

The Theatre of Our Ambitions

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Preacher: Colin Dow

[0 : 01] In the face of Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, Paul saw God's redeeming love upon the throne of the universe. It had descended deeper than sin and death. It was now exalted above all the heavens. It filled all things.

That sight he carried with him everywhere. It was his salvation and his gospel, the inspiration of his inmost life, the motive of all his labors.

One who owed all this to Christ was not likely to make Christ's service the theatre of his own ambitions.

He could not do anything but take the servant's place and proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord. What part does ambition play in the service of the gospel?

Ambition is defined as the strong desire to achieve something and a determination to achieve success.

[1 : 06] Should ambition form any part of our service for Christ? Was the apostle Paul an ambitious man? Well, according to that quote I read at the beginning from the 19th century Free Church Father James Denny, ambition should shape and drive our service for Christ.

And yet it must not be selfish ambition. The service of our Lord is not to be, and I quote, the theatre of our own ambitions. Rather, it is the ambition, and once again I quote Denny, to take the servant's place and to proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord.

In other words, the ambition of the servant of Christ is to move downwards into the service of Christ's people and forwards into the proclamation of Christ's gospel.

There is to be no hint of that form of ambition which seeks personal advancement. Rather, it is ambition for the glory of Christ and the good of Christ's people.

Ambition for personal achievement in serving Christ does not belong to any conceivable Christian schema.

[2 : 26] We do not want, nor do we aim for, to be made much of by any man. Rather, the success we are determined to achieve is that all people everywhere would make much of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

Last week in our studies in 2 Corinthians 4, we considered together these golden words in verse 5. For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants or slaves for Jesus' sake.

And we saw that the two major features of the role of the gospel servant is proclamation and service. Proclaiming Christ, serving Christ's people.

We saw that the call of this verse is to radical self-denial. The intentional suppression of our own desire for recognition and reputation.

Whoever we are as Christians, our role is not to proclaim ourselves. We are not in the business of drawing attention to our competencies or to our charisma.

[3 : 46] Pardon me. Our role is to proclaim Christ. We're in the business of drawing attention to the love, the power, and the glory of Jesus. And again, as Christians, as you can see, our role is to serve others, literally to be their slaves.

Following on from the Lord who said, I did not come to be served, I did not come to be served, but to serve, our greatest ambition as Christians is to have the lowest place. To consciously suppress our desire for recognition and for prominence, and rather strive for the spiritual success of others.

This is God's call to radical service and ministry. The ministry of self-abasement and Christ-glodifying servitude.

The ministry of evangelism and God-glodifying proclamation. It is in so many ways diametrically opposed to what by nature we want to do and to be.

It is diametrically opposed to what is considered success by the world around us. The service of Christ is never, ever, ever to be the theatre of our own ambitions.

[5 : 10] Rather, the success we are determined to achieve is the glory of Christ and the good of his people. Pardon me.

But the thought world of verse 5 begs the question, verse 6 is designed to answer. Why must we as gospel servants proclaim Christ and not ourselves?

Why must we as gospel servants serve Christ's people in humility? What is our motive? Why isn't there even just the tiniest bit of space for selfish ambition in the pursuit of our goal?

The reason is given here in verse 6. For God who said, Let light shine out of darkness, made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

I've always felt that this verse is the heart of this chapter and is pregnant with meaning. The kind of verse a preacher is terrified of misusing. Perhaps that's one reason it's taken me 16 years to go anywhere near it.

[6 : 19] I don't claim to have plumbed its depths. If truth be told, it deserves a series of studies all on its own. But it's this verse which militates against the servant of Christ, making the service of Christ the theatre of his own ambitions.

I'm dealing with this verse only from one perspective and I admit that I am skipping important features of this text. I admit that, but needs must for our purposes this evening.

At first sight, perhaps we rush past the most important words in this verse. In truth, the key reason why there is no room even for the tiniest bit of ambition in the pursuit of our goal is found in the first couple of words of verse 6.

For God who, or more literally, because it is God who. In other words, the ultimate reason why the servant of Christ suppresses his or her desires to make the service of Christ the theatre of his or her own ambitions is because salvation is entirely, completely, 100% of God.

By nature, Paul says in verse 4, the gospel was veiled to us. Again in verse 5, the God of this age blinded our minds so that we could not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ.

[7 : 47] We were blind. But it was God who made his light to shine in our hearts. It was all of God and none of us. I remember the American preacher, Stephen Lawson, telling us about a conversation he had with the great R.C. Sproul where R.C. said to him, Steve, the important thing to remember is that the work of justification is entirely monergistic.

And I'll explain what these words mean. is entirely monergistic, whereas the work of sanctification is synergistic. What Sproul meant was that the work of the justifying of sinners is entirely the work of God.

we contribute nothing. We do nothing. We do not work for it. Rather, it is completely of God. And if he is right that we contributed nothing to our salvation, then what right do we have to pretend that we did?

We were dead. Christ made us alive. We were blind. Christ opened our eyes and not even the tiniest bit came from us. And therefore, we have no grounds upon which to boast of our achievements, to make much of ourselves, or to allow even the tiniest bit of selfish ambition to shine through.

Rather, because it was entirely of God, we make it our burning ambition to take the lowest place and to proclaim God's sovereign glory in the grace of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

[9 : 37] Our ambition is wholly focused on his glory and not our glory. Our ambition is entirely fixed on the success of the gospel, not on the success of our reputations.

ambition in the ministry of the gospel is necessary. There is nothing worse than an unambitious servant of Christ.

However, it must be the right kind of ambition. Not selfish, but slave-like. Not seeking one's own prominence or reputation, but the glory of Christ.

These five small words, these three small words at the beginning of this verse, dictate the whole of our lives as servants of Christ. For God who?

That, it seems to me, is the major teaching point of this verse. That our ambition for serving Christ is not to proclaim ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake.

[10 : 50] And that is driven by the knowledge that we have contributed nothing to our own salvation. That it is all of God. For God who? The service of Christ must therefore never be the theatre of our own ambitions.

It must be the exhibition of Christ's servant heart and the glory of God. God, if we are labouring under the illusion that we contributed anything at all, even the tiniest portion of our good works to our salvation, or that somehow we deserved the mind-opening miracle of God's sovereign grace, then we are likely to be the kind of Christian servants and Christian preachers who draw attention to ourselves rather than pointing to Christ.

we are likely to be the kind of Christian people who are unwilling to get down on our knees and serve others from below and not from above.

The rest of verse 6 is Paul driving home the point that the reason we pursue the kind of ministry we do is because we are fully convinced that salvation is all of God.

And he tells us three things briefly about the God into whose service we have been called and whose gospel glory we are called to proclaim both by words of speech and works of service.

[12 : 22] Each driving home this monergistic, this one only work of God in our salvation. In the first instance, we serve and proclaim the God whose word created.

The God whose word created. Paul begins this verse, it is God who said, let light shine out of darkness.

The apostle here is bringing us right back to the beginning of creation when the world was formless and empty and darkness was over the surface of the deep.

Every day in that primeval world was dark. In fact, there was no day and there was no night because there was nothing to separate one from the other. The whole of the earth was covered in one long polar winter.

It was pitch dark. If we had been there, we would have seen nothing because there was no light by which to see. Darkness was over the surface of the deep. And the question we want to ask is this, if everything was only ever dark blackness, where did the light come from?

[13 : 42] Paul isn't asking a scientific question, so let's not try to answer him using quantum mechanics. He's asking a straightforward question here of logic and reason. If everything at the beginning was only dark blackness, where did the light come from?

The light did not come from the darkness because by definition darkness is the absence of light. The light could not have come from the darkness, so where did it come from?

The answer is, God said, let light shine out of darkness. The divine word of God brought light from darkness.

The divine command was sufficient itself to create that which had not previously existed. And Paul's point here in context is that we as human beings, or the universe as the created work of God, we are entirely uninvolved in the creation of light.

We did not have a hand in the creation of the universe. We did not play even the tiniest part in its production. It was entirely God's work.

[14 : 52] It was absolutely 100% God's work. Can the human race boast of its achievement of creating light from the darkness in the very beginning?

No. No, such a thing came from God and from him alone. Did the light somehow come from the darkness? No, not at all. It was God who by his powerful word commanded such a thing.

And Paul's brilliant analogies drive home this point. In verse 6, there's darkness. According to verse 3, that the gospel is hidden from us.

It's veiled to us. According to verse 4, the God of this age has blinded our minds. These three words belong together. Darkness, hiddenness, blindness.

But by nature, this is who we are when it comes to the truth of the gospel glory of Christ. That we are blind to it. That it's hidden from us. It is as the darkness to us.

[15 : 57] What role did any of us here play in the creation of the light or of the universe? None at all. We had no part in it. It was entirely from God.

We cannot say of the universe or of the light. Look what I did. And somehow impressed people with our ability when all the time it was God who commanded the light to shine.

In the same way here, Paul is arguing that that removal of the veil from over our eyes, the opening of the eyes of our mind is 100% the work of God.

It is nothing of us, and therefore there is no room for boasting in any way. The proclamation of the work of God in creation is not to be the theater of our own ambitions, neither must the work of God in salvation be.

The second way Paul backs up his argument that salvation is 100% God, and therefore we preach Christ and not ourselves, is the God whose glory we have seen.

[17 : 07] The God whose glory we have seen. God's glory was manifest in the creation of light and the universe, but in no greater way do we see the glory of God than in the face of Jesus Christ.

As Denny said at the very beginning of our service this evening, in the face of Jesus Christ, Paul saw God's redeeming love upon the throne of the universe. The face of Christ, such an evocative phrase, a phrase which almost forces us to place ourselves in the presence of Jesus when, during his earthly ministry, he spoke such mighty words of power and he expressed his compassionate love to his people.

When during his death he cried out in pain to his father and drew his last breath. When during his resurrection his face was like that of the gardener and yet they recognized his smile.

When during his exaltation his face shone like the sun and all its brilliance and his hair was white like wool. The face of Jesus Christ, those eyes which were the mirror of his soul, those ears which acutely heard the cries of the needy, that mouth which was forever ready to speak a word of love and grace to the downtrodden.

Humanity has never seen glory like it did in the face of Christ. The greatest of sunrises in the highlands, the most glorious of sunsets over the western Atlantic.

[18 : 47] There is nothing compared to the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. And why is that face so glorious? It is because in that face we see the redeeming love of God.

The grace of God comes to us in the person and work in the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. What compares to the glory of God we see in the face of Christ?

Can it be said of any other human being, even the greatest of human beings, that the glory of God can be seen in his or her face? Does any preacher have the hubris arrogance to compare himself to Jesus Christ?

Has any other great man or woman given himself upon the cross to be the sacrifice for the sins of the world? Has any of this world's greatest ever been raised and exalted in such a way that their face shines like the sun and their eyes are like blazing fire?

Of course not. Why boast in who we are then as frail mortal sinners? Would any of us boast of our footballing skills and achievements if we were standing beside Lionel Messi?

[20 : 12] How much less would we boast of our gifts and graces when we're standing before the King of Glory, Jesus Christ in whose face shines the light of the knowledge of the glory of God?

Was even one of the greatest intellects of the modern age Paul the apostle able to stand beside his master Jesus in such a way that they could be compared? No.

And that's why Paul does not preach himself but Jesus Christ as Lord. But then of course we want to ask the question, what did we do to merit the coming and the living and the dying and the rising of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ?

Christ. We were perishing, verse 3. We were unbelieving, verse 4. There was nothing about the human race which drove God's hand to reward us for our achievements or our moral perfections.

As Paul says in another place, we were dead in our transgressions and sins. We were perishing, we were unbelieving. What role did we play in the cross and resurrection?

[21 : 25] What part did we play in the earning of our salvation? Nothing. None at all. It was entirely of God. We cannot say, look what I did and impress people with our ability when all the time it was Christ who worked salvation for us.

In the same way Paul says, there is no room for self-promotion in the service of Christ. The proclamation of the cross and resurrection, the lordship of Christ and our salvation is not the theatre of our own ambition.

And then the third and final reason why we are to proclaim not ourselves but Jesus Christ as Lord is that God has shined in our hearts.

God has shined in our hearts. God shined in the light. God shined in the light shine.

The word itself is that from which we get the English word lamp, that which brings light in the darkness. darkness, in the darkness of our blinded minds, God turned on the lamp of his glory.

[22 : 44] We once were blind but now can see. Whereas before we merely admired Jesus, now we bow down to him, we proclaim him Lord and Saviour. the eyes of our mind and our hearts have been opened by the sovereign grace and glory of God to the face of Jesus Christ.

Now of course for the Apostle Paul as we know, such a thing happened on the road to Damascus. Remember how this zealous young Pharisee named Saul of Tarsus was stopped in his tracks by the exalted Lord who cried out to him, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?

Remember how a great light from heaven shone and blinded his eyes? Remember how the blindness of Saul of Tarsus' eyes is contrasted with the openness of his heart?

But when the glory of the exalted Christ shone, it blinded Saul's eyes? But it opened Saul's heart.

And from that very moment, Saul of Tarsus realized that he had been wrong from the get-go, that Jesus Christ really was Lord, and that he had been trying to earn his salvation by good works of righteousness, and it was as nothing compared to the righteousness of God which comes through faith in Jesus Christ.

[24 : 16] That's the experience as we've seen which held Paul in a kind of trance for his whole life, the Damascus Road encounter with the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

And as he looks back, he recognizes that to him, Saul of Tarsus now called Paul, the worst of sinners, was given the highest of all honors, that he should know Christ.

Christ. The light of Christ's gospel opened the heart of Saul of Tarsus, the Saul who at that very moment was engaged in the extermination of the early church.

Did Saul of Tarsus deserve or merit such favor? No. It was to the worst of sinners Christ revealed himself in glory that day on the road to Damascus.

The Apostle Paul could never have claimed, even for one moment, that he played any part in Christ's light shining and blinding his eyes, but opening his heart. It was all of God.

[25 : 29] And you know, what's true for Saul of Tarsus is true for many of us. Perhaps you can't put an exact time on it. Perhaps it was a more gradual process. But before the process began, we admired Christ perhaps, but we did not bow to him as Lord or pray to him as Savior.

But there came a time when God shined the lamp of his glory into our hearts. And perhaps in a moment, maybe not, we saw not only how uniquely glorious Christ is, but we bowed before him and we called him Lord.

And afterwards, when we thought about it, we concluded that it was not so much that we had ever been searching for Christ and had now found him, but that all along he had been searching for us and had by his spirit now opened our minds and hearts.

So we can never say, look what I did, and impress people with our ability when all the time it was God who opened our hearts and minds to the light of the knowledge of his glory in the face of Christ.

And in the same way here, Paul is once again arguing that there is no room for self-promotion in the service of Christ. The proclamation of the cross and resurrection, the Lordship of Christ and our salvation, is not to be the theater, of our own ambition.

[27 : 02] Our ambition as servants of Christ is to be altogether different. It is to see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ filling our homes and our workplaces.

It is to see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ filling our city and our nation and our world. It is to work toward the fulfillment of that wonderful prayer in Psalm 57 verse 5.

Be exalted, O God, above the heavens. Let your glory be over all the earth. Let that be our motive for proclaiming not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as each other's servants for Jesus' sake.

that the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ may be known and loved of all people. That in our homes and in our streets, in the businesses and parliaments of our nation and our world, every knee would bow and every tongue confess, Jesus Christ is Lord.

Lord, are you an ambitious person? Am I? Are these not wonderful ambitions?

[28 : 19] God of since? Sing■■■■ maar. Comme invite you in the world, everyone. He has gone tootifology. He will have an cumin, but that in the remaining 20,000 foot in the Sana szayl voice and can't harvest through the entire age.

Or REPRODENDABIL wo?