

## Burbank Leader

### In Theory: Does all worldly success come directly from God?

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Q. Many successful sports, showbiz and business people credit faith in God for their success. But a recent article in the Wall Street Journal discusses winners at this year's Grammy awards and their belief that it's not just faith that's driven them to the top of their profession — God actually chose them to be successful over other musicians. As Christina Aguilera's mother says, "We thought there must be some divine intervention. Early on, I realized...God has plans for her."

The article's author, Neil Strauss, calls this "competitive theism" and says, "As I compiled and analyzed these interviews for my new book, I reached a surprising conclusion: Believing that God wants you to be famous actually improves your chances of being famous." Interestingly, he also concludes that an individual believes this regardless of his or her own personal morality, thus justifying a faith in God from artists whose lyrics and behavior may seem very un-Christian.

Do you think a strong religious faith can help people succeed in highly competitive fields such as sports and pop music? And is a multi-millionaire pop singer any more deserving of special attention from God than someone striving to find the cure for cancer, or anyone else for that matter?

Answer:

The question we were asked was whether we thought a strong religious faith could help people succeed in highly competitive fields such as sports and pop music. The examples that were given came from a number of famous popular singers and their families who believed that God was instrumental in their achieving great success. One is not an answer to the other.

The fact that some musical artists and others seem convinced, at least in public statements, that their fame has come from God does not make it true. The reality may be that their strong belief in God's agency on their behalf has given them the increased motivation to succeed.

I believe that Rabbi Harold Kushner addresses the flip side of this question in his book, "When Bad Things Happen to Good People." In this book, he says the issue about reward and punishment is not "why" but "when." Bad things do happen to good people just as good things happen to bad people.

And, from my point of view, fame and fortune are not the only measures of success. A person who has lived a life of dedication to others may not end his or her life in financial luxury, but that person may have been incredibly successful in helping to make the world a better place. Likewise, a person who has been cruel and miserly with her or his huge fortune may end life with lots of "things" but no real and loving connections with others.

As a Unitarian Universalist, I do not see God as an anthropomorphic being who rewards the good and punishes the wicked. If that were true, the world would be a very different place than it is today. For me, God is that force that binds us together with each other and dwells in each of us. I am happy when some people truly succeed and very sad when other people face incredible adversity. To paraphrase a quote often attributed to theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, I see my role as a minister as one of comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable. And I take both very seriously.

The Rev. Dr. Betty Stapleford

Unitarian Universalist Church Of the Verdugo Hills, La Crescenta

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As always, there are at least two truths going on here; and as always, it is arrogance and folly to judge which one is happening in someone else's soul.

On the one hand, there is, indeed, such a thing as giftedness; people of faith believe that these gifts are of God. When you're "in the zone" of the best thing you do, when you're soaring high on the uplifting currents of everything that's possible in human excellence — if you're a person of faith, you feel God with you in that. You feel, in your very marrow, God's delighting in you then.

And caught up in that ecstasy of God's delight, the natural and appropriate response is an expression of gratitude and humility. It is perfectly right for those who have felt God singing in their blood and surging through their gifts to say, "It is not I who am responsible for all this excellence. I must admit, this is from God, and I am merely a vessel of grace for this great thing."

On the other hand, of course, is false humility—the shallowness of those who are consciously expressing a faith they don't feel simply because they think it's in vogue. These are the people whose speeches ring hollow and whose posed piety is irritating.

But on a third hand, there are otherwise well-intended people who simply have not yet gone all that deeply into the life of faith and are unclear about how it all works. In the first shallow waters of what may become a deeper journey, they fumble for words to express the beginnings of their experience of God reaching for them and working through them. It's not an easy thing to put words to, and which of us, our own words inadequate to capture heaven, is to blame another for trying?

And then, there has been more than once that as my own pious lips have been saying some version of "Give God the glory," my naughty inner self has been snickering, "Damn, I'm good!"

So who am I to judge?

The Rev. Amy Pringle

St. George's Episcopal Church

La Cañada

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Of one thing we can be sure: God wants us to be happy. He wants us to be happy not only in eternity but even now in this life. As the Sacred Scriptures say, he came that we might have life and have it to the fullest.

How do we open ourselves to this gift of God that he wants so much for us? How do we appreciate and enjoy this fullness of life?

One thing is certain: It doesn't happen by having a discussion ( prayer?) with God, in which we tell him exactly what we need to be totally happy. No, exactly the opposite is true.

In our prayer we ask for three things. First, Lord, teach me always to love as you love me. Second, Lord, help

me always to do your will. Third, Lord, thank you for the gifts you have given me and let me always use them for the benefit of others and to build up your kingdom.

This type of prayer is a response to all the Lord does for me and has given me, and it helps me appreciate with the deepest humility that all that I have comes from him. Here is the source of happiness.

There seems to be a tendency today to look upon wealth and talent as God's personal blessing upon an individual. This is not a new tendency. Again the scriptures tell of those who wondered in awe, if it is so hard for a rich man to enter heaven, what chance have the rest of us?

God blesses all of us because he loves all of us. He blesses us with all that we need to be happy. These blessings are his gift to us and are not our expectations of him. Our only expectations of God (if we even dare to use that terminology in reference to God) is our expectancy of the fullness of his constant love.

The Rev. Richard Albarano

St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church

Burbank

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God has a sovereign plan for every person's life. "Man's steps are ordained by the Lord. How, then, can man understand his way?" says Proverbs 20:24. Jeremiah confesses, "I know, O Lord, that a man's way is not in himself; nor is it in a man who walks to direct his steps." (10:23). God decreed that Jonah would preach in Nineveh, and that's just what Jonah did — after a brief "fishing expedition."

God's path for some leads to earthly wealth, fame and power. For most others, it's a relatively quiet life of working and minding our own business with tranquility, godliness and dignity (see 1 Thessalonians 4:2 and 1 Timothy 2:2). Whichever it is, God's primary requirement is faithfulness to him for what he's given to us. Faithfulness and love for God where he has called us to serve mean much more to him than the earthly standards by which we measure "success."

God's specific plan for Joshua was that he would lead Israel into the land of Canaan. But in addition to this calling, God told Joshua what was required of him for success, "This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have success." (Joshua 1:8).

Authentic faith is evidenced by obedience to God. God blesses obedience with supernatural success — in the area to which he has called us. So with that in consideration, yes, a strong religious faith can help people succeed in highly competitive fields.

Pastor Jon Barta

Valley Baptist Church

Burbank

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I am sure that a strong religious faith can help people succeed, as do luck, talent, hard work, training, connections, good looks, height, chanting if you think it does, and any number of other factors or combination

thereof. I have no doubt that stars who talk about their faith are true believers for the most part, as are many, many more who don't brag about it.

Being an older mom whose kids resemble me not at all has taught me that not every question needs my answer. So I avidly await our pastors' takes on our second question about "the deserving," but I will pass on it.

It is an interesting paradox to be an atheist contributing to a discussion on religion. Equally incongruous to me is the Wall Street Journal covering religion. I regard that publication's true faith to be capitalism and profit their god.

So I am surprised then that this gimlet-eyed bulwark of free enterprise fails to even mention what I suspect is a possible reason for some entertainers professing their belief in God. Might at least some be attempting to cash in on a huge potential fan base of believers?

Roberta Medford

Atheist

Montrose

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Faith is a strange commodity. In many of the healings attributed to Jesus in the gospels, Jesus says something like, "Your faith has made you well." Jesus didn't say, "My faith." Jesus said, "Your faith."

What's more, there is at least one instance in which the gospel writer says that Jesus couldn't do any good work in one area he was visiting because of "their lack of faith." The truth is that if one person believes he can do something, and another person believes that he cannot do something, both are right!

Not to reduce this very important issue to a sports idiom, but how many times have upsets occurred because the team that was the underdog believed they could win and therefore did win?

My late mother used to marvel at the human mind and the power of positive faith. So if superstars and multi-billionaire heroes think that they are blessed and truly believe that they are, who are we to say that they are wrong? I'm not saying that God favors them anymore than God favors anybody else — but if they have that belief, they may certainly have an advantage.

I am not saying they are "bulletproof" against adversity. But keep in mind the Apostle Paul's famous statement that he could do all things "through Christ who strengthens me." At the same time, the Apostle Paul, according to tradition, was martyred at Rome, and Jesus, of course, paid the ultimate price, too. So having faith certainly is a good thing, and thinking good thoughts is, too. But there are no guarantees, regardless of how "blessed" someone may think he or she is.

The Rev. Skip Lindeman

La Cañada Congregational Church

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Like Strauss and most everyone, I hear the accolades to the holy from singers who glorify gang culture, drugs and violence toward women and assume that they have missed most of the truly important points that God has been trying to make since, oh, the beginning of time. I guess this is what happens when everyone around you is

worshipping you. It's easy to get confused about which ideas are yours and which are God's. Poor deluded famous people.

Let's be clear on why God calls people — namely, to restore the world to the place of peace, justice, kindness, mercy and generosity that God intended. Jesus called this the Kingdom of God. The prophets of old were called to say very difficult words to the famous people in power. They said things like, “You are exploiting the poor. Cut it out or God will bring judgment,” and “You are worshipping other Gods. Cut it out and worship the one God.” Jesus called disciples to spread the good news: God wants to rescue us from despair and fear and give us a life of hope and wholeness.

Do we hear these themes echoed in the public words of celebrities allegedly called by God “to be famous”? Not usually. But I pause here to give props to a legitimate sports “thanks to God” moment. After the Rose Bowl, TCU's Andy Dalton's comments revealed a genuine religious faith that he lives out on the field, with his team and on his campus, where he leads a weekly nondenominational Christian gathering.

A “strong religious faith” is so much more than saying to Larry King, “I pray.” It is being involved in the work of restoring the world from wherever you are with whatever gifts God has given you. It is practicing the fine art of loving and forgiving one's neighbor in the context of a faith community. It is relying on God for your personal value, rather than on record sales and the sycophantic words of your entourage, because what happens when those go away?

I wish they'd hire me on as the Grammy/American Idol chaplain.

The Rev. Paige Eaves

Crescenta Valley United Methodist Church

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It's a sad joke when celebrities thank God at award shows for producing perverted videos or movies rife with serial fornications and verbal blasphemies. So too, the millionaire athletes who thank God for knocking opponents unconscious and rendering them brain-damaged for the rest of their lives.

There's nothing wrong with thanking God for things that accord with his nature and will, but he doesn't want your thanks for being rewarded as a devil. There's cognitive and spiritual disconnect with such people. The athlete I can almost fathom; he's not thinking beyond his competitions, only that God allowed him the raw tools to physically strive to the top. But I don't imagine God sitting up in his holy heaven watching Christina Aguilera's “Dirrrty” video with her strutting about in panties and extolling her worldly virtues of being “dirty, filthy, nasty,” thinking, “Ah, my golden child.”

Anyone could get a big head and believe that God is favoring them when everything they do pours huge financial “blessings” into their lap along with trophied kudos, but what god do they imagine wants their example promoted? I think the Red Hot Chili Peppers were right on the money when they got up at the '92 MTV Awards and said, “First of all we want to thank Satan!” Yep, that “god” favors them.

There's only one true God, but there's also a malevolent angelic being that God refers to as “the god of this world/age” (2Co 4:4). Meaning, earth's inhabitants follow Satan more than they do the actual God who only permits their temporary existence, and Satan may aid those who serve his purposes with their flaunting rejection of godly virtues and by espousing confused and phony religiosity.

God's rewards are not usually the ones we would lavish upon ourselves, but ones to be used by him through us for the sake of saving others. Yes, there are rich and famous artists of genuine faith, but God tells us how best to

identify them; “by their fruit you shall know them” (Mat 7).

The Rev. Bryan Griem

Montrose Community Church

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Whether or not faith has fueled the success of superstar athletes and popular entertainers, I think that it is critical for people at the top of the entertainment and sports industries to have strong religious convictions so that they can keep their moral bearings intact. The immense daily pressures of entertaining and satisfying millions of fans can be crushing — and the flood of money rushing in from multi-million dollar contracts can easily enable self-destructive behaviors. It is no wonder that we see so many celebrities act ridiculously; it sometimes seems as if they are trying to outdo one another with their outrageous antics.

I don't believe that these top performers are more deserving of God's grace than anyone else. I do feel that God chose them to attain fame and fortune — and it now rests in their hands to determine if they will use these magnificent gifts of talent, wealth and prominence to become a positive influence on our children and constructive members of society.

The sad reality is that, to date, very few performers have actually mustered the courage to conduct themselves properly and act as shining examples for our youth.

In my opinion, a sincere religious faith would go a long way in helping these seemingly troubled individuals find proper footing and principled direction. And more importantly, it would transform these personalities — who are idolized by millions of young Americans — and help them act in a way that they would be worthy of both the adulation conferred on them by their fans and the celebrity and affluence bestowed upon them by God.

Rabbi Simcha Backman

Chabad Jewish Center

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