

When dreams go thud: Handling failure in ministry

(Partially given at conference; full talk here)

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Introduction

Some of you will remember at Toolangi I shared a talk entitled “If I had a dream” and in that dreaming with you I gave a vision that I hoped we would share together and it had a quantifiable reality associated with it. I am still dreaming for 10% of Australia’s Jews being messianic by the year 2020. And I shared what I believed it would take for such to occur.

Now in this briefer and properly self-critical talk, I look at the realities of the ‘not yet’ of the dream, question the method of taking a reality check, and unpack how to handle the apparent *thud* sound of the lack of responses, so far, to the prayers and the dream of a Messianic Australia.

Not yet

So far, we are not seeing 10% of Australian Jewry saved. The census last year revealed 95,000 people registering as Jews and using the usual method of re-evaluation, the estimates are 120,000 Jewish people are here in country. Suzanne Rutland in her book, which was on our library table, estimates that 250,000 people in Australia have at least one Jewish parent, but we will use the usual method of census taking. That means we hope to see 12,000 people, Jewish people, believing in Jesus by 2020.

That said, we are not seeing more than about 1,000 Jews in Australia born again. Our database in Sydney has 863 people who are Jewish and believers in Y’shua. Pretty good. But also as of today, 473 of them do not have a physical address. Where are they? Some have died, and some have moved and we lost their address. Some don’t want to hear from Jews for Jesus any longer. Fair enough, but we had close to 1,000 on the list.

A far cry from the 12,000 we want in our 10%. Then add the Jewish believers we didn’t have on our list, who are on CPM list, on CWI list, on CMJ, and those we continue to find everywhere we go, so maybe there really are 1,000 alive and well in Australia. So we have to rejoice in the one-by-one nature of our work, but we are filled with aching about the lost, the ones on our caseload, the ones we read about in the Australian Jewish News paper. We pray for revival. We long for God to pour out his spirit, and yet, it’s not happening. We ask the churches for whom we speak, to pray for Jews. We ask them to pray for a specific person or two, and they do. They take our prayer requests on board. But have we asked the churches to pray for 10% of Jews in this region to be born again by 2020? I admit I have not.

Some things don’t succeed

Dreams don’t just happen, they take work to accomplish. Now, to be fair, not all dreams should work.

This day in history, 10 August in 1945 the Japanese surrendered in World War II, thus ending their dream of world, or at least Pacific, dominance. In that case, we helped end their dream and the world is a better place for it. Dreams by themselves are not necessarily authorized, righteous, or relevant.

But ours is righteous. Or so we self-declared. We dream and we long and we pray and we work so that our people find Y'shua.

How are we really doing in this regard?

Let's self-evaluate. How many Jews have come to faith in Y'shua since we last met? How many did you lose to the anti-missionaries? How many have passed away? You get it... we need to count. Not for the sake of boasting but rather for evaluation.

It's hard for me as an American, albeit an Australian in citizenship as well, to speak about failure and success without thinking of the American model which is filled with numbers.

That said, numbers could matter.

I learned from Moishe Rosen that we set goals, actual real numbers and then afterwards evaluate.

For instance, if we want 100 people to attend an event. That's what we pray, decide... and we reach 80. That's within a range of acceptability. If we have 110, we have a success. If we have 120, glory! But if we have 70, we have not reached our goal and thus, we have failed. I know, I know, some of you say, but 70 were reached. Yes, that's well and good. But for this context, I'm defining failure as not reaching a defined goal. That does not make you a failure. But if you cannot accept that we have failures, then you won't really know how to rejoice in a success. Everything we do is not a winner. Everything we do doesn't work. I think of the typing of all capital letters and the loudness/ shouting that this makes, and the lack of 'hearability' this represents. If everything is fine, if everything is loud and important and successful, then nothing is. I'm not advocating ee Cummings-type writing, but rather the natural rhythm of large and small letters, of winning and losing.

Do you know the name: Asafa Powell? Jamaican. Fast runner. Came in 8th in 100m this week.

Or Nigerian Muizat Ajoke Odumosu? She came in 3 seconds later than Antyukh who won the 400 metre hurdles.

What of their dreams? Are they losers?

It's perfectly normal to win at times and to lose at other times. Call failures 'failures' and you will be able that much more to call victories 'a win!'

What have you tried and it didn't work? Was it an outreach? Was it a big event which you advertised and for which you hired a hall, a musician, and a speaker? Then you spent a lot of money and resource of your time and the results were not what you wanted?

Listen, you may not accept this, but it will help you if you do.

That said, and you are unhappy about this reality check, I'm sorry.

Evaluating an event as a failure in ministry is only momentary, and self-evaluative. It's a tool. But not a lord.

Failing does not make you a failure

We live in such a self-affirming generation this may be hard to even consider. Every child at sporting events nowadays receives an award for

participation. It's hard to be at such events. Compare the Olympics which we are watching each night here in AustralAsia. Winners happen; losers are the vast majority of the participants.

A cartoon that paid out the Aussies this week showed a grumbling Aussie who had won a silver medal in contrast to a celebrating Kiwi (NZ) bronze medalist. The Kiwi had reality in her mind; the Aussie expected to win gold. Disappointment carried over to her funk; celebration of 3rd place characterized the Kiwi.

Coming in 2nd or 3rd or 33rd doesn't make you a loser. Losing is what happens to the vast majority of the world. But we are not losers.

In fact, this sense of being a failure is what often drives people to law-keeping, Torah-observance, especially Gentiles in Jewish congregations. Always longing to be approved. In direct answer to this, hear these words from Israel Houghton:

I was running, and you found me
I was blind, and you gave me sight
You put a song of praise in me
I was broken, and you healed me
I was dying, and you gave me life
Lord, You are my identity

I am forgiven, I am your friend
I am accepted, I know who I am
I am secure, I'm confident
That I am loved, I know who I am
I am alive, I am set free
I belong to you and you belong to me

Our failings don't change who we are.
Our life is in Y'shua and in His spirit and love. We are accepted!

Handling disappointment

Honestly, losing is nothing other than disappointment. Disappointment can be handled in listening to and believing this Bible thinking:

"I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth." (Psalm 121)

"Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." (Hebrews 4)

But disappointment is not all we face when we hear a thud.

Handling rejection

Now Joseph, the patriarch from Genesis, was a dreamer, to be sure. We read "Now he had still another dream, and related it to his brothers, and said,

“Lo, I have had still another dream; and behold, the sun and the moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me.” And he related *it* to his father and to his brothers; and his father rebuked him and said to him, “What is this dream that you have had? Shall I and your mother and your brothers actually come to bow ourselves down before you to the ground?” (Genesis 37.9-10)

This I call ‘handling rejection.’ And this thud-sound/ rejection doesn’t come only from the unbelievers, but can also come from the brothers.

I expect this from certain sectors of the church. That helps me when it comes. It is not personally given, so I don’t really need to personally receive it. It’s not about me. It’s about our being Jews or about loving the Jewish people. It’s about Israel or our concerns for the people there. Mention Israel in polite society today and you will be immediately touted by some as an occupier. Last month I spoke in New Zealand and carried the torch for a love for the Jewish people and the need for evangelism to them, and was branded a terrorist by one person seeing the identification with anything Jewish as Zionish-Israelism.

I expect rejection from unbelievers, of course, as well. They rejected our messiah and he promised us that we would cop this hostility also. Still, the hardest is the pain of brothers saying they want nothing to do with us.

This rejection was not the case in Toolangi, but may be something we have to deal with at this stage of our reality check. I anticipate we will have some serious battle with the unity we so obviously enjoy and in which we have begun to learn to cooperate.

Handling personal failure

The worst part of self-evaluation is hearing the thud-- finding ourselves as the object of our investigation. And if you really know yourself, you know you haven’t been in prayer as often as you should. You know you haven’t given yourself to the evangelism, the one-to-one meat-and-potatoes of our work. We are more content with speaking at churches and hearing incidental praises afforded us, rather than the painful rejection of those who are lost.

God help us to bear the reproach, outside the (church)camp, and live in faithful sharing of the Gospel with our people, so that they will have opportunity to follow Y’shua themselves.

How did Y’shua deal with failure?

He knew what was in man.

He came to deal with all men, and at times pulled away, at times challenged, at times, cried early in the morning to his father, spending time alone nailing his own thought and dreams to the reality of his father.

To his followers he said, “No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you.”

“Now My soul has become troubled; and what shall I say, ‘Father, save me from this hour’? But for this purpose I came to this hour. (John 12.27)

“For I did not speak on my own initiative, but the Father Himself who sent me has given me a commandment as to what to say and what to speak. (John 12.49)

That said, He finished his work with only a few left there at his cross, and some confused followers huddled after a couple days. Into that situation he walked (Luke 24.37ff), had a meal, taught and demonstrated himself to them, and sent them into the world. “He knew what was in man.” (John 2.25)

Y’shua was no failure, although in the natural, most would say he spoke to thousands, and ended with almost nothing. His 3-year term as messiah-in-waiting finished with nothing to show for it. Or so they say. But we know better. What looked like a failure was actually God’s ‘Plan A.’ He came to die. He came to suffer and be buried and rise from the dead.

Dare we still dream?

I believe we need to do so. We need to work even with the sound of our own thuds. Even with our own personal failures and disappointments, sometimes the rejection of the church and others who don’t get it.

Let’s still dream. Let’s continue to work to the end that our people find Y’shua. Let’s work together, pray together and dream on. His will be done. On earth. In Australia and NZ, as it is in heaven.