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The Head and Not the Tail

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Deuteronomy 28:1 promises: “Now it shall be, if you diligently obey the Lord your God, being careful to do all His commandments which I command you today, the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth.”

It is a signal honor to be “high above all the nations of the earth.” Many feel this way about their home country. My family and I felt proud of our country when we visited the Kennedy Space Center and gazed in awe on a colossal *Saturn V* rocket. Such mind-bogglingly complex and powerful machines produced millions of pounds of thrust to propel *Apollo* astronauts literally high above all the nations of the Earth—a quarter of a million miles to the Moon. Teamwork, vast resources, and awesome brain power accomplished something that no other country has done.

We were also proud on the morning of January 16, 2003, as we sat by the water at Port Canaveral, Florida, looking intently at a bulbous object a

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few miles away. All at once, a cloud of smoke arose, and space shuttle *Columbia* majestically rode a fiery plume into space one more time—one last time.

Is this what Deuteronomy is talking about—human achievement by human strength and expertise, such as winning the space race or the arms race, or Switzerland shutting out New Zealand 5-0 in an America’s Cup yacht race? No. In Deuteronomy 28:1, it is the Lord who achieves the lofty placement of His people.

The next verse says: “All these blessings will come upon you and overtake you if you obey the Lord your God.” This is a radical paradigm shift: Rather than human beings pursuing success and then achieving their goal, it is success that pursues them. David expresses the same idea at the end of his Shepherd’s Psalm: “Surely your goodness and unfailing love will pursue me all the days of my life, and I will live in the house of the Lord forever” (Ps. 23:6; NLT).

How do you like that! Americans may be proud of the United States Declaration of Independence, which recognizes a person's right to "the pursuit of Happiness," but God guarantees to His faithful people that happiness will pursue them! If you don't want happiness, whatever you do, don't seek first the Lord and His righteousness, or you'll have happiness and success breathing down your neck!

Why would God want to bless His people so that they are higher than everyone else? Deuteronomy 28:10 explains: "So all the peoples of the earth will see that you are called by the name of the Lord, and they will be afraid of you." Other people would make the connection between the blessings of the Israelites and their omnipotent God and would leave them in peace.

Isaiah provides an additional perspective: "It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established on the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow to it. Many people shall come and say, 'Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, To the house of the God of Jacob; He will teach us His ways, And we shall walk in His paths.' For out of Zion shall go forth the law, And the word of the Lord from Jerusalem" (2:2, 3; NKJV).

By blessing His people, God

draws all nations to Himself, thereby fulfilling His goal of making the spiritual descendants of Abraham a channel to reveal Himself to the world. All through the Bible, God expresses His desire to bless and elevate His people not merely for their comfort and enjoyment of status, but in order to teach others the magnificence of His character.

There is always a condition attached. For example, Deuteronomy 28:13 promises: "The Lord will make you the head and not the tail, and you only will be above, and you will not be underneath, if you listen to the commandments of the Lord your God, which I charge you today, to observe them carefully."

This isn't salvation by works. God had already saved His people from bondage when He gave them His commandments. The reason for obedience was to be in harmony with Him in order to rightly represent His character. If the Lord blessed the Israelites even when they misrepresented Him, He would have defeated His purpose. So if they did not live and work according to His principles, He could not allow them to prosper, no matter how much effort and ingenuity they expended. Careful thought and effort were important, but they could be successful only if they were cooperating with Him. If they were not cooperating, they were beating their heads against a wall.

Other peoples, who lacked the covenant connection, were not bound by the constraints that went with Israel's privileged status. When the Israelites focused on success rather than on God, they were confused because other nations were achieving success. "So let's do what they do so we too can be successful. Let's have a king, build a great army and fortresses, worship their gods, and live off our endowments. Then we can be happy as they appear to be."

No matter how many times God's people have tried this approach over the millennia up to the present, they have always ultimately failed. It was only when they sought first the Lord and His righteousness that all other things were added unto them. It was only when they realized that the government was upon His shoulder (Isa. 9:6) and allowed Him to take the burden of giving them success that they have found true peace, prosperity, and contentment.

When God's people turn to Him with all their hearts and humbly rely upon Him, Judges 10:16 says that "He could bear the misery of Israel no longer." He can't stand it. He must save His covenant people.

When challenges occur, they often happen together in a distressingly dizzying array of compounding and accelerating factors that seem to spiral inexorably to certain doom. "When it rains, it pours," and

when it rains, it roars.

When *Apollo 13* was 200,000 miles away from Earth, most of the way to the Moon, an oxygen tank exploded. As a result, not only did Jim Lovell and his crew struggle with lack of oxygen; they also lost crucial electrical power and encountered lethal danger from carbon dioxide. Only by closely cooperating with the experts at Mission Control, for whom failure was not an option, did the astronauts make it home safely. Backup systems were exhausted. There was no leeway for error, free-lancing, or disobedience.

Our Mission Control is described in Revelation 4 and 5—the throne room of God in His sanctuary in heaven, which pulsates with infinite power and mercy to help in time of need. Our task is not to bear the burdens of government and administration upon our feeble shoulders, but to allow Him to bring us home to safety and success according to His superior wisdom.

At Kadesh-barnea, Moses, Caleb, and Joshua on one hand and the rest of the people on the other approached the same practical data in opposite ways. The former learned about challenges in order to cooperate with the Lord, believing that the obstacles were about to crumble before divine power in order to reveal God's glory. The bigger the obstacles, the more magnificent the glory! The remaining Israelites cringed,

choosing to have greater faith in obstacles than in God's ability to overcome them (Numbers 13–14). As the German statesman Konrad Adenauer observed, "We all live under the same sky, but we don't all have the same horizon."ⁱ

What makes the difference between the two attitudes? Both agree that obstacles are real. "For the person of faith, obstacles are temporary because God is real. For the disbeliever, obstacles are permanent because God is not real enough. Thus, the key to exegesis of exigencies is an existential question: Is God real to me? Do I believe, act, and live as if he is alive?"ⁱⁱ

As God's people—living, working, and planning within the frame-

work of His "new covenant"—our challenge is not primarily to obtain and deploy adequate financial and human resources. Rather, our first task is to allow the reality of God to enter and transform us individually and corporately. Then His people and institutions will be the head and not the tail. "Failure is not an option."

NOTES AND REFERENCES

ⁱ Unless otherwise noted, Scripture texts in this article are quoted from *The New American Standard Bible*.

ⁱⁱ Quoted in J. C. Maxwell and J. Dornan, *Becoming a Person of Influence: How to Positively Impact the Lives of Others* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997), p. 72.

ⁱⁱⁱ Roy Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2004), p. 603.