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“Well done, good and faithful servant!”

— MATTHEW 25:21

holy
AMBITION

You have probably heard the phrase “Well done, good and faithful servant!” as long as you have been a Christian. You may even know that Jesus used the phrase twice in one of His parables (Matt. 25:21, 23) to give us a picture of the way God will settle accounts at the end of the age. I’m sure you have heard at least one sermon that ended with an emotional appeal to think about how wonderful it would be in eternity to stand before God and hear Him say, “Well done, good and faithful servant.” The problem is such sermons rarely tell you what it will take to get there.

Most Christians I talk to want to finish well. Unfortunately, “finishing well” gets translated into some vague wish that God will say

something nice to them in eternity, but they don't dare make that phrase the purpose of their lives. But if that isn't the purpose for living once we've met Christ, then what is? What is the target of our Christian life? If we aim at nothing, we're sure to hit it. What are we aiming at as we follow Christ? What's our holy ambition?

What do we really want God to say to us someday?

I know *ambition* is one of those almost forbidden words in Christian circles. It shares a place with words like *discipline*, *suffering*, *passion*, and *perseverance* on a list of terms that may offend comfortable Christians or skittish pagans. Based on our sensitivities, the Bible is full of such offensive language. It calls us sinners and questions our integrity. If we weren't dealing with God's Word, we might resent the insinuations. The New International Version uses the word *ambition* seven times. Five uses are negative (selfish ambition) and two are positive. Paul told the Romans, "It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else's foundation" (Rom. 15:20). He also told the Thesalonians, "Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life" (1 Thess. 4:11a). Other translations tend to substitute the word *aspiration* for *ambition*, but I like the edginess of *holy ambition*. That's because I find the attitude of holy ambition taught everywhere in Scripture. It's unavoidable. The phrase itself isn't used that often, but many commands and directions from God's Word can only be applied if we make them our holy ambition. Consider these examples:

Trust in the LORD with all your heart and do not lean on your own
understanding.

In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight.

— PROVERBS 3:5–6 NASB

But it is not this way with you, but the one who is the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like the servant. For who is greater, the one who reclines at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at the table? But I am among you as the one who serves. You are those who have stood by Me in My trials; and just as My Father has granted Me a kingdom, I grant you that you may eat and drink at My table in My kingdom, and you will sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

— LUKE 22:26–30 NASB

And He was saying to them all, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake, he is the one who will save it.”

— LUKE 9:23–24 NASB

What you just read is only a sample. Each passage presupposes or demands that we respond with holy ambition. If we make it our ambition to save our lives, Jesus said, we will lose them. But if we make it our holy ambition to lose our lives for His sake, Jesus promises that we will discover and experience life to its fullest.

Holy ambition is deep and long. It affects every part of life for all of life. The depth and length of our holy ambition will be tested. One day the faithful will hear God say, “Well done, good and faithful servant!”

THE STARTING PLACE

Right here at the start of our journey, things get tricky. How does holy ambition actually work? Is this just another book about trying harder, getting up earlier, and praying more? How does holy ambition turn into a life that makes a difference? What’s my part? What’s God’s part? The landscape around holy ambition can be very dangerous unless we

understand how God creates and sustains this passion in our hearts. God wants to do something supernatural and tremendous through you; but unless you understand where He begins and how He works, you're destined for failure.

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That's why one Old Testament verse has had particular meaning to me over the last thirty-five years. I memorized this verse when I first became a Christian but didn't understand its full impact. The words simply struck me as too wonderful to be true. Later, as I studied this passage carefully, I came to understand that this was not only a promise for one king in Israel but also a timeless axiom of how God relates to every man and every woman in every age. Follow along carefully and listen to the spirit behind these words:

For the eyes of the LORD move to and fro throughout the earth that He may strongly support those whose heart is completely His.

— 2 CHRONICLES 16:9 NASB

Please read this statement again *slowly*. Think of it as true, not just something written three thousand years ago in the land of Israel but at this very moment in your life, your neighborhood, and your church. This verse expresses not some antiquated view of God but a timeless truth. It describes the omniscient (all-knowing), all-powerful, all-wise God who is carefully considering the earth and looking for a select group of people. As you read this verse, are you among those people whose hearts are fully His? The promise of this amazing passage is that God is actually looking for people He can strongly support. In other words, God wants to do far more in most all of us than most of us want

Him to do. He is looking today for something in the human heart that will ignite His support in his or her life.

God seeks people who are completely His

Nothing hides from God. Every covering and shelter becomes transparent under His knowing glance. He sees through high-priced and low-rent walls. No skin color deflects His gaze. He could see right through us, but our Creator adjusts His view to consider one part of who we are—our hearts. God looks for a select group of hearts found in widely differing people throughout the world. This select group never has race, income, education, culture, intelligence, charisma, or style in common. What they share is a heart that completely belongs to God. Their hearts beat with holy ambition.

When the ancient prophet Hanani described God to King Asa, he was merely stating what God had done, was doing, and would always do in every place and in all times. God looks for a select group of people whose hearts are completely His. That's what Hanani meant when he said, "For the eyes of the LORD move to and fro throughout the earth that He may strongly support those whose heart is completely His" (2 Chron. 16:9 NASB). God is doing that right now. The question is: Where are you? For a moment, follow God's eyes into your own being. What do you think He sees? Does His all-knowing look find a heart in you that belongs completely to Him?

The New Living Translation of this verse says that God looks for a man or a woman or a student or a child whose heart is "fully committed to him." These are people who, when they hear the call of God directing them, obey. They may have emotional struggles, just as you and I do. They may not enjoy a

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particular act of obedience. They may not feel like obeying. They struggle with the implications, relationships, finances, and geography that obedience to God often involves, but they do what He has asked. High cost? They do it. Complications? They do it. Repercussions? They do it. They make a difference. They change the world. You may not even know all the ways your life has been deeply affected by people whose hearts are completely God's. God has built His kingdom, and He builds His church on that kind of people.

Are you that kind of person? Do you have a heart that belongs to God? Are you ready to take the steps that develop holy ambition? Maybe you honestly don't know. Fair enough. Are you willing to find out? If you are, then these chapters will help you.

A KING'S HEART

In order to better understand what it means to have a heart completely God's, let's begin by looking briefly at the life of a man who had holy ambition, but faltered. This is not a story with a happy ending. Although King Asa's heart began in the right place, he eventually backed away from the life God offered him. That's when God sent the prophet Hanani to speak to King Asa the words we have already seen: "For the eyes of the LORD move to and fro throughout the earth that He may strongly support those whose heart is completely His" (2 Chron. 16:9 NASB). People who are familiar with that verse are often shocked to discover its context. The verse comes with a story. Without the story, the verse loses much of its punch. For, although the prophet was describing God's ways, he was not describing the king's heart.

Early Years

You can read the summary of Asa's life in 2 Chronicles 14–16. God showed Asa how pleased He was with the king's early dependency, faith, and courage. The first ten years of his reign were conducted

under peaceful conditions. Since his borders were secure, Asa decided to take on building projects. He gave God credit for the peace and began to develop new cities and construct fortified walls around existing ones. Rising towers and gates pushed consumer confidence to new heights. The people enjoyed a time of great prosperity.

A Time for War

Suddenly, around year ten, a looming cloud of uncertainty overshadowed the bright economic forecast for Judah. An army almost twice the size of Asa's approached from the southwest. This was a major reality check for the king and his people. Within his borders, Asa had passed the early test of his leadership by taking a stand for God. Prosperity followed. Now it was time for another test.

Faced with impossible odds, Asa did a very wise thing. He turned to God. "Then Asa called to the LORD his God and said, 'LORD, there is no one like you to help the powerless against the mighty. Help us, LORD our God, for we rely on you, and in your name we have come against this vast army. LORD, you are our God; do not let mere mortals prevail against you'" (2 Chron. 14:11). Asa put his kingdom and his future in God's hands.

God's answer was immediate, swift, and decisive: "The LORD struck down the Cushites before Asa and Judah. The Cushites fled" (2 Chron. 14:12). Huge success. The army carried lots of loot and livestock back to Jerusalem. A great disaster was averted, but had any lessons been learned? Time would tell.

The Promise and the Warning

Shortly after the victory, the prophet Azariah came to Asa and basically said, "King, it has been a long time since God has been so honored, and you are moving in the right direction. Asa, God wants you to consider a proposition. Here it is. If you will trust and obey Him, and your

people will trust and obey Him, He will be with you and He will do things beyond what you ever dreamed. But if you forsake Him, He will forsake you.”

Asa took the prophet’s words to heart and put them into action. The lands of Judah, Benjamin, and the surrounding territories got a

thorough idol cleansing. The altar for sacrifices to God in front of the temple in Jerusalem was repaired and put back into service. A revival of worship and obedience broke out in the nation that peaked in the fifteenth year of Asa’s reign. People pledged allegiance to Yahweh and turned away from their sins. The Scriptures describe the attitude of king and people in this way: *“They sought God eagerly, and he was found by them.* So the LORD gave them rest on every side” (2 Chron. 15:15).

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The land experienced another time of great blessing. For the next twenty years, Asa reigned and walked with God. He trusted the Lord. The years flew by. Life in the kingdom of Judah settled

into the kind of routine that usually precedes another test. The king and the people were well, feeling settled, but they were about to discover that life with God doesn’t involve “settling.” Holy ambition is not a permanent condition. It’s not about dramatic, one-time decisions, or living off our faith from the past. It involves active trust and continuous obedience. It’s all about living on the edge, living now!

A Test of Holy Ambition

Thirty-five years into his reign, Asa was suddenly faced with a new challenge. A coalition of enemies surrounded Judah. Asa did something he hadn’t done in thirty-five years. Until this point, he had an

unblemished record. Now, instead of trusting God, he decided to handle this problem on his own.

Asa's determination to trust God and be a difference maker had been dulled by twenty years of peace and financial prosperity. His years of success had ever so gradually hardened his heart and shifted his focus from God to himself.

So God brought a new test to Asa to give him another opportunity to succeed. But instead of trusting God, he emptied the treasury, contacted one of Israel's powerful allies, paid him off, and got his help to defeat the Israelites. Strategically, politically, and militarily, all this was a brilliant move. Spiritually, it meant disaster for Asa. He soon got another visit from a prophet. That visit is the context of the underlying theme of this book.

Hanani came to Asa king of Judah and said to him, "Because you relied on the king of Aram and not on the LORD your God, the army of the king of Aram has escaped from your hand" (v. 7). Then Hanani reminded him, "Were not the Cushites and Libyans a mighty army with great numbers of chariots and horsemen? *Yet when you relied on the LORD*, he delivered them into your hand" (v. 8). Now comes our theme verse: "For the eyes of the LORD move to and fro throughout the earth that He may strongly support those whose heart is completely His" (v. 9). But there's more. Here's the end of that verse that most people don't quote: "You have done a foolish thing, and from now on you will be at war" (v. 9).

The Moment of Truth

This turning point in Asa's reign would determine whether he would renew his commitment to holy ambition or step away from God's guidance. The moment provides an amazing applicational insight for us. Here was a man who had walked with God for at least thirty-five years. An unexpected crisis caught him off guard, and he made a serious

error in judgment. Past obedience is not a guarantee of future obedience. Asa heard God's prophet call him a fool. But instead of repenting, Asa reacted in anger toward the messenger, Hanani, and threw him in prison. How often have we similarly taken our anger out on those speaking truth into our lives instead of humbly taking their words to heart and making a change?

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Unfortunately, the king wasn't through being foolish. He brutally oppressed some of his people. He turned his back on holy ambition. He leaned away from God instead of toward Him. His effectiveness faded. Within five years, Asa developed a serious disease in his feet. He still didn't admit his foolishness or ask God for help. He died in the forty-first year of his reign.

We look at Asa's life and see great success. Each of the apparent difficulties God brought across Asa's path turned out to be a door of opportunity until that event in year thirty-five. After that failure, God had some direct words for the king. He basically said, "If you had trusted Me as you did before, I would have taken care of everything! Israel and that even bigger enemy you paid off by emptying the treasury were no problem for Me. I would have taken care of all of them. You know why, Asa? Because what was true when you were desperate and young in the faith remains true today: the eyes of the Lord still go to and fro throughout the whole earth. Why? Because I want to support every person whose heart is fully committed to Me." Asa missed a golden opportunity. We are left with the sad record of someone who did not end nearly as well as he started.

WHAT ABOUT YOUR STORY?

How do you think your life will end? For a moment, picture your life as a time continuum on which you mark the point when you came to Christ. I sincerely hope you are already part of God's family. Where are you right now? How far have you moved from your starting point with Christ? Where do you think you will be when your life ends? What kind of commentary would God write for you up to this point? Does your life look more like the early years of Asa or more like the latter years? Those are penetrating questions, aren't they?

There's at least one important principle from Asa's life I don't want you to miss. Past success (faith and dependency on God) is no guarantee of future faithfulness. In fact, as I read the pages of the Old and New Testament, I find very few men and very few women who ended well. Few heroes ended heroically. Few runners crossed the finish line as winners. Beyond Scripture, I've noticed the same sad pattern.

Many Christians coast or fade badly near the end of their race. They start well, but they usually finish poorly. There are not many churches that start well, grow, and then stay well.

Do you know what usually happens with people, churches, and organizations—people like you and like me? Once we experience success because we trusted God out of desperation, we usually go on to do one of two things: (1) we take the success and its results for granted and become arrogant, or (2) we forget the process God used and settle into a comfort zone that leaves God in a corner of our lives. Survival tactics gradually replace holy ambition. We get respectable inside Christian circles and gradually come to resist the idea that faith has anything to do with risk.

We may proclaim our security in Christ even though we are actually relying on every other form of security than Christ. We avoid risk.

Does your life look more like the early years of Asa or more like the latter years?

Our focus is primarily on the rearview mirror—what God did in our past—instead of radically trusting Him for the future. We learn to depend on people, on laws, on principles. We begin to level off or settle down, losing any sense of holy ambition, losing sight of the edge, that close reliance on God.

Life flies by, just as it did for Asa.

Then, after a while, God brings another test. And now we fail in battles whose victory God guarantees. Like Asa, in spite of all God's promises and resources, we make decisions that snatch defeat out of the jaws of victory. We end poorly. That's a lesson from the pages of Scripture mirrored in lives today.

I don't know about you, but I don't want my life in Christ to end poorly. I don't want that for my family or for the ministry I lead. And I don't want that for you. But honestly, I fear that history tells me the odds are against us. The only way I know to beat the odds is find a God-given holy ambition and allow that to shape our life.

When we're talking about holy ambition, we are talking about answering God's call. Looking at lives like Asa's certainly jars us out of complacency and awakens our spiritual concern. But that's not enough. We need to spend time studying and imitating those who did run the race all the way. We need some real heroes, and God has provided them in people like Nehemiah. In the pages to come, we will take a close look at his life.

God calls us to holy ambition, not only individually, but also corporately. You can't live on the edge without getting other people involved. Holy ambition is selectively contagious. Some will follow your example; others won't. That, as we will see, is all part of the joy and challenge of living powerfully for God.

Holy ambition means living with a large purpose in life. I like to remind our ministry regularly of our particular challenge with this question: Are we going to answer God's call for Living on the Edge to make

a significant impact in this new millennium, or will we rest on past success? Can you personalize that challenge?

How will you answer God's call
on your life to be a difference maker
while you walk this earth?

What will it take to really make a difference for God? The rest of this book is designed to help you answer that question. And in it you will learn the six conditions that God looks for in the lives of people He uses:

- ✦ A dislocated heart
- ✦ A broken spirit
- ✦ A radical faith
- ✦ A strategic plan
- ✦ A personal commitment
- ✦ A courageous soul

These conditions hold true if you are married, single, old or young, rich or poor. They apply to laymen, pastors, missionaries, and businessmen. They are conditions that transcend age, gender, race, and cultural background. If you are a business, small group, or church leader, I have included a small group study that follows a brief video presentation that will give you information at the end of the book about pursuing holy ambition as a group. But remember, when the eyes of the Lord are searching the earth, He is primarily looking for starting points, for individual men and women who will be catalysts for change that draw others into lives of holy ambition for God.

The first thing God notes when He finds a select person who is moving toward holy ambition is a dislocated heart. That's the best place for us to start, too. Let's get started!

THINK IT OVER

1. If God gave you an unlimited check to do anything for Him, what would you do? Why? How would you define “holy ambition”?
2. For you personally, what would it look like to “finish well”?
3. “For the eyes of the LORD move to and fro throughout the earth that He may strongly support those whose heart is completely His” (2 Chron. 16:9a NASB).
What is your greatest roadblock to having a heart that is “completely His”?
4. When in your life were you most living “all out” for Christ?
5. Spend some time reflecting on the following words from the lips of Jesus. What do these verses teach us about “holy ambition”?

As they were walking along the road, a man said to him, “I will follow you wherever you go.” Jesus replied, “Foxes have dens and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.” He said to another man, “Follow me.” But he replied, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.” Jesus said to him, “Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” Still another said, “I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say goodbye to my family.” Jesus replied, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.” —Luke 9:57–62

6. Asa’s determination to be “a difference maker had been dulled by twenty years of peace and financial prosperity.”
What is in your life that can dull your holy ambition?

- 7.** Who do you respect and admire as someone who “finishes well”? It could be someone in Scripture or a personal acquaintance. What is it about their life that you respect most?

LIVE IT OUT

- 1.** Connect this week with someone whose heart seems to be “completely God’s.” Have a spiritual conversation about life and faith. Listen and learn from them. What do they do to remain radically reliant on God and continually trust Him?
- 2.** This week read for yourself the story of Asa from 2 Chronicles 14–16 and answer the following two questions.
 - Where do you see holy ambition in Asa’s life?
 - Where do you see selfish ambition in Asa’s life?

A small group video teaching and study guide are available at www.livingontheedge.org.