

WHOSE AMBITION?

AVOIDING THE SLIPPERY SLOPE OF PERSONAL GAINS

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God strangely often denies His people completion...

- God promised to make Abraham into a great nation (**Gen 12:2**). Isaac was but the start; to be fulfilled in the times of Moses when Israel had become so numerous that it could become a free nation of its own (**Num 1:46**).
- With regards to land, Moses began the Exodus but was himself denied entry (**Deut 1:34-40**).

Joshua began conquest, but denied its achievement (**Jos 13:1**), which would be fulfilled in the days of David and Solomon, when the whole breadth of promised land came under Israel's rule (**1 Kings 4:21; 2 Chr 9:26**).

- With regards to kingdom, David was given numerous victories and was granted a lasting kingdom, but was denied its climax – the building of the Temple of God (**2 Sam 7**). This was to be the very climax of victory; but that was to be accomplished under Solomon.
- With regards to Law, Moses was given the laws on tablets of stone, not ones that are written in hearts (**Ez 36:24-32, Jer 31:31-34**). Its provision was given to Moses. Its faithful administration culminated in the days of David. But its accomplishment is to be achieved only in the days of Christ.
- Finally, everything was to be fulfilled only in Christ; and everything served to bring us to Christ.

So, Joseph was led to entry but was denied exit. Moses led the exit but was denied entry. Joshua started conquest but was denied its completion. David accomplished conquest but was denied the Temple.

But why did God do things this way? Why deny Moses entry when he had been so faithful in leading the people and did but one small mistake? Why deny Joshua, a faithful aide and an obedient servant, conquest to the land (**Jos 13:1**)? Why deny David the privilege of building the Temple of God only to hand the task to a son who was no better than him?

There are at least two reasons that I have found in the Bible. One is found in Hebrews 11. In its chiasmic structure, the main idea of the stories came in the middle of Hebrews 11:

“All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth.

People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore

God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them” (Heb 11:13-16)

Consider briefly the story of Moses. If his faith had not been fixed on another reward, he would literally go crazy. Moses wasted the first forty years of his life for one tiny mistake of killing an Egyptian. He wasted his next 40 years being in the desert and not knowing his purpose. He again wasted the last 40 years leading a stiff-necked people and was denied entry because of a slight mistake. But in God, Moses' first 40 and second 40 were a preparation for the last 40, where God would use him in a mighty way. And his denial of entry, though a form of punishment, was also a test of faith to Moses so he would look to another, heavenly city of God.

Moses was able to come to terms with his not entering because he knew Canaan was not the final destination. Joshua was able to accept his inability to conquer all of the land because he knew the Kingdom of God extends far beyond Canaan. David knew all too well that God will not dwell in temples built by human hands, and that His dwelling place should be in the human heart, where man becomes the very temple of God. This was why they could come to terms with being asked to start a work they cannot finish; and with being given a promise that will not be fulfilled in their lifetime. All of them were being taught a wonderful truth; that the “Story of Moses, the Story of Joshua, the Story of David” are not really their stories, but God’s story, that history is to be His story. God was to be the focus, not them. And to avoid people (and more dangerously, themselves) thinking otherwise, God in His providence ensured that other people should finish the work they started. This would give all of them the final test of faith – whether they were looking to build God’s Kingdom as opposed to their own; whether they were seeking to glorify God’s name instead of their own; and whether they were administering God’s covenant as opposed to their private ambition. God shattered their projects to establish His own. But God comforted them by showing how they have taken part in His plan, His will. And for these people, God is expressively proud to be called their God.

The second part of Scripture I will want to mention is 1 Cor 3. Later in the New Testament, Paul will once again emphasize a similar pattern in God’s methodology. In **1 Corinthians 3**, Paul defines spiritual maturity in the ability to identify God’s hand in literally everything. Paul called the people of Corinth childish because they still attempted to attribute certain projects to particular individuals. “I follow Paul,” and “I follow Apollos” was a mark of immaturity. Why? Because Paul, Apollos, (and therefore Abraham, Moses, Joshua, David, Solomon) were but servants of God through whom we came to the Gospel, and God Himself assigned the appropriate task to each one (v. 5). The glory should not go to these servants, for “*neither the one who plants and the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow*” (v. 7). And so to each are assigned one specific purpose, to which they will be held accountable and rewarded according to their own labor (v. 8). In having this view, we are admitting that we are co-workers in God’s service (v. 9) and are privileged only in doing these which are allotted to us. Any less would be unfaithfulness. But any more, and it will be personal ambition that glorifies the self.

In conclusion, I would like to say that, contrary to perhaps popular beliefs, “ambition” is not a dirty word, though personal or private ambition is. The very same Paul we have just discussed says this, “*it has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known*” (**Rom 15:20**). See, to make it your ambition to fulfill the very calling you receive from God is honorable, and Paul’s ambition was built only on his calling in **Acts 22:21**. Yet even Paul was aware of the need to continually expose himself to God in order to test his

heart and motivation. Paul, who in the past was zealous for the wrong reasons (**Acts 22:3**), knew with certainty how the heart is deceitful above all things (**Jer 17:9**) and could lead him to unintentional sins. Again, to do less is being unfaithful, but to overstep your boundary is private ambition. This is why, in such context, Paul humbly admitted that though his conscience is clear, that does not make him innocent (**1 Cor 4:4**). He must leave room for God, the Judge of all, to expose his guilt, if any was found (see **v. 1-5**). But all in all, Paul stresses how we should regard the Apostles, himself included: “*as servants of Christ*” (**v. 1**).

Whose work are we doing? Is it God’s? Or is it our own?

Whose ambition are we fulfilling? Is it God’s? Or our own private ambition?

Whose name are we trying to glorify? Is it God’s? Or our own repute?

God alone tests and judges all heart. But when He tests us, sometimes he denies us a completion of the very project He commanded us to begin. How we come to terms with that will determine our own spirituality and maturity. “*For from Him and through Him and for Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever! Amen*” (**Rom 11:36**). Soli Deo Gloria!