

GOD-SANCTIONED AMBITION

"And Jabez was more honorable than his brethren: and his mother called his name Jabez, saying, Because I bare him with sorrow. And Jabez called on the God of Israel, saying, Oh that thou wouldest bless me indeed, and enlarge my coast, and that thine hand might be with me, and that thou wouldest keep me from evil, that it may not grieve me! And God granted him that which he requested" (I Chronicles 4:9-10).

While reading the long genealogies in First Chronicles my attention was arrested by the name of one man to whose biography God's Word has devoted only two verses. His biography not only arrested my attention and interest, but it also blessed my life.

In reading the long lists of undistinguished names in the opening chapters of First Chronicles one might say, "Well, what a lot of ordinary people there were in the world in those days! All that could possibly be said of them was, that they were born, they lived awhile, and they died. Nothing is recorded of any achievements to their credit--they were born, they lived, they died, and their children followed on after them." But here in the midst of the long procession of ordinary people is the name of a man concerning whom God wrote something. God did not say that this man was more wealthy, more brilliant, more healthy, or more popular than his brethren, but that he was more honorable than they were.

When an infant is born the mother is generally very happy. Unlike most mothers, the mother of Jabez was not joyful at the birth of her son. We do not know what was the cause of the mother's grief, but in token and memory of the sorrow in which she bore her son she called him "Jabez," which means "sorrowful."

A bad name is a tremendous handicap in life. Bearing such a name, Jabez had a poor start in life. While thousands can tell of a godly father and a praying mother, there are still larger numbers who do not have any such memories to bless their pathways. Yet out of such an environment have come those who have been noted for saintliness. Those who are reared in homes where there is no parental direction in the way of sanctity are handicapped greatly. When some succeed in spite of that handicap, it is due to the grace of God.

A careful reading of the text will convince you that Jabez was ambitious. Shakespeare put these words into the mouth of one of his characters, Cardinal Wolsey: "Cromwell, I charge thee, fling away ambition: by that sin fell the angels." Was he giving advice which accords with the teaching of Scripture? Is ambition necessarily a base and selfish quality? Is it indeed the "last infirmity of noble minds?"

There is an ambition which might be described thus, but there is also an ambition which is worthy and to be cherished. In essence, any ambition which centers around and terminates upon self is unworthy, while an ambition which has the glory of God as its center and goal is not only legitimate but positively praiseworthy.

Many fail to achieve worthwhile goals because they do not have a masterful ambition, a dominating purpose to unify their lives. They live haphazardly rather than like Paul, who said, "This one thing I do." An interesting story is told of the father of the famous Webster brothers, who found the boys lounging around listlessly. He said, "What are you doing, Ezekiel?" "Doing nothing," he replied. "And what are you doing Daniel?" "Helping Zeke, sir," said Daniel. Many others have not had any more ambition than those boys had.

If you are to achieve a worthwhile ambition, you will require such a wholehearted abandonment as Demosthenes, the greatest orator in the ancient world, displayed in pursuit of oratorical power. When Demosthenes first spoke in public he was ridiculed and hissed off the platform. His voice was harsh and weak and his appearance unprepossessing. He resolved that his fellow citizens would yet hang on his words, and to this end he gave himself day and night to the study of elocution. He shaved half his head so that he would not be drawn into the involvements of society. To overcome a stammer he recited with pebbles in his mouth. He delivered his orations against the thunders of the Aegan Sea in order that his voice might gain in volume. An ugly lifting of the shoulder he corrected by standing beneath a suspended sword. He corrected his facial distortion by practicing in front of a mirror. It is not surprising that, when he appeared in public again, he moved his audience and his nation. Along with another orator he was speaking on a matter of vital importance to the nation. When his colleague concluded his speech, the crowd said, "What marvelous oratory." But when Demosthenes reached his peroration they cried with one voice, "Let us go and fight Philip!"

Worldly ambition expresses itself in three main directions: to build a reputation, to amass wealth, and to wield power, but its fatal flaw is that its center is self and not God. This ambition does not ennoble, but it engenders jealousy and envy. It is impatient of the consideration due to others and will go to any length to achieve its end. It frequently drives a businessman to crush ruthlessly his weaker and more scrupulous competitor. But how trivial are its achievements and unsubstantial are its rewards when viewed in the light of eternity! The ambition of Napoleon and Hitler brought them momentary glory, but with it eternal shame. Such an ambition is the very antithesis of the spirit or attitude of Christ.

It is possible to have an unworthy ambition in religious circles as well as in worldly associations. Before their transforming experience at Pentecost, James and John used their doting mother in an endeavor to gain them a preferment over their ten brethren. They stooped to petty intrigue to exclude the other claimants to the places of supreme privilege in Christ's kingdom. Even the Last Supper was not too sacred an occasion to be marred by their selfish strife. Nor were the ten free from the same unworthy ambition, or they would not have been so indignant with James and John for forestalling them. They had yet to learn, and by very bitter experience, that the lowliest is the greatest in Christ's kingdom; but they later mastered the lesson.

The ambition which God sanctions is far otherwise. The true disciple of Christ lives by an entirely different scale of values. A God-approved ambition must be pure and noble, tinged with self-abnegation and self-sacrifice. The disciple recognizes that he belongs to Christ -- body, intellect, emotions, and will -- and therefore any honor which may come to him belongs to the Master. Like his Lord, he cherishes the ambition to give rather than to receive, to serve rather than to be served, to use his time and talents for his Master rather than debase them in pursuit of self-aggrandizement.

It is the underlying motive which determines the character of ambition and renders it laudable or unworthy. In speaking to Baruch God said, "Seekest thou great things for thyself? seek them not" (Jeremiah 45:5). The wrong does not lie in the ambition itself, but in its inspiring motive. An intensely ambitious man himself, Paul encouraged others to aim high by citing himself as an example: "I press toward the mark for the prize" (Philippians 3:14). Three of Paul's own unusual ambitions appear in his epistles: to be "well-pleasing to God" (Philippians 4:18); "to be quiet," "the quiet of inner repose,

and not of inertia (I Thessalonians 4:11); and "to preach the gospel, not where Christ was named" (Romans 15:20). All his ambitions found their center in Christ, "that in all things he might have the preeminence" (Colossians 1:18).

Here then is the measuring rod for an ambition which is legitimate for the Christian. Is its supreme objective the glory of God and not the glory of the disciple? Will its fulfillment make the disciple more useful in Christ's service and a greater blessing to his fellow men?

One of the splendid examples of holy or God-sanctioned ambition is found in our text. It affords a remarkable insight into the character and ambitions of the one man whom God singled out from among all of his contemporaries for honorable mention. It is a remarkable thumbnail sketch which lays bare the ambition which caused him to become "more honorable than his brethren." When God preserves the epitaph of one man out of millions and gives it such concise and meaningful language, we can be certain that a detailed study of it will be very rewarding.

Before looking into the subject of his ambition, let us learn two important lessons from the life of Jabez.

One lesson is, that there is no need for obscurity to overshadow a life. From church history we learn that God frequently takes up obscure men or women and uses them to an extraordinary degree while passing by people of seemingly much greater gifts.

If history teaches anything, it teaches us that God seems to have a fondness for getting hold of very commonplace persons and transferring them into uncommon saints, or leaders, or reformers, or preachers, or missionaries. Where did He get Moses? Out of the obscurity of a humble home among the Hebrew slaves of Egypt. Where did He get Fideon? Out of the obscurity of a little wheat farm in Ephraim. Where did He get David? Out of the obscurity of the large family of Jesse where fame had never been known to rest. Where did He get Peter and John? Out of the obscurity of their unheralded toil as fishermen. Where did He get Dwight L. Moody? Out of the obscurity of a little shoe store lost among the big palaces of merchandise in Boston.

These incidents are endless in God's great pattern of doing things. They call us to sound thinking. They summon us to clear judgments of values. They tell us that obscurity should never stifle or strangle us. They drive home the truth that, however undistinguished a person may be, he can serve God in a distinguished way. Jabez, along with many another unsung member of the guild of the godly, sprang out of obscurity into everlasting remembrance because of secret prayer life.

Another lesson is, that disabilities need not disqualify in the race of life. That Jabez was born with a tremendous temperamental handicap is implicit in the name given him. Though his nature was set in a minor key and he inherited a bias toward pessimism, Jabez soared above his brothers who did not inherit any such disability. Disabilities need not disqualify one for a spiritual ministry to others.

God is sympathetic toward a holy ambition. Jabez cherished a strong ambition which God sanctioned. His four petitions were indeed ambitious and on the surface might have appeared selfish. But the fact that "God granted him that which he requested" indicates that the glory of God rather than selfish aggrandizement was his real desire. God does not honor unworthy motives, nor does He answer self-centered prayers. "Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts" (James 4:3).

God delighted to honor Jabez because Jabez desired to honor God. God's statement, "Them that honor me, I will honor" (I Samuel 2:30) is an abiding truth.

Jabez's prayer voiced the aspiration or ambition of his heart.

I. Jabez Prayed For Divine Endowment.

"Oh that thou wouldest bless me indeed." No ordinary blessing would satisfy him. He yearned for something which surpassed any previous experiences. When he wanted a blessing that was a blessing indeed, he went to the only source from which it could be obtained. There is but one place where we may receive blessing indeed, and that is from God.

God's ear is always attentive to such a plea, for a true spiritual blessing always ennobles character, enriches life, and qualifies one to be a greater blessing to others. When God blesses you, you are blessed indeed. When you get a blessing from God, it will last you forever.

II. Jabez Prayed For Divine Enlargement.

"Oh that thou wouldest bless me indeed, and enlarge my coast." Jabez wanted something bigger. His primary concern was for an increase of territory which would bring him greater influence, but it was not for mere personal aggrandizement, because God granted his request. His was a God-sanctioned ambition. One should be ambitious to fill a larger place if he can thereby bring more glory to God. We ought to desire enlargement. Every Christian should have a high and holy ambition, namely, to please God. In positions of responsibility God needs people who will serve Him faithfully and loyally. God is looking for people who are discontented with a limited opportunity when they can bring greater glory to God in a wider sphere. Our ambition should be for a growing knowledge of God, a stronger faith in God, a deeper love for God, and a wider influence for Him. We must not be content to remain as we are while there is so much to learn, so much to enjoy, and so much to do. Do you as a Christian have a spiritual aspiration to accomplish more for the Lord?

III. Jabez Prayed For Divine Enablement.

"That thine hand might be with me." An enlarged coast influences increased responsibility and imposes greater demands. Jabez knew that he needed a power greater than his own to possess and develop this new territory for God. God's hand represents His mighty power.

It is a great joy and blessing to know, beyond a peradventure of a doubt that God's hand is with you when you are going out to live your life and to do His work. It matters little whose hands are against you, if God's hand is upon you. His hand is the one by which all of your needs shall be supplied. When His hand is with you, you can be sure of the daily provision for your needs.

In substance Jabez prayed, "Oh, God I cannot do anything. I do not have any power at all. Lay Thine hand upon me, so that wherever I go Thine hand may be with me." Think of those upon whom God's hand has been laid. What wonders they accomplished! That was the explanation of Joseph's career. The Lord was with Joseph; His hand was upon him, and nobody could stand against him. That was the explanation of the success

of Moses, Joshua, David, and the prophets -- the hand of the Lord was upon them. When the hand of the Lord is with a man, there is no telling where He will set him down, or put him up. When you have the hand of the Lord with you, you will have everything that you will ever need.

IV. Jabez Prayed For Divine Exertion.

"And that thou wouldest keep me from evil." Jabez was afraid of evil lest it should hurt him. His great desire was to be kept from evil, for he knew that sin could not produce anything but pain and tribulation. He knew that an enlarged coast would mean an increased activity on the part of his enemies. Attempting great things for God always attracts the hostile attentions of Satan, and Jabez's prayer for the exertion of the divine strength is appropriate in all ages. All of us need to walk in humble dependence on God.

And now listen to what the Bible says: "And God granted him that which he requested." Jabez prayed, and God did just as he asked Him to do. Do you believe God? Do you believe that God answers prayer? If you do, then why don't you pray more? When we ask according to God's will, He hears us and grants to us the things which we have requested. There is not anything which God will not do for the person whose sole ambition is for the glory of the Lord.