

Rescuing Ambition

Dave Harvey

FOREWORD BY C. J. MAHANEY



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Foreword

Humble ambition. Is such a thing even possible?

If you'd asked me twenty years ago, I would have said, "I don't think so."

My friend Dave Harvey is one of the men who have helped me see otherwise. Humility doesn't have to quench ambition. And ambition—the right kind—doesn't have to trample humility. In fact, we honor the Savior by cultivating both.

If that surprises you, then you need to meet Dave.

I vividly remember a conversation Dave and I had years ago. We were sitting outside during an afternoon break in a conference we were attending in Coventry, England. For once it wasn't raining, but that's not why my memory of it is so vivid.

Dave and I had no agenda for our time together. We were just good friends talking and laughing, following the conversation wherever it went. But the relaxed scene was quickly infused with passionate vision when we began to talk about the future. We talked about starting new churches and about whether it was appropriate for us to be ambitious in serving the Savior.

I'm sure Dave brought up the topic of ambition, because it wasn't something I'd given much thought to, if any. For myself, I was immediately suspicious of ambition in my life in whatever form it appeared.

But it was obvious to me that Dave had given much careful thought to the subject. He was wary of the temptation to have selfish ambition, but he also had big dreams. He had a holy drive to advance the gospel through church planting. And as we talked, it was obvious I needed to reconsider my assessment of ambition.

Since that afternoon I've had many conversations with Dave about ambition. And today I can heartily commend this book to you.

Now, Dave hasn't been on a personal campaign to write this book. It was only recently that he wondered about writing on ambition, and all his friends encouraged him to do it. We think he's qualified for a number of reasons. Let me give you just a few.

FOREWORD

We think Dave is uniquely qualified to write this book because theology shapes his thinking. He's been studying this for years. Gospel-centered, sound doctrine informs his understanding of this topic.

And he hasn't simply studied it with detached, academic interest. Dave is uniquely qualified to write this book because he has also studied his own heart. He pays very careful attention to his own soul, alert for the slightest presence of selfish ambition. In this book he's going to tell you what he's discovered about his heart. It's not flattering stuff. Dave is a humble man, and he'll help you get to know your own heart.

Maybe you're like I was before my conversion, with no discernible ambition at all. Maybe you keep your dreams manageable and tame because it's just easier that way. Or maybe you're more like Dave—full of boundless energy, always looking for the next challenge. And maybe you've seen your own ambitions turn ugly, as dreams morph into demands and life becomes a quest for personal glory.

Either way, this book is for you. You see, this book is about much more than selfish ambition. This book is about grace. It's about ambition for the glory of Another. It's about seeing ambition rescued and sanctified for the advance of the gospel and the service of your local church, your family, your office, your school. It's about igniting ambition for the glory of God.

Every one of us is ambitious for something or someone. (Yep, that includes you.) But too few of us have thought biblically about ambition. We don't like to talk about it. We assume that if we avoid the topic, we'll avoid temptation. We need someone to talk with, someone to teach us about our aspirations. This book will help you cultivate holy ambition.

So if you think, like I once did, that humility and ambition can't coexist, turn the page. I think years from now you'll remember where you were when you first read this book and what a difference it made in your life.

C. J. Mahaney
Sovereign Grace Ministries

Introduction: Ambition's Face

Welcome to the introduction—the why-should-I-stop-my-busy-life-to-start-reading-this section. An extensive survey (meaning the one I conducted by walking around my office and asking a few people) has conclusively proven that people rarely read introductions. So thanks for bucking the trend.

Let's tackle the curiosity question delivering you here in the first place: Why should you, with so many demands already hijacking your time, read this book? Let me answer that question in a manner befitting a pastor. Cue the story.

For the past couple decades, I had a condition that kept me from sleeping well. The technical term was apnea. My wife called it “snoring-like-all-git-out.”

So I went to see the doctor. “I'll remove your uvula,” he said, “then you won't snore. You'll sleep better.” Now, I didn't even know I had a uvula, but I freaked when he suggested its removal. There's something about doctors, scalpels, and stitches in the throat area that makes one more content to go without sleep.

For some reason, though, I let them do it. They cut out my uvula. And now I can sleep.

But here's something I didn't expect. When I lost my uvula, I found my dreams. You see, because I never slept well, I never dreamed. I know experts would say I dreamed and just didn't know it—but that doesn't matter because I don't ever remember dreaming. Not once. I was dreamless. Even an expert will tell you that's a boring way to spend a night.

I didn't even know I'd lost my dreams until I found them—or, rather, they were returned to me. Actually, they were rescued, airlifted from some cold, lifeless crevice where dreams hibernate until the arrival of deep sleep. Or something like that.

All this may sound strange, but it's true. My dreams were rescued by a guy with a scalpel. Go figure.

Lots of people live that way—you know, without dreams. They move from one day to the next without the refreshing effect of a memorable dream. I can relate. My lack of dreaming was never bad enough to disrupt my life, just enough to turn my nights into slow motion and make my days hazy, like a mist fogging my mental windshield.

But there are dreams we can lose that are much more significant than those I was losing. Not the REM kind of dreams, but the dreams that drive us when we're awake. The dreams that cause us to reach beyond ourselves, to see beyond the present and to live for something more.

If you're having trouble holding on to those types of dreams, that's a real problem. And this book is for you.

The Most Secret Passion?

My friend Andy is a gifted man who grew up with little drive to develop or use his gifts. Be all you can be? Nah. Ambition for Andy was like algebra—he needed enough of it to pass, but any more than that wasn't worth the trouble. Andy preferred a good nap to a new challenge. He didn't have many dreams—or he'd lost the ones he had.

In college, Andy was converted to Christ. His life was no longer his own. He realized that his fruitfulness as a Christian was linked to his dreams and desires for God. Over time Andy's eyes were opened to dreams he'd never had—aspirations for the glory of God. That changed Andy as a man, a husband, a father, a Christian. He saw the connection between dreams—the right kind—and enjoyment, fruitfulness, and glorifying God. That's quite a connection.

What comes to your mind when you think of ambition? Do you see it as something occupying the interest of God?

Those are the kind of dreams I'm talking about in this book. They stir one of the most potent motivations of the human heart: *ambition*. It's the instinctual motivation to aspire to things, to make something happen, to have an impact, to count for something in life.

Herman Melville called ambition “the most secret of all passions.”¹ What do you call it? What comes to your mind when you think of ambition? Does the word conjure images of megalomaniacal petty dictators or chew-up-anybody-in-my-way corporate climbers? Or do you see ambition as an important part of great human achievement—the drive behind scientific discovery, political change, artistic excellence?

More importantly, do you see it as something occupying the interest of God?

Do you know what comes to mind when I think of ambition?

Me.

I’ve always had more of it than I knew what to do with. If it involved a ball, I wanted to be on a winning team. If it involved a group, I wanted to lead. If it involved school, I wanted to leave to go play something with a ball. (Yeah, my ambitions were strong, but they ran pretty shallow.) From early on, I remember wanting to make an impact, to differentiate myself in some way. Gimme the ball, gimme the lead, gimme the wheel—it didn’t matter. I just wanted to be somebody creating momentum. And if, in some strange and totally unexpected way, my actions brought attention to *me* . . . then bring it on, baby!

John Adams once spoke of the natural “passion for distinction” we all have—how every person is “strongly actuated by a desire to be seen, heard, talked of, approved and respected.”² I’m not saying this is a good thing, but it sure was a Dave thing.

Being “first wherever I may be” was an unconscious mantra I repeated with religious fervor. And it’s that very struggle with ambition gone bad that led me to write this book.

Maybe you’re like me. You have a vision of success that guides your dreams and decisions each day.

Or maybe you’re saying, “Nope, I’m with Andy. I’m pretty good at just chillin’ with whatever comes along.” But ambition, by definition, is about the future, which means it’s about all of us. And as we step into the future, whatever it is we’re pursuing—whether it’s Mr. Right, the corner office, well-behaved kids, successful ministry, or just a long nap—it matters to God.

So does the *reason* we pursue it.

Rescue Operation

The ambition dreams I'm talking about can't be unlocked with a surgical procedure. They need to be rescued. To rescue means to save something, to prevent it from being discarded or harmed. Capsized ships need it; damsels in distress need it; sometimes our economy needs it. Ambition needs it as well.

You see, I believe that ambition—godly ambition, that is—is a noble force for the glory of God. But let's face it: ambition has mostly hovered outside respectability. For church leaders from Augustine to Jonathan Edwards, ambition was synonymous with the love of earthly honor, vainglory, fame-hunting—pretty slimy stuff.

Today's cultural climate doesn't help. The prevailing worldview in the West involves a distrust in big ideas and man's ability to achieve them and the firm belief that objective truth doesn't exist. But when we deny truth, we suffocate ambition. Without truth as a foundation and ideas worth exploring, meandering replaces meaning, confusion trumps conviction, ambivalence swallows aspiration—nothing really matters all that much.

Humility, rightly understood, shouldn't be a fabric softener on our aspirations.
True humility doesn't kill our dreams;
it provides a guardrail for them.

Ambition must also be rescued from a wrong understanding of humility. That may sound crazy, but I'm serious. I think this issue quenches a lot of evangelical fire. Humility, rightly understood, shouldn't be a fabric softener on our aspirations. When we become too humble to act, we've ceased being biblically humble. True humility doesn't kill our dreams; it provides a guardrail for them, ensuring that they remain on God's road and move in the direction of his glory.

Ultimately, it's we ourselves who hold ambition hostage. We're sinners, we love ourselves, we aspire to bring glory to ourselves, and

we'll drop godly dreams if something more attractive shows up—and in the process, the right kind of dreams die.

So this book is my own little attempt at a rescue operation. The idea is to save ambition—specifically, godly ambition—and return it to where it belongs. To do this, we must snatch ambition from the dust heap of failed motivations and put it to work for the glory of God.

What About You?

Whether you view yourself as a Dave or an Andy, ambitious or laid-back, proactive or reactive, type A or type C, whether you're a student, housewife, executive, politician, or pastor, whether you're staring at a life of opportunities or of limitations, how you relate to ambition will define what you do and who you become far more than you might realize. "One way to clarify your spirituality," says Donald Whitney, "is to clarify your ambition."³

I'm not rooting this perspective in common sense or well-researched psychological studies. Nope, ambition is inherent in who we are before the God who created us. The Bible teaches that people are created by God to desire—and to go after those desires with single-minded determination. It's this capacity to desire and strive that can generate remarkable good or stupefying evil. Whether it's to conquer nations or control the remote, we're hardwired to be ambitious for what we want.

Why read this book? Read it to make connections between what you want and what you do . . . between your present opportunities and your future hopes . . . between your life and God's glory. These connections rescue us from fruitlessness, pointlessness, purposelessness, and the haunting gray twilight of wasted time and lost opportunity. They remind us that a big God uses small people to steer the course of history—people like you and me.

To understand ambition, we must understand that each of us lives on a quest for glory. Where we find it determines the success of our quest.

And that's where our journey begins.

Putting Ambition to Work

It's time to reach further and dream bigger for the glory of God.

"This is not a self-help book that doesn't really help; it's a wake-up alarm to rouse the good gifts specifically placed within us by God for his own glory."

SCOTT THOMAS, *Director, Acts 29 Church Planting Network*

"You will find this book not only profitable but also hard to put down."

JERRY BRIDGES, *author, The Pursuit of Holiness*

"Dave Harvey has delivered a compelling case for developing God-ward ambition in the lives of men and women alike. With self-effacing humor, Dave reveals how being wired for glory can either corrupt us or lead us to a divine agenda. Highly recommended!"

CAROLYN MCCULLEY, *author, Radical Womanhood and Did I Kiss Marriage Goodbye?*

"I hope every leader in the church today will read *Rescuing Ambition*."

ED STETZER, *President, LifeWay Research*

"Whether you're on Main Street or Wall Street, this book has something to say to you."

JOSH DECKARD, *Former Assistant Press Secretary to President Bush*

"Those who want to live with high and glorious purpose for the Savior must read this book."

THABITI ANYABWILE, *Senior Pastor, First Baptist Church of Grand Cayman; author, What Is a Healthy Church Member?*

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