

# **The Secrets to A Successful Life**

**With An Emphasis on How to Do Your Best On Exams**

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## Secrets to Success

***“The God of heaven Himself will prosper us”***

(Nehemiah 2:20)

*Blessed Son and Daughter...*

As the exam season comes around, I find myself reflecting back to a time when I was living a similar life as you are living now - maybe even having the same feelings and facing the same issues. I would like to assure you that this indeed is a difficult time that you (and even your family) are going through. I would like to tell you that the Church shares your feelings and longs to support you during this period.

Going through this exam period is a very unique period of time in which you experience the life of sharing - as everyone around you is going through these same stresses! It is a period of time in which you behold certain experiences that will enrich your personality, touch your soul and support you through the rest of your days. Thus, how can you make the most of this period?

### **SUCCESS IS A GOSPEL DIRECTIVE!**

Every man desires to be successful. Success touches the inner and outer being of man; it touches his spiritual, academic, familial, social and psychological life. Success is even a gospel directive: “Beloved, I pray that you may prosper in all things and be in health, just as your soul prospers” (3 John 1:2).

### **ACADEMIC SUCCESS!**

We usually think of success in academic terms, which involves excelling in the classroom in order to attain higher degrees. This type of success cannot be neglected because academic success contributes to the elevation of our morals and self-confidence. It also helps to push societies towards continuous advancement.

On the other hand, academic failure, even among children, can cause extreme depression if it is not dealt with wisely. It could cause a huge problem to the student and to his family, who is looking forward to his success and excellence.

### **YOU ARE MUCH BETTER THAN THAT!**

Although we encourage everyone to succeed academically, focusing merely on academic success usually leads to serious problems - whether the person actually succeeds or fails! Furthermore, a person’s academic success

might lead him to arrogance and vanity, which in turn would cost him much of his life. The son of Sirach said: “There is a sinner that has good success in evil things; and there is a gain that turns to loss” (Sirach 20:9). On the other hand, a person’s academic failure might lead him to a state of depression, grumbling, tension and worry - even if this failure was due to reasons beyond his control (e.g., due to illness or financial problems).

Academic success is only one component of the overall success of a person’s life. That is because man has a mission to touch the life of his family and his surrounding community. His or her influence might even extend for years after death - if not for several generations. Thus, it is proper for man to sit with himself under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and to ask God to reveal his mission to him and to help him complete this mission.

In all different eras, under various environments and countless circumstances, the fingerprints of the life of he who was serious in knowing his true mission touches the lives of many. One of the greatest success stories was that of the Prophet Daniel, who was successful even in the den of lions, though the king was sleepless the whole night out of worry (Daniel 6:18).

## **GOD DESIRES YOUR SUCCESS AND THE SUCCESS OF ALL MANKIND**

Beloved, you need to know that your life is very precious in the eyes of God. He desires your success along with that of all mankind. Your life is an integral part of God’s plan.

## **THE SUCCESSFUL NEHEMIAH!**

Nehemiah came to know the road to success. Despite all the difficult circumstances he was going through, he believed in God as the Source of success, and thus he prayed: “Oh Lord... let Your servant prosper this day... and grant him mercy in the sight of this man” (Nehemiah 1:11). When the evil people resisted him, he answered: “The God of heaven Himself will prosper us; therefore we His servants will arise and build” (Nehemiah 2:20).

Our Christ has come to the world as a prosperous Man, so that we can draw unto Him and behold His success in us: “Behold, the days are coming,” says the Lord, “That I will raise to David a Branch of righteousness; a King shall reign and prosper, and execute judgment and righteousness in the earth” (Jeremiah 23:5). Jesus said: “In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). Through Him we can prosper, succeed and triumph in all things! When you cling to the victorious Jesus Christ, the Granter of victory, success will be natural in your life. Thus, you will prosper in your studies, your spiritual life, your family and social relations, your psychological life, and in your career.

## **THE SUCCESSFUL JOSEPH!**

The older brothers of the little boy, Joseph, envied him and arranged several plots against him. He went through several harsh experiences and was finally sold as a slave where “his master saw that the Lord was with him and that the Lord made all he did to prosper in his hand” (Genesis 39:3). He was then wrongfully imprisoned, but “the keeper of the prison did not look into anything that was under Joseph’s authority, because the Lord was with him; and whatever he did, the Lord made it prosper” (Genesis 39:23). Later, he became only second in command after Pharaoh. He was successful in all that he did! The details of Joseph’s life ultimately became part of the Holy Bible; and have encouraged many people towards success and won many to God’s Kingdom.

### **THE SUCCESSFUL CYRUS!**

According to human reason, there was no possible way for the people of Israel to return from captivity. But God, Who listened to the moans of his beloved and for the sake of His true and divine promises, sent Cyrus, the Persian king, and granted him success: “I, even I, have spoken; yes, I have called him, I have brought him, and his way will prosper” (Isaiah 48:15).

### **HOW CAN I BECOME SUCCESSFUL?**

Some people succeeded in gaining publicity and attaining fame amongst millions of people; yet when they realized that this did not satisfy their inner being, they committed suicide. Others considered themselves successful because they were able to amass fortunes; yet, due to their fear of losing those fortunes, they suffered several psychological problems. They were filled with worry over losing their possessions, and were burdened with doubt and distrust of the closest people to them - even their own children. Thus, how can I become *truly* successful?

### **FAITH AND SUCCESS!**

Faith inspires man to strive with joy in perseverance - without fear of the future, or people, or illness, or even death. Man beholds in him Christ’s words: “Be of good cheer! It is I; do not be afraid” (Mark 6:50); he repeats the words of St. Paul: “If God is for us, who can be against us?” (Romans 8:31) and, “He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?” (Romans 8:32).

### **SURRENDERING YOUR LIFE TO SUCCEED!**

The exam period is a great opportunity for you to exercise surrendering your life to God; for you believe that success is a heavenly gift that God grants to the striving man, who takes his academic, spiritual and family life seriously. This period shall pass; and you will not only have gained academic

success, but also spiritual, mental, familial, psychological and social success. A time will come when you will have finished all your exams (although we never cease to learn every day of our lives), so make sure that you pass this period with some wonderful spiritual experiences that add to your growth. Remember that God, Who cares even for the number of hairs on your head, cares also for your prosperity in all things.

## **THE SACRED LIFE AND SUCCESS!**

- ❖ **Belief that God Is the Source of success, and resorting to Him through prayer:** The believer realizes this wondrous fact: that he is the dearest creature to God, the Lord of the impossible, Who is capable of harnessing everything for his success. “O Lord, I pray, please let Your ear be attentive to the prayer of Your servant, and to the prayer of Your servants who desire to fear Your name; and let Your servant prosper this day, I pray, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man. For I was the king’s cupbearer” (Nehemiah 1:11). “By Him the end of them has prosperous success, and by His word all things consist” (Sirach 43:28).
- ❖ **Adherence to God and His Commandments:** The righteous Joseph was never burdened with feelings of misery or loneliness, despite the fact that he was deprived of living in his father’s house and of his freedom. He was sold as a slave and was wrongfully jailed; yet he always felt that God was with him, embracing him. Therefore, he was able to say to Potiphar’s wife: “How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?” (Genesis 39:9). Thus, he who dwells in His company will surely be prosperous.

It is written of the king Hezekiah: “For he held fast to the Lord; he did not depart from following Him, but kept His commandments, which the Lord had commanded Moses. The Lord was with him; he prospered wherever he went” (2 Kings 18:6-7); and it is written about the man who was passionately attached to the Law of the Lord: “He shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that brings forth its fruit in its season, whose leaf also shall not wither; and whatever he does shall prosper” (Psalms 1:3), and: “He who dwells in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty” (Psalms 91:1).
- ❖ **Adhering to the Divine Promises:** A secret of our success is asking for, and adhering to, God’s promises. He, as our Heavenly Father, is delighted when we ask for, and trust in, His promises. When the people lost faith in the Divine promises, Moses said, “Now why do you transgress the command of the Lord? For this will not succeed” (Numbers 14:41).
- ❖ **Repentance and Returning to God:** Repentance is not just the forgiveness of sins; rather, it is, above all, returning to God, Who can satisfy all our needs. “A prudent and wise heart forbears sin and prospers

in the good deeds” (Sirach 3:32). “He who covers his sins will not prosper, but whoever confesses and forsakes them will have mercy” (Proverbs 28:13). “Praise is not seemly in the mouth of a sinner, for it was not sent him of the Lord. For praise shall be uttered in wisdom, and the Lord will prosper it” (Sirach 15:10).

- ❖ **Purity and Virtue:** Oh, how beautiful are the words of St. John Chrysostom, who said: “Joseph was more glorified, though still in chains, than any wreathed conqueror; while the woman of Potiphar was more miserable, though living in the royal palaces, than any prisoner.”
- ❖ **Hesitation, Uncertainty and Wavering:** Psychological diseases (e.g., fear, anxiety, feelings of failure, and losing the meaning of life) are increasing in all societies. However, the true believer is capable of challenging these disease states - he lives with a powerful spirit without any hesitation or fear. “A heart walking in two roads does not prosper, and the evil heart will tumble in both” (Sirach 3:28).

## THE LOVE OF CONTINUOUS LEARNING

A sign of true success is not to obtain some valued scientific degrees; rather, it is the true and continuous desire to learn as long as one has the ability. Many scientists and inventors did not seek or desire the degrees they attained; rather, their degrees were a byproduct of their zealous pursuit of knowledge. If a shepherd – even a Pope – ceased to learn, his growth would stop; his spiritual life would become stagnant, thus preventing his people from growing spiritually. St. Ambrose said: "I wish to continue learning, so I will be able to teach, for there is only One Master (God), Who alone does not learn what He teaches to everyone; but the people have to learn first before they can teach others. They accept from God – their Teacher – what they ought to teach others." St. Hieronymus said: "The desire to learn deserves praises, even if there was no master to teach it."

Pope Demetrius, the vinedresser, was a very simple man who was taught just enough to enable him to read and write. When he became Pope, he decided to persist in acquiring spiritual and secular knowledge in order to be fit for this position, which had become so famous due to the efforts of the scientists who held it previously. It was said that, at first, he was not able to acquire knowledge and that the vicar used to sit at his feet to help him. He screamed to the Lord to enlighten his mind. He used to sit humbly at the feet of the church's chanter to learn from him. One night, the Virgin Mary appeared to him and gave him an inkwell full of water. When he drank this water, God enlightened his mind.

He also used to glean knowledge from the professors of the School of Alexandria. His determined desire to continue learning and to make up for what he had missed as a child enabled him to compensate for all the years

that had passed. He acquired a great deal of knowledge in a very short period of time. What he learned enabled him to formulate calculations, known as "The Apquaty," that are responsible for determining the dates of Easter, and are still used today in Eastern Churches. Pope Demetrius was also very concerned with setting fixed rules for the Christian fasts and feasts. He merged the 40 holy days of fasting with the Passion Week. Furthermore, he wrote all this information and sent it to Agapius, Bishop of Jerusalem, and to Maximus, the Patriarch of Antioch, and to the Pope of Rome, and to many others. They all concurred with him, and continue to use this information until today - except for the Church of Rome which has followed the Gregorian calendar since the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

## **A TRUE STORY**

After the young Emad Shawky Gayed had finished his studies in a Clerical School, he joined the Faculty of Arts, Department of Philosophy. During one of his lectures, the atheist professor began aggressively attacking the idea of the existence God. The young student took notes of all the professor's arguments, and then started to fiercely controvert each and every one of them - for he was very knowledgeable and a strong controversialist. The other students listened to the arguments presented by the spiritual student with great interest; while the professor was extremely perplexed and upset. After the student had finished his argument, the professor asked him for his name and demanded to see him in his office after the lecture. The following conversation ensued:

Professor: "I recommend you look for another college than the Faculty of Arts."

Emad: "Why?"

Professor: "I will not allow for you to graduate for as long as I'm alive."

Emad: "God exists!"

Professor: "Whether He exists or not, that will not save you from my hands. You have no choice but to leave this college."

Emad: "I will not."

Professor: "I assure you, you will not graduate!"

When time came for his exam, the registrar called Emad and told him that he was forbidden from taking the exam according to the professor's orders. The professor had reported that Emad had not completed the required attendance percentage. Emad accepted the situation very simply - considering it a very small price to pay for expressing his belief in God, his Savior.

The following year, the professor was sent to the University of Iraq. Emad was then able to attend the exam, which he passed. Two years later, he graduated from that college; and the dean of the faculty and the head of the university signed off on his results. When Emad went to the college to accept

his certificate, he found that the professor had returned from Iraq; so he went to his office to welcome him back:

Emad: “Do you remember me?”

Professor: “Yes, you are that student who argued with me about the existence of God!”

Emad: “I came today to get my certificate with the blessing of the *existing* God.”

Professor: “Congratulations my son!”

The professor patted Emad on his back. He was so insistent about his belief, yet the professor was not able to expel him from the college; rather, he was the one who left for three years until Emad had finished his studies there.

### **SOME GUIDELINES FOR THE EXAMINATION PERIOD**

- While studying for your exams, keep your Agpeya (Canonical Hours) open on your desk. Pray a psalm (or part of it) every now and then so you will feel His Divine presence!
- Try not to retrieve the small details of the subject you are studying; rather, focus on just the broad items. Remember that during this period of time you do not need to acquire new information; rather, you need quietness and inner peace so you can recall the information that you had previously learned.
- When the exam starts, lift your heart to God and ask for His guidance and help.
- Give yourself five minutes to read the entire question sheet.
- Determine a specific length of time to answer each question, and make sure you never exceed that time.
- Start with the easy questions, and remember that obtaining tranquility is sometimes much more important than trying to recall the information itself.
- Try not to scratch up your answer sheet, because the one who grades your work can be influenced by the look of your paper.
- When answering a question in essay form, try to follow this model:
  1. Write an introduction of about 5 to 6 lines.
  2. Then, write about the specific points of the subject, while underlining the important ones.
  3. Finally, write a conclusion of about 3 to 4 lines.  
(Usually, the instructor only reads the introduction, the conclusion and the underlined points (this advice was given by a college professor in Egypt).

- Do not rush your answers. Neat and legible handwriting has a very good impression on the one who grades your work.
- Do not rush to turn in your answer sheet; instead, take 10 minutes to review your answers.

## **A PRAYER DURING THE EXAM DAYS**

### **"YOU ARE THE TRUE SUCCESS!"**

*“My soul magnifies You; You, Who have created me to live always as in the Garden of Eden!*

*You have trodden everything below my feet! You have given me a mind to reason, and wisdom, to live successfully in every way!*

*I behold You, for You lift up my heart and mind, and You grant me health, understanding and fullness.*

*I see You preceding me in everything I do, blessing my mind, my time and my life - always guiding me on the road to success!*

*When can I see You face to face, so I may kiss Your hands that have created me, and fall thankfully on my knees before You; for You have turned my life into a continuous joy and gladness!*

*Receive my life, my ways and my studies; and precede all my steps. Open the doors before me so that my soul will rejoice in Your work in me!”*

## **Questions**

### **1. “WHY DOES GOD ALLOW EVIL PEOPLE TO SUCCEED?”**

With God there is neither favoritism nor injustice (Romans 2:11). He who endeavors will succeed - even if he is evil, atheist or a resister of the Divine Right. And he who does not work will not succeed, even if he is righteous for "If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat" (2 Thessalonians 3:10). One of the main features of righteousness is striving as much as one could without slothfulness (Proverbs 21:25; Matthew 25:26). However, for the sake of the strengthening and the salvation of the soul, God allows that evil person to fail so that he may return to God and be delivered. In the same respect, God sometimes allows the righteous person some pain or illness, and temporarily obstruct his success, for the sake of a Divine plan that ultimately works for a hidden benefit and joy.

### **2. “SOME OF MY COLLEAGUES CHEAT AND YET SUCCEED, WHILE I KEEP MY INTEGRITY AND DON'T SUCCEED LIKE THEY DO. WHY?”**

Excellence based on cheating and dishonesty can never last; it also causes the person to lose so much in this life, as well as in the afterlife. Remember what Jesus said: "You were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your Lord" (Matthew 25:21).

### **3. “I FEEL THAT I DON'T HAVE A TALENT FOR STUDYING, WHAT DO I DO?”**

Many times we use this misconception as an excuse for our laziness. You should do everything you are able to do, and then God will complete the rest for you. Sometimes the way we study is wrong (i.e., one may sit for hours at his desk and become fatigued). One should take breaks from his studies, even if just for a few minutes (but with caution); in order to alleviate the weight of the cumulative stress and to renew physical and mental energy.

Combine your studies with prayer and readings from the Holy Bible; but be wise and plan appropriately and without exaggeration - especially in the time of exams.

#### **What the Fathers Say About Success**

- ❖ There is no victory like the victory of man over his inclinations.”  
**St. Cyprian**
- ❖ I have put my feet on top of the world, when I feared nothing and desired nothing from it.  
**St. Augustine**
- ❖ All things go well for Gaius (3 John 1:1-2), for he is occupied with righteous things according to the direction of his righteous will.  
**Hilary of Arles**

#### **A SUCCESSFUL MAN IN JAIL**

The evil woman put Joseph in jail to destroy him; yet he prospered and was blessed there, so that the jail itself turned into a road to glory for him.

- ❖ These are the plans of God, that the exact same things that are meant to hurt us become the things that benefit us. This is what happened to Joseph: Pharaoh’s wife tried to destroy him, yet her actions actually brought him to safety, for the house where this monster (the evil woman) dwelled was like a den to Joseph, while jail was rather kind to him. When he was in the house overwhelmed with honor and affection (her flirting with him), he lived in fear that she would hunt him down. He was in greater and more brutal fear than when he was in jail. On the other hand, after her accusations, he came to safety and peace, as he got rid of this monster and its destructive plans and lechery. It was better for him to be kept in a miserable place (jail) in the midst of humans than to be in the company of a mad woman. He was truly set out of jail, not put in one. She made his master become his enemy, but she also made God become his Friend. She enabled him to enter into a closer relationship with God, the Righteous Friend.

**St. John Chrysostom**