence; we failed at parenting; we failed to keep standards. Then Moses, God's man for the moment, put up the Law, road signs to make directions clear, but we stumbled into the Promised Land and failed to do the things that would have guaranteed peace and prosperity.

We failed to heed the law or even bother with it; but instead complained that we really needed a strong leader. A king! A king! ... so God called upon a prophet, who was something of a cross between a pope and a field general, to find and anoint a good king. The one he found started well, but became a paranoid, suicidal mess. The prophet went to work again, anointed a fresh king, one who gained a reputation for humility, an eye for the women, and total incompetence as a father. Ditto for the king's son, who asked God for wisdom, gained wisdom, power, fame and riches and again, clueless as a father.

Kings came and went, some good, most bad or worse, and all committed horrible judgment errors that sealed the doom of future generations. Ultimately the nation was taken wholesale back into slavery, by the dominant empire, passed from empire to empire. To their credit, the people stubbornly identified with their origin, their clan, their tradition. But only a few bright heroes shone above the muck, prophets who spoke of a great age to come, a time when doing right would count for something. And after centuries, a Rescuer came to set things right, and he did a good job of it. He was so successful that – guess what? - the leaders of his country had him killed. Crucified.

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Please wait...

Resurrection 30%... 57%... 100%!

Please wait...

Prelude to Dystopia

Now things brighten up. Three mornings after his death, the Rescuer stepped out alive from his grave, and left in his wake a rush of belief and revival of hope! The bright morning of a Golden Age? Sorry. Even as the glow of resurrection is fading, we see failure to believe. People believed the miracles of resurrection, but they failed to believe God, to believe that God's love is ultimate to life. Seeds of bigotry and selfishness begin to sprout. Instead of fresh green life, we got moldy weeds. Historical study outside the Book confirms this. Religion became a protection racket, a front for a powerful State. Even today, fat textbooks and glossy magazines are filled with accounts of battles won, palaces and great houses of religion constructed, and advances in art, science and industry, under "Great" enlightened kings. Most of those in Europe flew the banner of Christ, but only as a window dressing for their racketeering and petty tyrannies. And that brings us to the present day, where Christianity shines bright in many places, but also, on occasion, fronts for mankind's worst atrocities.

And, amazingly, we still have the Book.

Our Book of Failure paints a dystopian future, the natural consequence of the failure of humans to even be humane. After legendary years of horror and terror, there is a thousand years of peace; then another rebellion, and that's enough. The earth itself simply must be replaced. The final few chapters of the Book begin, "... and I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven

and the first earth were passed away.” Not just a reboot; a new operating system.

So that’s the book, actually a collection of short books, with no formal title. Some call it Scripture“, meaning “The Writings”, or; but that does not make it unique. Therefore, others call it “The Book”, distinguishing it from all lesser books. It also takes its name from a very ancient port city in Lebanon, famous for its paper industry during the time of the Greeks and the Romans: Byblos, from which we get the name “Bible.” To be fair, after this grim review of its contents, it holds more hope for mankind than all the other books ever written.

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Why Do We Read a Book of Failures?

The Bible is far more than a catalogue of failures. It is a book of victory, victory over death and fear and lovelessness and over all the evils of this world. It reveals God as alive, within our very being, and gives us liberty to live powerful and productive lives, full of love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, goodness, faith, humility and self-control.

It is the sole contemporary source of information about Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ, the Messiah, the one who walked on water and fed thousands from a lunch box, but who counted those things as nothing compared to his message - that He spoke words that, if trusted and put to work in the world, bring eternal life – and that those words are meant to be shared and lived out, so that one person speaking them is like a single seed from which a whole orchard springs.

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The World’s Response

Christ has changed the world. The Word spread quickly, and many followers were true to Jesus' command to carry the good seed to every corner of the earth. Today, a vast majority of nations now hold to (or use as political coin) moral and ethical teachings found in the Bible as their standard. We now talk about “high moral ground” as a vital element in any political transaction. We are to become more and more godly, or "godlike, yet innocent" – the opposite of what Adam was doing to bring about his own failure. It stands in diametric opposition to another huge system of human thought; opposed, yet giving that system a moral coloring. "Humanism", the step-brainchild of Epicurus and others, is probably

the leading religion in the world today. It proclaims that humans have the ability, the right, and the responsibility to improve their own lot, and to pass on a better world to their successors. In this it mimics Jesus' teaching, but with a catch: humanism insists we don't need Jesus' help.

Humanism has an optimistic view of humanity. It stands opposed to Reformed, Evangelical, Roman Catholic and most other forms of Christianity, which have a pessimistic view of humanity. Humanists don't believe that apes need or ever needed a savior, but only mere survival of their fittest members. Humanists have functionally omitted "survival of the fittest" when it comes to modern humans in their belief – the faith – that we can improve ourselves without keeping the weaker ones out of the gene pool. This is tricky, since modern medicine substantially increases the ability of the weaker to survive. There is, in addition, an element of eugenics which would control the gene pool. Thirty U.S. states prohibit or restrict the right of developmentally disabled people from marrying, by such means as requiring castration. I have never heard a humanist claim, however, that humans will evolve to become an improved species. They have the sense to know that their program must be carried and renewed from generation to generation by force of law and political conditioning. Humanists are not "left-wing" by nature, as often portrayed by their opponents. Actually, one of the purest forms of Darwinian evolution is capitalism, which is practiced worldwide by Communist and free societies alike.

We might gather that humanism is intensely political at its core. Christianity may also get intense in political action, but it is at the periphery rather than the core. Christians believe that improvement of the world is about us listening to and obeying God, resulting in seeding the present world and future generations with visible examples of God's love, lived out in our own bodies, no DNA samples needed. But we have a huge task – to overcome fear-based, failure-based thinking with the mind of God's holy Spirit. Consider a matter from the sixteenth century:

The reformer, Martin Luther, as a young priest, was afraid to look up when walking on the sidewalk, lest he accidentally see a nun (dressed in full-length "habit") and get turned on, he clasped his hands behind his back lest he accidentally (even more horrible) touch a nun, and stared at the ground. That

was standard procedure in the year 1515. But the reality? Men and monks alike regularly kept mistresses, as some do today. In spite of many reforms, priests and ministers alike include many unfaithful in their ranks, both in matters of celibacy and in basic doctrine. Failure to meet standards is pandemic among human beings. Let's listen to the good Apostle Paul bemoan himself in his letter to the church at Rome, chapter 7:

21 So I find this law at work: Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me. 22 For in my inner being I delight in God's law; 23 but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me. 24 What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?

In the last sentence of the chapter, he answers his own question: 25 Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!

Paul has laid out for all to see the misery of his own failure to do what he full well knows is right. And in chapter 8 he lays out God's plan: it is God's Spirit, living in a human being, that brings life to the surface and enables a person to live free of condemnation.

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Fun with Failure

I love to watch those little video clips called FAIL. They show people putting three ladders end-to-end to reach a high place on a wall, autos in swimming pools, cats trying to eat with the vet's plastic collar on, that sort of thing. They are hilarious, not because I despise the stupidity of other people, but because from the safety of my sofa I can see, and laugh at, my own failures at "climbing to the top." (I should be long dead because of my misadventures on ladders!) Success is fleeting. Go back to my beloved White Sox, who climbed the summit, and won the World Series in 2005. News articles proclaimed a new "dynasty." I said to my friend, "within three years their manager will be fired." I am not Isaiah the prophet, but what I said proved true. Anybody could see it. Their best players knew their value now, so as soon as their trophies were on the shelf, they jumped off to other teams. The Sox themselves had forgotten how to lose gracefully. A little again, a few key injuries, and... failure.

Case Histories

People go through their lives pulled by forces of "right and wrong." We may use fancy terms such as "appropriate and inappropriate", or "righteousness and sin", but at the core there is a polar struggle. Picture the cartoon with a man facing a decision, and on one shoulder there is a miniature angel, on the other a tiny devil giving him bad advice. The word *satan* means "an adversary, or one who plots against another." Words and ideas are a satan's weapons, designed to produce mental and emotional harm and influence destructive behavior. God creates, builds and supplies; the devil kills, steals and destroys. Humans respond in many ways, but it is common to *backslide* during times of ease and plenty, leading to a jaded conscience and bad relationships. There comes a time of awareness and sorrow, bringing about *repentance*, a commitment to return to doing right. The Bible chronicles cycles of personal and national backsliding and repentance, often with God speaking warnings to and through an individual, sometimes a king, sometimes a lowly sheepherder who becomes a *prophet*.

To Adam and Eve, God spoke warnings which were contemplated, then ignored under satan's bad advice. Their oldest son, Cain, ignored God's warning about jealousy, and killed his brother with no regret at all. With Cain banished, Adam and Eve had a third son (among many children) named Seth, and Seth's son Enosh saw a time when men "began to call upon the name of the Lord." This would seem to say a *religion* was founded, which might guide people in favor of listening to and obeying God's voice. But that wasn't the case. We see advanced "civilization" appearing, with music and cities and farming and industry, but also with brutal dictators who would kill at the slightest provocation. The family names in both Seth's and Cain's lines are similar - Methuselah on one side, Methusael on the other, and so on, perhaps showing a dynasty overlapping the "good" Seth side and the "evil" Cain side, with the evil predominating. There is no reference to false gods! We see the Lord looking down and seeing only wicked *behavior*.

The individual for the hour, was Noah. Lamech, Noah's dad, prophesied that his son would get everyone out of their mess ("give us rest"). Well, they did rest - at the bottom of the sea, except for Noah and his close family. A year later, the world dried off and was in full reboot; Noah had celebrated the return of life with a proper sacrifice, but then, sated, sat down and got stoned drunk, an act which initiated division between his three sons. Still, they managed to multiply

and populate the earth, or at least the part of the world which today we call the Middle East. Once again it became filled with cities and agriculture and despotic kings and violence - and religion. In this period we see secular history paralleling the Bible history (though people argue a lot about the specifics). For sure, we see religion everywhere, including the all-important ritual of *sacrifice*. Sacrifice is the act of giving something valuable to God: in that economy, it meant killing a prize farm animal, and sharing it with religious leaders at a feast, at a place of worship, or temple. An honorable idea, showing in concrete terms faith in God to supply one's needs, and a respect for a shared religion in the community. However, some might view sacrifice as "buying off God", a sort of insurance policy; while others would simply see it as a way to give thanks. As people backslid, sacrifice became a useless ritual, a cover for the darkness in men's hearts. After a thousand years of this, it was time for renewal.

Around 2000 BC Abraham is born, in a land called "Ur of the Chaldees", which is likely near the Persian Gulf, in what today we call Iraq. He answered God's call to go west to a place that today we call Israel, named after Abraham's grandson Jacob, also known as Israel. The youngest, Jacob, had won the right to head his family through deception; but to continue required a struggle, and that is what his name means in Hebrew or perhaps Aramaic, which was spoken over a wide area, from Palestine as far east as Ur.

During a long famine, much of Jacob's family moved to Egypt. This is a twisty story, in which the older brothers had gotten rid of an irritating younger brother, conniving to have him sold to traveling merchants. Joseph ended up succeeding in Pharaoh's court, became CEO, and established an emergency famine storage program. The whole family migrated there, and took root as a unique people, not involved with Egyptian religion but with service to God. Ultimately suspicious of these foreigners, Egypt made them slaves; but God rescued them through powerful miracles and a man named Moses. On the surface, the whole thing looks wonderful; but there is an undercurrent of resistance to God among the Hebrew people, not only in Egypt but after their escape. In general, the common man was perfectly happy to adopt the customs and to marry the women of the nations they lived among.

Most of us know Moses as the man who led Israel over the dry bottom of the Red Sea, or the Sea of Reeds, and into the Promised Land. Some of us also know that God appointed Joshua as successor, and Joshua "fought the battle of Jericho, and the walls came tumblin' down." Some of the some of us know that Hagar was a lady (sort of) innkeeper who helped in that conquest. But not many of us have

plowed through the book of Judges. We read that "every man did what was right in his own eyes" - but that is found in chapter 21! The book opens ominously with the picture of Israel entering the Promised Land and promptly intermarrying with the locals and adopting their evil ways and false religions. Yet there is also a cogent description in chapter 3 of the cycle of repentance and backsliding, coupled with God's basic attitude: "if you want so bad to live that way, fine; but you will have to handle the consequences yourself." Scott Adams, the Dilbert cartoonist (and atheist) says it this way, paraphrasing Romans 3:23 - "All people are weasels." Weasels, or perpetual teenagers.

At any rate, God saw to it that His people would be ruled not by kings, but by judges. Their first order of business was to learn to live right, not to live in luxury by plundering other people. It's a little surprising to read Judges in terms of years of peace and/or prosperity:

Judge No. 1 - Othniel

"...after the death of Joshua the Israelites asked the Lord, 'who will go up first to fight the Canaanites (resident Palestinians)? God says, "Judah's tribe, and I guarantee victory." Chapter 2 – Flashback to last days of Joshua. God: Uh, you didn't do what I asked you to do. People wept. Joshua lived to 110, and his advisors beyond that, and all was well. The next generation failed. 1st Judge: Othniel, Caleb's nephew. 40 years of peace.

No. 2 – Ehud

The lefty slew Eglon, and they had 80 years of peace.

No. 3 – Deborah, the prophetess

Teamed up with Barak, defeated Sisera (with Jael's help) and Jabin.

Pause: what do all these have in common? They served god as long as the Judge was alive, then immediately fell into idol worship and immorality.

No. 4 – Gideon

God raised Gideon from wimpy, scared and hiding to utter boldness and military victory though ridiculously outnumbered, but God was with him, and he obeyed God.

But when he died Abimilech, his rotten son, took over. The theme of "great prophet, great king, rotten son" echoes over and over in the Bible.

Back to more Judges!

No. 5,6,7 –

Tola (23 yrs) Jair (22 yrs) Jephthah (big hero, even though the son of a harlot).

No. 8,9,10

Ibzan (7 yrs) Elon (10 yrs) Abdon (8 yrs). Peace.

No. 11 – Samson. Complex guy.

Last sentence of Judges: "everyone did what was right in his own eyes."

The people still felt threatened by the big outside empires, and begged God for a king. Someone who would show them who was who! And thus begins the story of Samuel, the son of Elkanah and Hannah. And also the beginning of the end for peace in Israel, because the people demanded a king who could "get things done." This happens to be an election year coming up; and people are demanding a king. Couldn't help mentioning that.

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Israel Gets a King, and a Great Deal More

Hannah, the wife of Elkanah, was childless. She prayed for a son; the priest Eli had not seen such fervent prayer, and assumed she was drunk! "A man of God" came to Eli to prophesy about young Samuel's future – and rebuke Eli for "kicking the sacrifice" (disdaining proper worship). Eli was the top priest, but very dense.

God gave a son to Hannah! Samuel grew up to serve God faithfully, but then came the whining about a king. Samuel's track record of anointing kings is questionable. First off, he anoints Saul, initially a humble kid, but under the stress of the job becomes paranoid. Eventually, in what we would call a *coup d'etat* today, Samuel anoints David, a roaring success in many ways – but David has a classic character flaw that will ultimately destroy the kingdom. Sex scandal, coverup, assassinates his own loyal general, and between Saul's and David's extended families we have civil war. Several generations down the road, enemies destroy the weakened, divided kingdom, taking its leaders hostage for re-education into paganism.

Success with God – How?

Christian theology wants to make the most important parts of the Word of God easily available to the ordinary person. For instance, the Bible has many things to say about man's dysfunctional relation to God, and how to make it better, and get our limited, battered selves to live well, and live forever. Jesus Himself reduced the entire "Law and Prophets" (hundreds of pages of the Old Testament) to "Love God with your whole heart, mind and soul, and your neighbor as yourself." Modern theology makes it a simple scheme which you may recognize from any evangelical "tract", but echoes throughout the core theology of all Christian denominations:

1. God is perfect, cannot even look on sin.
2. Man sins, cannot look on God or even seek God on his own.
3. Jesus fixed this problem by taking our sins upon himself.
4. If we trust in Jesus, all is made well, Jesus linking man to God.

If you are trying to get a person to commit their life to Christ in a hurry, this simplistic theology enables you to emphasize the imminent possibility of death without that decision to trust in Jesus. This system gets ink on the commitment card, but it lacks any requirement for the person to know just who Jesus is, and to understand Jesus' ways.

Jesus' teaching avoided formulas; he tended to state a truth and back it up with an example, often in story form. He gave us a relevant theological statement, one that occupies three chapters in the Gospel history by Matthew. We call it the Sermon on the Mount, because he spoke it to a crowd on a hillside. It begins with eight short phrases, each promoting a way of life commonly associated with failure. Listen!

"Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are those who mourn,
for they will be comforted.
Blessed are the meek,
for they will inherit the earth.
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful,
for they will be shown mercy.
Blessed are the pure in heart,
for they will see God.
Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called children of God.
Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

How different from what we might come up with! A more common worldview might read:

"Blessed are those whose spirit is tanked up on premium!
Blessed are those who stay happy! Who needs pity?
Blessed are those who take charge; they will grow rich.
Blessed are those who demand better treatment; they'll get it.
Blessed are those who don't let people take advantage of them.
Blessed are people who go with the flow.
Blessed are those who are ready and armed for a fight.
Blessed are the winners. Who wants to be a loser?"

The Bible is permeated with examples of failure, punctuated by the few faithful; yet it calls us all to be faithful, to live full of God's Spirit, and feed those around us with love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, goodness, faith, humility and self-control. Further, it says there is no law against any of those things - we are free of the chains of selfishness, which require us to own and fight for to even maintain. God is looking for people to worship Him in spirit, and in truth.

Both major candidates, in the last election, claimed to be representative of true Christianity, what St. Paul calls "True Jews". Romans 2:28 says that, and here's how: The Apostle Paul was writing to believers in Rome, a "non-Jewish" town, and there were many there who wanted to keep the distinctive mark, and all the customs, the whole ethnic thing, and were making life hard for people that just wanted to be Christians. Paul said that true Jewishness stems from faith in God, not faith in a religious system. This simpler approach began when God asked Abraham to follow His leading, and Abraham, having faith in God, took up the call, and left his home town by the Persian Gulf and walked west until he hit what is now Israel. The Law given to Moses, the whole system, was just a fleshing out of faith. When in the course of time, Jesus was confronted by the Lawkeepers, he found the flesh part was alive and well, the faith part dead or

dying. But we can read about where He did find faith, and understand. The old passes away, and God makes us a "new creature."

CREATION BY GOD IS GOOD. Evolution works through the failure of an existing species to survive, whence it is superseded by a few of its fellows who have been born with some improved characteristic that gives them a competitive advantage. The capitalistic business model is the closest analogy in our modern world to classical evolutionary theory. Under both systems, the idea of "good" is meaningless unless it means "surviving and winning." Social kindness, love, care, and all such "virtues" are allowed to exist and even prosper because they may help the "herd", or society as a whole, survive and prosper. But God's way contradicts the evolutionary scheme:

- SUCCESS is not about getting BIG.
- SUCCESS is not about becoming EXCITING.
- SUCCESS is not about being CORRECT.
- SUCCESS is not about becoming a BOSS
- SUCCESS is not about being FREE of RESTRICTIONS.
- SUCCESS is overcoming fear to be able to LOVE GOD, PEOPLE, OURSELVES and GOD'S CREATION.

Which is more successful?

Picture a life-sized, gold-plated statue of a conqueror on horseback.

Now imagine a seed, one small brown seed.

That equestrian, glistening in the sun, will lead an imaginary charge for ten thousand years, yet he will not capture one inch of enemy soil. The seed, even if it is years before it comes off the shelf, will sprout and reproduce, launching generations of fruit-bearing trees, each with more seeds, nourishing life, hope, dreams and successes. When I buy seeds, they are so light! I have to shake the package to make sure I have bought anything at all; but my garden soil welcomes them. The Bible is a storehouse of seeds – stories which challenge the human mind, even if they lay dormant for years – but as the seed forces its way out and cracks its pod, the stories force their truth on me; and I look for well-lit, fertile soil in which to plant them.

Plant the seeds of faith, love, hope and honest knowledge, nurture them, and God's Word will be transformed from a Book of Failure into a guide to true and lasting success, which can change not only your future, but the course of the entire world.

