

Script: Pastor Frank R. Johnson

## The Glory and the Dream

### “Where Godly Aspiration Meets Grateful Contentment”

2 Samuel 7:1-29; Philippians 3:12-16; 4:10-13

Take a first look.

I. To follow Jesus, we must learn to *aspire for more* and *be grateful for less*. The art of Christian living is to do both at the same time. Our hearts should be fired with the desire to fulfill God’s purposes in our lives as fully as possible. But we must learn to be grateful and content at the end of each day with what God has already done in our lives.

II. Let’s take a closer look at where godly ambition meets grateful contentment. We will focus on one important story from ancient Israel and clear teaching from the Apostle Paul.

Take a closer look. Read 2 Samuel 7:1-17.

**I. Godly ambition meets grateful contentment when we affirm God’s sovereignty over our lives and over the flow of history. 2 Samuel 7:1-29; 1 Chronicles 17:1-27**

**1. King David learned both to serve God wholeheartedly and to be grateful for whatever God allowed Him to accomplish.**

**2. God allowed David to establish his rule over Israel, but God did not allow David to build the temple.**

In a previous message, I briefly recounted this incident in the life of King David of ancient Israel. Our Scripture reading for today tells half of that story (2 Samuel 7:1-17).<sup>1</sup> After several years of his reign, King David realized that the LORD had given Israel a place of security and even primacy in their region. This was the first time that such a pause from serious enemy attack had come since their arrival in the Promised Land, about 4 centuries before. It was not the last of it, as there were battles with neighboring nations that followed this, but the kingdom had become secure and David’s reign well-established. Perhaps King David was standing on the roof of his palace one day and was looking out over the land, and then he viewed the Tent of Meeting in the distance. The contrast struck him: “I am living in this glorious palace of cedar, while the Ark of the Covenant, the symbol of God’s abiding presence with His chosen people, is sitting in a tent. What is wrong with this picture?” So, he called in his trusted advisor, the prophet Nathan, and shared his observation: “Look! I am living in a palace made from cedar, while the ark of God sits in the middle of a tent” (2 Samuel 7:2, NET). Nathan said, “You should go and do whatever you have in mind, for the LORD is with you” (2 Samuel 7:3b, NET). I can imagine the king having an evening of excited contemplation of what he was about to build.

But then, that night the word of the LORD came to Nathan. He returned the next morning to the king and delivered what could have been a disappointing message. It was good news and bad news. The good news: “Yes, a great temple shall be built for the LORD for the first time in history.” The bad news: “You will not be the one to build it, but rather your son will.” That message from the LORD to David became, in summary, “You will not build a house [a temple in Jerusalem] for me, but rather, I will build a house [a lasting dynasty] for you instead.” And from that time forward, the LORD began to do what He had promised. David became the archetypal king to whom all who followed him

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Chronicles 17 tells this story, also.

were compared. If they did good, they acted *like* their father (ancestor) David. If they did evil, they acted *unlike* their father David. I realize also that all of this happened before the whole moral failure by King David—adultery with Bathsheba and setting up her husband, one of David’s 30 Mighty Men and most loyal soldiers, to be killed in battle to cover it up. That is a story for another time.

**3. David’s response was to worship God with gratefulness. 2 Samuel 7:18-29; 1 Chronicles 17:16-27.** After Nathan came and told him what lay ahead regarding the temple for the Lord, rather than pouting about this seeming rebuff, King David went into the Tabernacle and offered a prayer of grateful contentment. In that prayer, David affirmed the greatness of God name (vv. 22, 26), the greatness of God’s chosen nation, Israel (v. 23), and the greatness of God’s promise to David to establish his house (i.e., dynasty) for the generations to come (vv. 27-29). Then, he began to amass supplies that his son Solomon would use to build the great temple that David had envisioned. He truly did *aspire for more* but became *grateful for less*. This passage is key to understanding God’s sovereign purpose for Israel as the human family from which the Savior of the world would come (see Luke 1:32-33). Jesus was from the “house of David” and He rules now over God’s people who have confessed faith in Him.

**II. Godly ambition meets grateful contentment when we offer God our best and trust Him for the outcome. Philippians 3:12-16; 4:10-13.**

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**1. We must “press on” to “make our own” the reason why God “made us His own.”**  
**Philippians 3:12-16.** This is not just the spirit of *Carpe Diem* (“seize the day!”) though it can be mistaken for it. The impulse is always there to prompt us to a short-sighted pursuit of what seems to bring us the most immediate benefit—power, pleasure, position—without much thought for tomorrow. The Epicurean maxim is “Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow you die.” Or, as a beer commercial on TV said during my youth: “You only go around once in life, so grab all the gusto you can!” Of course, the implication of that memorable saying is this: such gusto comes as we grab a cold brew of their brand. *Aspiring for more* can easily turn into a self-serving pursuit of anything that appears to provide us with the most “personal peace and affluence” in the here and now, to borrow again a phrase from the late Francis Schaeffer. Aspiration can be channeled into merely selfish ambition, or it can be redeemed by God into the pursuit of godly character that leads to actions that matter not only for time but for eternity. This seems to be Paul’s conviction and pursuit. ***Why has God taken me as His own? How then should I live as one who belongs to the living God?***

**2. We must learn to be grateful for all God has provided thus far in our journey.**  
**Philippians 4:10-13.** Grateful contentment opens our hearts to the blessing and power of God. As we cultivate a spirit of gratitude, we see more clearly the hand of God in our lives. We realize that Chesterton’s “Mystical Minimum of Gratitude” for existence itself is only the starting point toward a fuller understanding of the world, ourselves, and the God Who is there. We come to affirm with King David, “The earth is the LORD’s, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it; for he founded it on the seas and established it on the waters (Psalm 24:1-2, NIV). We recognize, along with Joseph in his final years, how the LORD has provided, guided, empowered, corrected, and confirmed the course of our lives, not only for ourselves but for those whose lives are influenced by ours (see Genesis 45:5; 50:20).

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***John Bunyan: We must bloom where we are planted.***

[I have a chapter on this man in my book, which I hope will be published soon, that expands on the theme I have been preaching about. I have printed copies of this chapter on the table in the foyer, if you would like to read a little more about him. Or, you can send me an email request, and I will send you a digital copy.] John Bunyan’s story reminds us that even when life does not play out the way we imagine, God can still work in us and through us in amazing ways. Bunyan was an unlikely convert to vital Christian faith in the mid-1600s. What God accomplished through him began at minimum during the generation before him, with the people of faith positioned by God to have a

transforming influence on him. His wife's parents may have had no idea of the effect the 2 books they gave her would have on the lives of their daughter and her unpromising husband. Overhearing a "random" conversation between devout Christians drew Bunyan further in. Once he had trusted fully in the finished work of Jesus and the Holy Spirit filled his soul, he was ready to share the truth that God was showing Him from the Scriptures. As he shared and served, God expanded his realm of influence, until suddenly, it seemed it had all come to an end when he was arrested and jailed. Yet, John was faithful and looking for ways to continue to serve. With his fertile imagination, he wrote books that have certainly outlived his personal impact. As I have often wondered, would we even know who John Bunyan was if he had not been jailed as a Dissenter from the established Church? We know of him, because he used his imagination and his knowledge of Christian truth to write books: *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, *The Holy War*, and then supremely *The Pilgrim's Progress*, among others. Being in jail for 12 and a half years with no ability to travel and preach gave him great opportunity to write. The world is enriched and the good news of Jesus has been spread abroad as a result. John continued to aspire for more as God gave him opportunity, while learning to be grateful for God's sustaining grace in his immediate circumstances. In regard to Bunyan's influence, *The Pilgrim's Progress* is second only to the Bible in its frequency of publication and its worldwide distribution.

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### III. Godly ambition meets grateful contentment when we remember that God is most interested in shaping our character as His people. Philippians 2:12-13

**Godly character leads to action that values the eternal over the temporary.** What is the "good pleasure" of God (Phi. 2:13)? It is that we progressively grow in "*desiring* and ... *working* on behalf of [His] good pleasure" (Philippians 2:13, FJV, my emphasis). This means that when we open our lives to our Creator through faith in His Son Jesus Christ, He begins to shape our desires to match His good purposes for our lives, purposes that God will empower us to accomplish. We see the value of developing the Cardinal Virtues: *prudence*, *temperance*, *justice*, and *fortitude*. We learn to be wise, to develop self-control (see Galatians 5:23), to practice the Golden Rule (see Matthew 7:12), and to keep on moving toward what is right, good, and beautiful despite all the opposition that comes from the world, the flesh, and the devil.

Aspiring for more while being grateful for less motivates us to nurture the Theological virtues as well: *faith*, *hope*, and *love*. We learn to trust in God's saving power and sustaining grace, to keep our eyes fixed on what God has promised, and to "love because He first loved us" (see 1 John 4:19; compare 4:11).

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#### **A Little Woman with a Big God**

**Gladys Aylward** would remind us that even the ordinary and obscure person of faith can have a world-shaping impact for what matters for eternity. As a youth and young adult, Gladys desired to be an actor on the stage. When she unexpectedly was drawn to faith in Jesus, she began to worship, to learn, and to serve. As she served, her burden for others grew, until it focused on the people of China. The Chinese people seemed to have had little access to the message of Jesus, and there seemed to be few people who were addressing that lack. But what could she do? She was nothing but a lowly housemaid barely making a living. Yet, through work, thrift, and saving, she earned her passage to China—one way. She attached herself to an unlikely partner, an older widow, Mrs. Lawson, whose personality would not have drawn Gladys to her in any other context. Then, Mrs. Lawson suddenly died after only 1 year and left Gladys with a decision: carry on the work as Mrs. Lawson had asked, or give up and return to England? Gladys decided that the One Who had led her to come to China, Who had protected her on the perilous journey, and Who had provided for her and for the mission station in Yancheng would continue to lead, protect, and provide for her to stay there and serve. Once she made that decision, she witnessed God open the way. She was unexpectedly asked to serve as the government Foot Inspector, which not only paid for the support of Gladys and the mission but also opened every door in the province to a witness of the gospel, at the expense of the government! Though she longed for a husband and children, God sent her

orphans who became her family. Then, God led and provided for Gladys as she brought 100 of them across the mountains to safety during a time of war. It was no accident that God led a journalist right to where Gladys was staying after all of that—a man who was trying to discover the story of the little woman who led 100 children to safety over the mountains by herself. We might say, after the movie *Inn of the Sixth Happiness* was made in 1958, that the rest is history. Gladys aspired only to accomplish the will of God, and though she learned to be contented without a husband and children of her own, her heart grew large enough by God’s grace to love the families of her province in China and many children who would not have known such love without her.

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#### **IV. Godly ambition meets grateful contentment when we trust God over time to accomplish His good will. Genesis 15:13-16; Luke 4:16-21; Acts 1:6-11**

**1. We must learn to believe in the providence of God. Romans 8:18, 28, 39.** Once again, the teaching of the Apostle Paul in Romans 8 helps us develop this faith and hope. We can trust His promise for a greater future, a loving and good purpose, and that we once we are His people by faith in Jesus, we will never be separated from His love. God is playing the Long Game with humanity.

**2. We must learn to believe in the timing of God. Genesis 15:13-16; Jeremiah 29:11.** God works with intention over time (*chronos*) to do just what He plans at the right moment (*kairos*). God fulfilled his promise to Abraham, albeit far into the future (see Genesis 15:13-16). The promise made to Abraham could only be justly fulfilled when it coincided with God’s judgment on the evil people who lived in the Promised Land, and it would be 400+ years in the future before the inhabitants of the land had crossed the line of no return, when “the sin of the Amorite” had become “complete” (see Genesis 15:16).

The descendants of Israel had to wait for 70 years in exile before God’s good purposes were fulfilled in their temporary judgment and they were finally allowed to return to the Promised Land (see Jeremiah 29:11). Then, Israel waited for centuries for the Messiah to come, and then He came in a way that they had not come to expect (see Luke 4:16-21). Now, we are waiting again for His glorious return. Peter explained the seeming delay across these many centuries: “The Lord of the promise does not hesitate, as some people consider hesitation, but *He is being patient toward you<sup>p</sup>*, not wishing anyone to perish but all people to make room for repentance” (2 Peter 3:9, FJV, my emphasis).

**A—We must learn the art of grateful living and faithful serving.**

#### **G. K. Chesterton: Much More than “The Mystical Minimum”**

G. K. Chesterton was saved out of the decadence and despair of his times, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, by a simple but profound insight: There is *something* rather than nothing, and we are here to observe and think about it. We can and must be grateful for existence itself, because everything else we think about comes from this basic fact: Here we are, wondering why and what it all means. From this “thin thread of thanks,” God brought Chesterton back to a robust and engaging confession of “the faith entrusted once for all to the saints” (Jude 3, FJV). He came to see how God had worked in history to fulfill not only pagan dreams but also specific promises in the coming of the unique Son of God, Jesus Christ. Chesterton came to understand how God had preserved and applied the insight and the power of that coming over time since then (See his book, *The Everlasting Man*). Chesterton grew into a spirit of grateful contentment and then aspired to help those of his generation (and beyond) to understand all of this, too.

Take it home (applications).

#### **I. Why are we here, and what does God want to do in and through our lives?**

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**Our Momentary Role.** It is tempting in every generation to believe that this is the generation of fulfilment, the generation in which everything important must happen. But, really, who can know

this? When Jesus was asked about the timing (*kairos*) of The End, He said, “About that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels in the heavens nor the Son, except the Father only” (Matthew 24:36, FJV). This statement is rightly understood as one evidence of the self-limitation that was necessary for the incarnation of the Son of God (see further, Philippians 2:7ff.). Jesus, though the Son of God *and* the Son of Man, humbled Himself to identify fully with those made in His image. He knew only what was predetermined for Him to know to fulfill His saving mission (cf. Hebrews 2:17). That did not for Him include the timing of The End, and so He did not tell us when that will happen, either. Since we cannot know when God will call an end to “this present age of evil” (Galatians 1:4, FJV), *we must be ready all the time*. We must grow in our relationship with God and see what we can do in our unique time and place to express His calling and gifting in our lives.

C. S. Lewis argued that we should aspire to be like an unnamed character in a Shakespeare play:

“In *King Lear*, there is a man who is such a minor character that Shakespeare has not given him even a name: he is merely ‘First Servant.’ All the characters around him—Regan, Cornwall, and Edmund—have fine long-term plans. They think they know how the story is going to end, and they are quite wrong. The servant has no such delusions. He has no notion of how the play is going to go. But he understands the present scene. He sees an abomination (the blinding of old Gloucester) taking place. He will not stand it.

His sword is out and pointed at his master’s breast in a moment: then Regan stabs him dead from behind. That is his whole part: eight lines all told. But if it were real life and not a play, that is the part it would be best to have acted.”<sup>2</sup>

## II. Will we trust God with our lives and serve Him with our best?

We must trust God with the outcome, both immediate and long-term. Since God, like Shakespeare in *King Lear*, is the Master of the Plot, we must trust Him to bring about His good purposes in the right time and in the right way. Such faith is how we can continue to aspire for more, while at the very same time be gratefully contented even with less than all we hope for.

A rather notable interview occurred with the evangelist **Billy Graham**, who in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was considered by many to be “America’s Pastor.” It is hard to conceive of the influence of this one man and of the team that he assembled to hold evangelistic crusades across the country and around the world. He was welcomed into the offices of presidents, prime ministers, kings, and queens. He knew things. In that notable interview, he was asked (I paraphrase), “Knowing what you do about world affairs, are you worried?” He answered something to this effect: “If I only had to go on what I know about human plans and purposes, I would be worried. But I am not worried, because **I have read the last page of the human story in the Bible, and I know how this is all going to end.**”

This is why we also can continue to aspire for more, even as we are grateful for less. We, too, can know what Graham knew. We can read the last page of the human story, as well, in its fullness in sacred Scripture. We can adjust our expectations for our own lives and for the story of humanity, because we can trust the One Who is telling the story, wherever we might fit in that narrative. And then, we can play our role with confidence, whether it seems great or small, trusting God to fit our part into His Grand Plot for the good of others and for His glory.

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<sup>2</sup> C. S. Lewis, “The World’s Last Night,” in *The World’s Last Night and Other Essays* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1952, 1955, 1958, 1959, 1960), pp. 104-05.