

Foundations: The Prophets 3
BE SUCCESSFUL
Isaiah 26:3-4 (AFBC 5/20/18)

We're taking a look at some foundational passages of Scripture found in the prophets, specifically in the writings of the Prophet Isaiah. Graduates, we're all so proud of you. And as we honor you today, I think I've found a passage in Isaiah that's tailor-made for you as you move into your next exciting chapter of life.

This morning, we turn to Isaiah chapter 26, and although the word itself is not mentioned here, I think it tells us something very important about living a successful life.

You want to be successful, don't you? (nod "yes") We want you to be successful too—especially your parents, or whoever it is that's still paying your bills—THEY want you to be successful!

Now, the verse we'll consider today is familiar to most of us. Graduates, if you participated in Bible Drill, you've likely committed this verse to memory. I did as I was coming along, and many of you have as well. Listen for the verse I'm talking about as we read our text for today:

Isaiah 26:1-7...Another Song--A Song of Praise

¹ In that day this song will be sung in the land of Judah:

We have a strong city;
God makes salvation
its walls and ramparts.

² Open the gates
that the righteous nation may enter,
the nation that keeps faith.

³ You will keep in perfect peace
him whose mind is steadfast,
because he trusts in you.

⁴ Trust in the LORD forever,
for the LORD, the LORD, is the Rock eternal.

⁵ He humbles those who dwell on high,
he lays the lofty city low;
he levels it to the ground
and casts it down to the dust.

6 Feet trample it down—
the feet of the oppressed,
the footsteps of the poor.

7 The path of the righteous is level;
O upright One, you make the way of the righteous smooth.

So, did you hear it—the verse we know so well? Some of you did, but others of us will only recognize it if it's read from the King James (which, at times may seem a bit old—it turns 407 years old this year!—but sometimes it's still the best!).

In this beautiful 1611 rendering of God's word, the verse reads:
"Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee: because he trusteth in thee" (Isaiah 26:3).

That's powerful. It's an important message for our lives. And it's what I want us to focus on today as we honor you, graduates. Although the word itself is not mentioned, I'm convinced that "success" is what this verse is about!

What does it mean to be "successful?" Most parents, if asked what they most want for their children, will say something like, "I want my children to live happy, successful lives." Some will add wisely, "I want them to live a life that honors God," or "a life that lives up to the full potential God has given them."

These high hopes we have for our children are all inter-related. They can't really be separated from each other. And it seems to me that the one word found in God's word that brings all these attributes of a successful life together...is PEACE: **"Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on thee..."**

From God's perspective, success... is being "at peace." To be successful is to experience this "perfect peace" that only the Lord can provide.

Now, I know that's a long leap from how the world defines success; but this is God's definition—which means you and I ought to at least give it some strong consideration, since it's entirely possible that He's right! Let's take a look.

Are you a successful person? Consider this question for a moment: are you... successful? Now, what first comes to mind for you when I ask that question?

Did you think about the house you live in? How about the car you drive? Was it the size of your 401K?

Maybe you thought about your job--how respected you are at work, or what level of management you've achieved. In other words, what standard do you use to measure your own success, and the success of others?

Well, there is every indication in Scripture that if God were questioning us about success, and we started focusing on any of the things I just mentioned, the Almighty would just chuckle and tell us to "get real." Because cars, houses, investments and the like, are not real--at least when trying to measure true success.

I didn't say the other stuff is unimportant—just that it cannot, by itself, make us successful people or insure that we'll live successful lives. When the next financial crash happens, there will be tons of folks who felt successful and maybe even felt at peace who will discover in the melee that they really aren't.

If the One who knows us best—because He designed and made us—if He were helping us take stock of our lives to determine if we're successful, I think He'd be asking us questions like these:

1. Are you at peace in your thinking? Or, do your thoughts bother you? Are they full of worry or jealousy or maybe a lot of unwholesome clutter that allows no room for stability and calm?

2. And how about your emotional life—are you at peace there? Or, do you get angry a lot and then stay that way; or do you often find yourself responding with disabling fear and frustration?

3. Do you allow other people to control your inner peacefulness? Do they upset you and rob you of calmness and serenity?

4. We could ask the same questions concerning our circumstances in life—the unexpected things that happen along the way. Just how irritated do these interruptions make you? How confident are you that whatever happens, life will still be okay, and you'll be okay too?

5. What about your finances? As new graduates, maybe you haven't been too affected by this yet. Somebody else has been paying most of your bills. But this will change.

It will be important for you to be a good manager of your income by living well within your means so that you can save and give and live above the debt-ridden craziness that you'll often see around you.

6. Are you at peace when it comes to your physical condition? Best not wait until you're my age, or even your parent's age, to begin taking care of that body God gave you.

Are you eating right and getting enough exercise? Then, after making those good decisions, are you choosing not to worry about all the things that could happen or even things that have happened that are beyond your control?

Why bring this up at church? Because God gave us our bodies and told us to think of them as His temple. It's important to be at peace about your physical condition, so as not to beat yourself up over the bad choices you've made.

Now, I doubt that any of us could answer these questions perfectly—in the sense that we're always 100% at peace with every aspect of our lives.

We might get to say "always" to some, but have to admit that the answer to others is, well... "never." Most answers would likely fall somewhere in between those extremes: not always, but frequently; not never, but seldom.

What I want us to understand this morning is that all these questions relate to what the Hebrew language calls "shalom," and New Testament Greek refers to as "eirene." These are the two Biblical words that are translated as... "peace."

I checked several different translations of Isaiah 26:3, and found only two exceptions to this. One translation uses the word "wholeness" instead of peace. The other, which aims to be strictly literal--instead of saying "perfect peace" or "true peace" said, "peace/peace." Here's why:

A. One translation uses the word "wholeness" because the peace Isaiah is talking about is intended to be all-encompassing. The questions I asked earlier involved our thoughts, our emotions, our

circumstances, and more. This perfect peace includes all that we are—our whole being—and thus... “wholeness.”

B. And what about this peace/peace? Well, that’s literally what the prophet wrote—“Thou wilt keep him in `shalom/shalom.”” The word “perfect” is not there.

Hebrew scholars call this a “super-superlative.” It’s one word, repeated—sometimes repeated more than once. Isaiah 6:3 says: Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of His glory.” That’s like “perfect holiness times two”—but that would be hard to set to music!?!

In the case of “shalom/shalom,” it simply means that this is an inner “peace” or “wholeness” that’s beyond any other. It’s a full, thorough, “all-inclusive” peace that comes to us as God’s gift.

And here’s what you need to know for the test—not my test, but life’s test—the one we all need to pass. This perfect peace--peace that has God for its only source--is the very definition of success. We can’t be successful without it.

Success is not what we’ve been led to believe it is—and the earlier we learn this, the better. There are lots of high standards and accomplishments that the world points to in its attempt to define what success looks like.

And, listen, don’t hear me saying that the Lord wants us to fail in those other aspects of life. He doesn’t. Prepare to be your best and do your best in everything that’s worth doing.

God just knows—because He knows us better than we know ourselves--that we will not find true and lasting success by achieving every goal the world puts in front of us. If we let what “they” call success to become our passion, we’ll end up very disappointed some day.

That disappointment, perhaps to the point of disillusionment, will happen the day we discover that, although we seem to have it all, we’ve not really been successful. Even with all our much-to-be-desired stuff, we’ve still failed the test that matters most—because that test is not about stuff, it’s about life—the abundant life that our Creator intends for us to have.

It comes as a rude surprise, especially for those of us who've grown up with the American dream—and listen: it's not a bad dream—it's just shocking to realize that achieving it won't make us successful. In fact, we're not able, on our own, to achieve what God knows to be success.

We find this in the Old Testament and the New. Jesus was giving us a little reality check when He said: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives..." (John 14:27). Jesus understood that what the world offers won't last. It can't make us successful--not for long.

God offers us success as a gift that He alone can provide. His success comes to us as shalom/shalom, "perfect peace." When we receive this gift, we become successful people. And unlike the world's version of success, this is real. It will last.

Friends, I want this for my life, for my family, for all of you and everyone else I know. // Do you want it? // How can this "perfect peace" be ours?

The answer is spelled out clearly in Scripture. It involves just two simple--but for some reason, very challenging--steps. First, we must let go of our "illusions of success"—the things that are not real. And second, we must turn to its true Source.

1. Isaiah preached this message to the people of Judah. They were looking for success by forming alliances with foreign powers.

They lived in a dangerous world. The prophets encouraged them to trust God. God promised to keep them safe, but they chose political alliances instead.

Our text for today was actually part of a song. Isaiah planned for God's people to sing it as they repented of their misplaced trust and returned to God.

That didn't work out, though. Isaiah had to sing solo, and God's people learned the hard way that those political alliances only led to failures and betrayals and finally... ruin.

It's hard for us to get away from thinking that success is always a matter of what we do, where we live, how much we make, where we go on vacation, the car we drive, the school we attend, the

club we belong to, the kind of restaurants we frequent, how well-insured we are—we've convinced ourselves that all this stuff is important—very important!

But there's nothing on that list that can make us successful. Nothing on it can ever bring peace to our lives. Jesus warned us. He said we can gain the whole world, while losing our souls. There's no peace in that--no success either. In fact, it's life's ultimate failure!

2. So what do we do? We let go of our illusions and embrace the Source of peace. Isaiah clearly tells us where to find it: **"Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee: because he trusteth in thee" (Isaiah 26:3).**

That really doesn't need much explanation. It just needs some implementation. We need to do this—to live this way.

If we "stay our minds" on the Lord, He does the rest. He gives us shalom—peace--and keeps us in that good place... as we "stay" focused on Him, faithful, trustful, obedient.

God wants this for us, and promises to achieve this for us—"Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace..." It's God's doing. If we'll trust Him, God will help us with this. In Him, we'll find our way to a successful life—to a life of genuine peace.

More than any other prophet, Isaiah tells us about the Messiah—the One whom God promised to send. Listen to how he describes Him: **"...He will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." (Isaiah 9:6)**

Christ came to be our "Prince of Peace," to show us the way to God, the way to know Him personally—how to "stay our minds" on Him. He came to offer us "abundant life"—a truly successful life—one that's at peace with God, with others, and with ourselves.

I invite you to receive Christ now, to place your trust in Him, that He might be your Prince of Peace!

An EXTRA Story about "illusiveness" of peace...(didn't have room)

Wilmer McLean owned a home near Bull Run. His house was seriously damaged during the opening battle of the Civil War, and so, falsely believing he would be safer from future conflicts, he rebuilt his home - only to have it destroyed during the 2nd battle of Bull Run.

Disgusted, he moved to a part of the country where he felt he could escape the ravages of war - a small obscure community called Appomattox.

When Lee surrendered to Grant, it was McLean's house that was used by the two Generals to sign the historic terms of surrender. Their aides de camp were so moved by the signing they desired a memento of the occasion - a souvenir to remember what had taken place in this house. So they all walked off with a piece of furniture from McLean's house.