

There is an old adage in leadership that says if what you are leading can't survive after you are gone, you've not been a successful leader. You can do all the things, build, produce, innovate, strategize, but if that doesn't include preparing and passing it on to the next generation, you've failed. **Success is ultimately measured by successors.**

We see that idea play out in a number of areas. The trades have this structure of master/journeyman/apprentice, where part of the master's job is to pour all that he's learned and experienced into the younger and less experienced craftsman so that the work can continue after he or she is gone. **Success is measured by successors.** We do this in the traditions of our families. I had a recent conversation with Martha and her sister about how their mom was a great cook and she passed what she knew to her daughters, and my boys and I will be forever grateful! And these days, as Martha is working her magic in the kitchen, she often has one or more of our boys in there with her, passing on what she knows. **Success is measured by successors.** You know where else we do this? Our faith. Being a disciple of Jesus not only includes receiving the good news of the Gospel but turning around and giving it to others. Our success is ultimately measured by successors. But how does that happen?

That's what I'm pray God shows us in our new series called *Succession*. We are going to spend the next few months working to understand and begin to live out God's succession plan, and there is no better place for us to go in Scripture than the Gospel of Luke.

[SLIDE: Luke 1:1-4] Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, ² just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, ³ it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴ that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.

Luke is likely a Greek commissioned to write an account of Jesus for the sake of another Greek named Theophilus. Luke's purpose is to ensure Theophilus has certainty about what he's heard of this Jesus, and he tells him how he'll accomplish that. Those who were with Jesus, witnesses and ministers of the word, have faithfully delivered, or passed on, what they saw, heard, and experienced to Luke, and now Luke faithfully delivers those things to Theophilus, not only for certainty, but for him to deliver them to others himself. Since Luke's account not only survived but became a part of our biblical canon, we can assume he did. Within the first four verses, we see three generations of disciples. Ultimately, **Luke wants to define Jesus' mission and show how he prepared and passed that on to his disciples to continue that work after he was gone.** Luke will do that through a two-volume work of Luke/Acts to show how God's glorious work of salvation starts in a manger in Bethlehem and winds up in the highest levels of Rome.

But it didn't stop there. You are a believer today because, for the last 2,000 years, followers of Jesus have measured success by successors, faithfully passing down what they were given generation after generation until it ultimately got to you. **You are someone's successor and now it's your turn.** You are the recipient of the gift of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and what comes with that gift is the God-given privilege and responsibility to deliver that to others, to pass that on to your own successors.

So, where do we begin? Well, we begin where Luke begins, the first advent of Jesus. After this year, I think it's good for us to start celebrating Christmas a little early! In the first couple of chapters of his gospel, Luke spotlights several characters who demonstrate the qualities of a successful witness. He will highlight these witnesses to assure Theophilus and encourage all who follow. The work of succession is not left to a chosen few. God has always used unlikely characters to pass on the Gospel from generation to generation and I want to spend our time this morning looking at the characteristics of a successful witness.

[SLIDE] **A successful witness will be worshipful.** Mary and Joseph have traveled to Bethlehem to be counted in the Roman census and she has given birth to her child and laid him in a manger.

[SLIDE: Luke 2:8-14] **⁸ And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. ¹⁰ And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹ For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ¹² And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, ¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"**

Jesus has been born and heaven is eager to announce something important has occurred. God sends angels to the unlikely audience of shepherds to bring this good news of great joy, *euangelizo megas chara*, the gospel of mega joy! This is no ordinary baby. He is Savior, Christ the Lord, the long-promised Messiah who has come to deliver his people and establish his sovereign reign over all creation. If they stopped there the message would have been adequately sent. But they don't. V13 says suddenly there was a host of angels who worshipped the Lord because of what he had done. Heaven is revealing the glorious magnitude of what has taken place.

This is where we have to start because our own personal response to the gospel is part of our witness. We can pass on information about Jesus, but we are also passing on how that information impacts us. Just think about any news you might give to someone else. There's a different gravity to telling someone what the weather will be today vs. walking into a room and saying, "It's a boy!" If the angels were "meh" about this news, it wouldn't have had much impact. But they are so moved by it that they can't help but praise the Lord. **The weight of your witness is determined by the wonder of your worship.** The "gooder" you find this good news to be, the more joy you experience because of it, the greater you will worship the one who responsible for it, and the more compelling and inviting your witness will be. I say with absolute confidence, those most in love with the Lord are those with the most successors. When you are full of joy you will be contagiously attractive to others, and they'll want some of what you have.

[SLIDE] **A successful witness will be faithful.** How will the shepherds respond?

[SLIDE: Luke 2:15-20] **¹⁵ When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has**

happened, which the Lord has made known to us.”¹⁶ And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger.¹⁷ And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child.¹⁸ And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them.¹⁹ But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart.²⁰ And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Upon hearing this news and seeing the angels’ worshipful response to it, the shepherds immediately go with haste, a sense of urgency, to check out the scene. They have been called the first evangelists. Luke wants us to see the first deliverers of the good news of Jesus were not the ruling class or the religious class. They were shepherds, as one writer said, “simple folk”. They received this news in faith, responded in faith to go see what it was all about, and upon seeing the angel’s words confirmed, they then acted in faith by reporting what they had seen and heard. Look at vv. 15 and 17. They go see this thing, “which the Lord has made known to us” and when they get there, “they made known the saying that had been told to them.” **That is the essence of discipleship; passing on the truth as it was delivered to you.** That’s what they do.

And their faithful witness was part of a chain reaction of succession; from God to angels, angels to shepherds, and shepherds to the assembled crowd. Ordinary people were given an extraordinary message to pass on to others as it was passed on to them.

If you think about a court of law, a witness only testifies to what they have seen and heard, and that’s all God is asking of us. **The substance of your witness is determined by the stewardship of what you’ve been given.** God is not asking you to be a theologian or become one before you share anything. He is asking you to faithfully pass on what has been faithfully delivered to you. If you are new in your faith, that means your successor may be an unbeliever, another new believer, or maybe an old believer who has lost their wonder of worship and needs to be refreshed by your newfound love for the Lord. And as you grow, so does your witness. But you don’t have to wait. If you are a follower of Christ, you have something to pass on today.

[SLIDE] A successful witness will be hopeful. Our witness is more than what’s come before. It includes our confidence in what God will do next.

[SLIDE: Luke 2:25-38] ²⁵ Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. ²⁶ And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ. ²⁷ And he came in the Spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the Law, ²⁸ he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said, ²⁹ “Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; ³⁰ for my eyes have seen your salvation ³¹ that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, ³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.” ³³ And his father and his mother marveled at what was said about him. ³⁴ And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, “Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed ³⁵ (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.” ³⁶ And there was a prophetess, Anna...(who) did not depart from the temple,

worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day. ³⁸ And coming up at that very hour she began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem.

As the scene moves to the temple, we might expect to finally see priests and Pharisees. Instead, we're shown two simple, aged, devout followers of God who have been waiting for this moment for some time. Simeon was waiting for the consolation of Israel, promised by God in Isaiah 40 that begins "Comfort, comfort for my people, says your God." Anna was waiting for the redemption of Israel, promised by God in Isaiah 53. This was more than some vague awareness that God was going to do something one day. They were full of expectant hope that he would do this, and they were on the lookout for that fulfillment. When the moment came, they recognized Jesus for who he is, testified that God's salvation and redemption had come, glorified God, and passed on that good news to those around them. Their witness was more than the passing on of information. It was a declaration that God could be trusted to do what he said he will do.

The only explanation for this confidence in God and recognition that he was on the move was their intimate relationship with him. Simeon was righteous and devout. Anna did not depart from the temple, worshipping night and day. They were close to God and **proximity produces hope**. The closer we are to God, the more we know his character is good, and the more we grow in confidence and anticipation that he will do what he says he's going to do. Simeon and Anna recognized the baby because they knew the Lord. Strangers don't recognize each other. Family and friends do.

How important has hope been in 2020? I can't imagine how the last six months would have gone if I didn't know and trust in the character of God and look forward to him fulfilling his promises. Devotion leads to hope, hope leads to recognition at fulfillment, recognition leads to praise and thanksgiving, and praise and thanksgiving lead to an even greater hope that God's character will remain true. All of that influences our testimony to others. **The authenticity of your witness is determined by your anticipation of God fulfilling his promises.** It answers the question "Do you really believe what you are saying?" We pass on the truth about what God has done, but we also pass on a confident and expectant hope that he will continue to fulfill the promises he makes. That's why Peter says to be prepared to give a reason for our hope, because it is so compelling. Our witness declares how God has shown himself trustworthy in the past, whether 2,000 years ago or in our own lives, and how he can be trusted in the days ahead, to pour out his grace and ultimately fulfill the promise of Jesus returning and setting all things right. We proclaim God's faithfulness in his first advent to proclaim the hope we have in the second.

What do we do with this? Well, it's a long series, so there is time for us to dig into what Luke is saying. My first encouragement would be that you [SLIDE] **read the Gospel of Luke three times between now and Christmas**. We'll zero in on one passage each Sunday, but our objective is to see what Luke is showing us from beginning to end, how God's succession plan works and how we are to be a part of it. There are 24 chapters in Luke. You could read a chapter every weekday starting tomorrow and will have finished three rounds by mid-December. It's an opportunity to absorb the full message of the Gospel.

Second is to **[SLIDE] pray for God to begin to show you how you fit into his succession plan.** Ask God to help you evaluate yourself in comparison to these four witnesses. How is your life of worship? How are you stewarding what has been passed on to you? Do you live with the expectation God is going to do what he says he's going to do? That may be where you need to start. But as you grow in those areas, ask God to begin to show you who your successor or successors might be. I say without hesitation that he has someone for you.

I close with this example of what we are talking about. This past week we laid to rest a dear brother and member of Fellowship Dallas, Morris Overstreet. If you didn't know Morris, that's not surprising. He was a quiet and humble man who called very little attention to himself. But, as God does, he used this quiet and humble man for tremendous impact in his Kingdom. Morris deeply loved the Lord and was committed to passing on the Gospel that was the hope of his whole life and eternity. A few things said about him: His wife LaTanja told me he was up at 5:00 AM the day he passed, praying, worshipping, and studying his Bible, as usual. His nephew said he was the greatest example of someone living out the Great Commission he had ever known. Emily Harmon, who leads Route 45 where Morris served, said this about him:

"Morris Overstreet was one of the most faithful, consistent volunteers in Fellowship Kids. Every Sunday he came into Route 45 with coffee in one hand and his Bible in the other as he geared up to teach the 4th and 5th grade boys. He would get to the classroom early, review the lesson, and set out Bibles at each of the boys' chairs. That was one thing you could count on with Morris – he made sure every child in his class had a Bible ready to go! In fact, one of the strongest marks of Morris' faith was his passion for the Bible, and it was an inspiration to everyone he met."

Morris worshipped and loved the Lord, he was a student of his Word, he lived with a hope that he is now realizing for eternity, and he dedicated his life to fulfilling his purpose in God's succession plan. He was a success because, before he left, he had successors. Oh that all those things would be true of us when we leave. God is not asking you to be impressive. He's asking you to be faithful. He has something to give you and he wants you to turn around to pass it along to someone else. And if you do that, then you'll be successful because you'll have successors.