

# God is Greater

Confirmation Sunday, March 1, 2020

John 16:1-15, 31-33

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Colossians 1:9-14

In the city of Rome there is a road, the *Via Triumphalis*, an ancient road used for Roman victory parades. Victorious emperors and generals led their armies down this road in a celebration of triumph. The apostle Paul knew of this road and the victory parades: he used it as a prophetic metaphor to describe our life in Christ. In his letter to the Colossian Christians, Paul speaks of how we are led in the victory parade of Christ. This is the great reality for those who connect their lives by faith to Christ Jesus: we are made to share in his victory and are led in his triumphant march through life.

But it doesn't always seem like it, does it? It doesn't always feel like we are living life in a victory parade. Sometimes life feels more like a death march than a ticker-tape parade. Fortunately, the Bible does not ignore this experience or shy away from addressing life's harsh realities. Scripture doesn't flinch from telling the stories of hardship and tragedy visited upon God's people. The overarching storyline of the Bible is not, "Once upon a time, they lived happily ever after." In fact, the divine story of God's people has plenty of moments where the narrative says, "Then all hell broke loose!"

The glorious thing about the chronicles of Scripture is that disappointment is never the end of the story – not for those who believe God. Instead, the barren *do* give birth, the slaves *are* set free, the Promised Land *is* found, the temple *is* built...and rebuilt, Messiah *does* appear, the kingdom *does* come, and the dead *are* raised. The amazing good news for us is that God is greater than the highs and lows of life.

On the front of your bulletin this morning you see four symbols: G>^v. It's clever and simple. It reminds us that God is greater than the highs and lows. It's the theme for this Confirmation Sunday, and I want you to make it one of the refrains for your life. God is greater than anything this world can throw at you: good or bad. That perspective will help you in life. Here are three reasons why I think this message is important.

**We are not defined by our success.** Success is defined in a couple of ways. Success may be accomplishing a goal. Success may also be the attainment of popularity or profit. We

are taught that our worth is defined by our success: our good grade, our athletic prowess, how much money we make, the size of our house, the type of car we drive, the number of people we have power over. These are the marks of success in the world.

Success is a good servant, but it is a bad master. Reaching for our goals, giving 100%, going the extra mile, and stretching ourselves are all good things. They will lead us to success in life. Indeed, God wants us to be successful. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus tells his disciples to "let their light shine" so that all the world see it; but Jesus' point is not to bring glory and fame on ourselves: it is to bring glory and honor to God (Matthew 5:16).

Success is a good thing to possess, but we cannot let it possess us. When the pursuit of success, always driving for what is bigger-and-better, prevents us from being content it can destroy us. Worldly success always leaves us wanting more. Why? Because success is a terrible master who is never satisfied. Success is the boss who can never be pleased. Success will always say, "You will never be enough." Slaves to success are trapped in a vicious cycle of dissatisfaction and the endless pursuit of emptiness, unless they are set free.

Worldly success will ultimately fail us. We may spend our entire life accumulating wealth and possessions, but it can all be taken away in an instant. One accident, one market correction, one illness, one controversy, one lie, one death, any swift surprise can be like a flood that wipes away everything. Success can be forgotten or revised. Everything we build in this life, if it is built for our own glory, will be forgotten.

In Christ, however, there is good success (Joshua 1:9). The success God gives is greater because it will not leave us wanting more and it will not fade away. The apostle Paul tells us what Christian success looks like: it is to bear good fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to God's glorious might so that we may have great endurance and patience, and giving joyful thanks to God who qualifies us to share in God's promised Kingdom. We are not defined by our success: we are defined by God's success.

**We are not defined by our failures.** I have had some spectacular failures in my life. I applied to music school only to be told I wasn't good enough. I tried to enlist with the National Guard, only to be told I was not physically fit enough. I had my first application

for ordination denied because I was not experienced enough. Life will hand you some serious setbacks. These failures can crush you, unless you have God to fall back on for help.

Paul is awfully direct about this. He says: failure without God leads to death (2 Corinthians 7:10). Judas betrayed Jesus and never sought God's forgiveness. He died alone and unloved. Without God, the "downs" of our lives will lead us to hopeless despair. Our failures will seem to be undefeatable goliaths who are far bigger than what we can ever imagine.

With God, our failures are given new meaning. The Bible is filled with stories of failures. David slept with another man's wife, but because of God's faithfulness David became Israel's greatest king. Jonah tried to run away from God, but because of God's grace he received a second chance to save an entire city from destruction. Peter failed Jesus, but because of God's grace, his failures molded him, and Jesus made him the foundation of the Christian church. With God, failure becomes our teacher, not our undertaker. The down moments of our lives teach us to lean on God, talk to God, and cling to God. Failure may become the solid ground on which builds a good work through you.

With God, failure shows us who really can be trusted. We realize how foolish is it to trust anyone or anything but God. The Gospel writer John records how Jesus told his disciples that he would soon be leaving them, but that he would send them a helper – an Advocate – the Holy Spirit of God. An advocate is someone who stands up for you, speaks out for you, and shows up when you are down and out. God never leaves us alone. We have God's Spirit with us all the time for comfort and support. What's more, we know that failure is not permanent. Jesus said, "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). Jesus died on the cross to take away all our failures, and he rose again so that we could live life anew and abundantly. With God we are not defined by our failures.

**God is greater.** So, if we are not defined by our successes or our failures, what does define us? In truth, it is not what defines us, but who defines us. We are children of God, created in God's own image, loved and redeemed by Jesus Christ, and supported by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. That's powerful stuff. Think about it. The God who created the universe thinks you are worth something; so much in fact, that God came in person

to make things right for you, to give you a future with hope. We are infinitely loved by a God who is greater than our success and our failures.

God is greater because in God there is none of the deceitfulness or untrustworthiness that comes from worldly successes or failures. Whatever we have in this world is grace – God's grace – and grace does not make us boastful or hopeless.

God gives us what is greatest and best: acceptance, forgiveness, redemption, and eternal life. In God, we are no longer slaves chasing for belonging or accumulating belongings. In Jesus, the love of God sets us free from the weariness of trying to gain approval. In Jesus, we are accepted for who we are, no matter what, and loved without condition. God embraces us, not based on the merits of our successes, but on the credits of what Jesus accomplished for us by his death and resurrection. God's love for us is faithful: our failures cannot diminish or deny God's love for us.

The "God is greater than our highs and lows" design is a spiritual reminder that our identity is not based on what we have accomplished for ourselves, nor is it determined by what we've failed to do. Life will continue to have highs and lows. Don't waste them! Trust God through the highs and lows of life. God is building up your faith and molding you into the person God created you to be. One day, it will all make sense. You will look back and realize how God worked through the highs and lows to get you to where God wanted you and needed you to be. In God there is true success. With God there are no fatal failures. God is greater than the highs and lows, because God is greater than this world itself.

Prayer: God, you are greater than my fears today. You are greater than my anxieties. You are greater than my depression. You are greater than all this world. You matter more. I was made for more. I was made to love and serve, and that is what I pledge to do today. Help me love you more. Guide me through this day. Be with me as I discover your plan for my life. I ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Source: <https://elevatedfaith.com/blogs/elevated-faith-blog/god-is-greater-than-the-highs-and-lows> (visited 2/19/2020).