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Please, send Questions, Feedback and Comments to: E-mail: imoisilic@hotmail.com

YOUR AMBITION IS NOT NECESSARILY GOD'S PURPOSE!

Today's Text: Isaiah Chaps 10, 13

Extracts:

Woe to Assyria, the rod of My anger, and the staff in whose hand is My indignation. I will send him against the people of My wrath. I will give him charge, to seize the spoil, to take the prey, and to tread down like the mire of the streets. Yet he does not mean so, nor does his heart think so; but it is in his heart to destroy, and to cut off not a few nations. For he says, 'Are not my princes altogether kings?' ... Therefore it shall come to pass, when the Lord has performed all His work on Mount Zion and on Jerusalem, that He will say, 'I will punish the fruit of the arrogant heart of the king of Assyria, and the glory of his haughty looks' [Is. 10: 5-8, 12]

*In the movie, **Sister Act** (1992), it was the ambition of a young lady to have a successful singing career in Las Vegas and its environs. When her mafia kingpin ex-lover was arrested, police saw her as a major prosecution witness. So, they put her in protective custody for a while in a convent. There, she was required to wear the habit of a nun and to observe a disciplined life style. She was even given the name Sister Mary Clarence. To keep her away from mischief, the Rev. Mother put her in the choir. Soon enough, her singing talents began to find expression in a very different setting. She became the choir leader and transformed the choir to the extent that attendance (especially of young people) in the local church grew tremendously. When the Pope visited San Francisco, he desired and had the opportunity to be entertained by the new choir. The Las Vegas girl had become a music sensation in God's house!*

Most of us have similar desires or dreams or drives to excel in our chosen fields of human endeavour, for good or for bad! Just as there are musical prodigies or top athletes or renowned scientists, we also have elusive terrorists and professional gangsters, all of them using God-given talents for their personal goals. For example, what is God's purpose in the ambitions of Osama Bin Laden? Why did God make it possible for the American cyclist, Lance Armstrong, to beat cancer and win the Tour de France seven years in a row (1998-2005)? To what extent are our personal ambitions synonymous with God's purposes? Today's lesson will attempt to examine this theme.

1. Ambition is good but ...

There is hardly any of us who does not have a desire for success in something. Without a purpose, our lives will hardly have any direction or meaning. Therefore, ambition can be a healthy thing. For example, good Christians are encouraged to desire the best gifts of the Holy Spirit [**1 Cor. 12: 31**], or strive to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ [**Rom. 15: 17-20**], or make themselves acceptable before God [**2 Cor. 5: 9-10**]. Unfortunately, Satan likes to counterfeit every good thing.

A counterfeit is an unauthorized copy of the original. For example, in developing countries with an acute shortage of American dollar notes, we do hear of cases of counterfeit notes in circulation. Two interesting features should be observed about such counterfeit notes:

- Firstly, they are not made by the state authorities but by criminals! Counterfeit notes or coins are not made by the mint or official agency of the state. Criminals who are usually under the close surveillance of the security forces make them in hideouts. What is interesting is that no matter how carefully the counterfeiters try, they can never produce genuine copies.
- Secondly, high-value notes tend to be more counterfeited than low-value denominations. It is rare to find fake dollar coins or fake small notes. Instead, criminals go for the fifty-dollar or one hundred dollar units! Since they are not sure of the degree of success, higher units are likely to yield better results, so criminals reason.

The forgoing suggests that Satan-inspired ambition is to be found more among leadership positions in the church and in the world than at lower levels. For example, battles for leadership positions in the church, business organizations or in politics are fiercer, if not more dirty than those at lower levels. Competitors resort to intrigue, blackmail or corrupt practices to defeat their opponents. They sign unholy pacts and promise rewards that they may not be able to deliver should they ultimately win.

The word of God says, “Exaltation comes neither from the east nor from the west nor from the south. But *God is the Judge; He puts down one, and exalts another*” [**Ps. 75: 6-7**]. It is to be expected that *God will exalt those whose personal ambitions are consonant with God’s purposes*. Whether in our studies or marriage or work or business or ministry, we do not want to operate outside of God’s plan. How then can we know that our ambitions will fit into that mode so that we can continue to be exalted? Let us study the ambitions of the Assyrian king and how God dealt with him, as reported in the book of Isaiah.

2. The Assyrian king’s ambition

The setting of our story begins after the larger kingdom of Israel had been conquered by the Assyrians and most of its inhabitants taken captive into exile in Babylon [2 Kgs 17: 7-12]. The Assyrians might have been surprised about the ease with which they had sacked Israel, given what they had heard from the pagan kingdoms about the power of the God of the Jews. So, why not go all the way and seize the smaller kingdom of Judah, with its attractive capital, Jerusalem?

Therefore, the Assyrian king had the ambition to:

- ❑ build by conquest a large and powerful empire [Is. 10: 7]. Most empire builders find it difficult to stop expanding their power base. Why not conquer the whole world?
- ❑ annex Jerusalem as he had done to Samaria, the capital of the kingdom of Israel [v. 11]. The city had a fascinating history. To control it is to be part of its history!
- ❑ create fiefdoms for his princes (generals) [v. 8]. The king's commanders also had their own personal ambitions. They should also be enabled to become bigger as the kingdom expanded. After all, would that not be a good insurance against insurrection or assassination?

In pursuing his ambition, the king trusted his own might and assured himself, "As my hand has found the kingdoms of the idols, whose carved images excelled those of Jerusalem and Samaria, as I have done to Samaria and their idols, shall I not do also to Jerusalem and her idols?" [vv. 10-11]. He added, "By the strength of my hand I have done it, and by my wisdom, for I am prudent" [v. 12].

How so human it is for us to take full credit for success! You need to hear winners at the Oscars (movie awards), Emmys (television), and the Grammy (music) making acceptance speeches. A negligible few may under the guise of the 'born again fad' thank "my Lord Jesus" or simply "God" as an addendum. The majority may thank their producers and fans and family. Almost all of them will show either in words or body language that they have earned the award! You want to hear more? Biographies and autobiographies of "self-made" men and women have always flooded the market. Our CVs (résumés) speak volumes of our single-handed achievements as if we only worked with robots! *Once arrogance steps in, our personal ambitions take a divergent route from God's purpose!*

3. His ambition failed where God's purpose began!

As far as God was concerned, He was looking for a *battleaxe* ("the rod of My anger") to "send him *against an ungodly nation* and against the people of My wrath" [Is. 10: 5-6]. His chosen people had gone into idol worship and wicked practices [2 Kgs 18: 19, 28-30]. God does not hesitate to send armies of any kind against the disobedient [Joel 2: 25] but *His aim is to provoke repentance* among them. For example, when the people of Nineveh repented, following Jonah's sermon, God spared the city of 120,000 people that He had planned to destroy [Jon. 3: 10].

Mount Zion is significant in God's eyes. A Jebusite fortress that was captured by David [2 Sam. 5: 6-9], and later the place from which Solomon brought the ark [2 Chron. 5: 2], it now represents God's spiritual kingdom that cannot be moved but abides forever [Ps. 125: 1]. Lamenting the state of Zion during the captivity, Jeremiah wrote, "Because of the mountain of Zion which is desolate, the foxes walk upon it" [Lam. 5: 18]. Do you know what foxes do? They spoil the vines [Song of Sol. 2: 15]. Human foxes eat away at the spiritual fabric of the church, grieve the Holy Spirit and expel Him from God's holy house.

See how Jesus Christ responded to the desecration of the temple in Jerusalem. He found there people who sold oxen, sheep and doves, and money changers doing business. He made a strong whip and "drove them all out of the temple" with their merchandise, warning them, "Do not make My Father's house a house of merchandise!" [Jn 2: 13-16]. Whether Jesus or the Assyrian king did it, God's purpose was to clean up the mess into which His chosen people had turned Jerusalem and the temple, and, of course, themselves!

To the extent that the people remained unrepentant, the Assyrian king continued to achieve his own personal ambitions. Then God completed His purpose on Mount Zion and on Jerusalem (that is, He got the people to repent) and said, "I will punish the fruit of the arrogant heart of the king of Assyria and the glory of his haughty looks" [Is. 10: 12]. After all, who was the king to boast of his might? Can an axe boast against the person who wields it? Can a rod wield itself? Can a battle weapon lift up itself? [v. 15]. The king had gone too far!

Let us take up the story in the 14th year of the reign of Hezekiah, king of Judah [2 Kgs 18: 13-37]. Sennacherib was the king of Assyria. During his first invasion, he came up against all the fortified cities of Judah and took them. In addition, Hezekiah gave him all the treasures of the temple and of the king's house. He stripped the gold from the doors of the temple and gave it to the invader [vv. 13-16]. At the time, foxes walked on Mount Zion!

As if that was not enough disgrace for the city of God, the Assyrian king sent another wave of invasion to Jerusalem under a loquacious general, Rabshakeh, who boasted in the local language, saying, "If you say to me, 'We trust in the Lord our God,' is it not He whose high places and whose altars Hezekiah had taken away, and said to Judah and Jerusalem, 'You shall worship before this altar in Jerusalem'?... Have I now come up without the Lord against this place to destroy it? The Lord said to me, 'Go up against this land, and destroy it!'" [vv. 22, 25].

Here is one mistake that ambitious people make. They stick to an earlier mandate or grace that God granted or allowed them when it suited His purpose and assume that it is for all times! They think that they can continue to win without realizing what the pursuit of their ambition has done to their relationship with God.

That was what happened to the Assyrian king. What he did not know was that king Hezekiah and the elders of the priests had declared a fast, to seek for God's forgiveness. He had sent also to the prophet, Isaiah, to "lift up your prayer for the remnant that is left." Through the prophet, God reassured Hezekiah, "Thus says the Lord, 'Do not be afraid of the words which you have heard, with which the servants of the king of Assyria have blasphemed Me. Surely I will send a spirit upon him, and he shall return to his own land; and I will cause him to fall by the sword in his own land'" [2 Kgs 19: 1-7]. *The Lord had achieved his purpose by getting the people to repent and turn from their evil ways.* From that point on, the Assyrian king had lost his mandate over Judah.

As the Assyrian king pursued his personal ambitions that no longer served God's purpose, he was defeated even without a fight. One night, an angel of the Lord descended on the Assyrian camp and killed 185,000 troops. Sennacherib hurried back to Nineveh, his capital. One day, as he was worshipping in the temple of his idol, Nisroch, two of his own sons struck him down and he died [vv. 35-37]. His personal ambitions blew in the wind!

4. Lessons

Here are important conclusions that we can draw from this study:

- ❑ God loves to bless us in material and spiritual ways [3 Jn 2]. The blessings are wrapped around the talents that He has given to everyone of us. Our ambitions are in turn wrapped around areas where our talents find opportunities. *It is a blessing when we excel in what we know how best to do. What we then do with the blessing is another matter!*
- ❑ As illustrated by the Parable of the Talents [Matt. 25: 14-30], some of us use their talents to manifest those blessings while some use their God-given talents to bury their blessings. *Those who have buried their blessings are those whose personal ambitions are not in line with God's purpose.*
- ❑ In pursuing your personal ambitions, it is important to *always remind yourself of God's purpose(s)*. In today's text, God pronounced "woe" to those who decree unrighteous decrees, rob the needy of justice and the poor of their rights, prey on widows and the fatherless. From such people, His anger will never be turned away [Is. 10: 1-4], and it is against such people that He will summon an attacking army (as in the case of the Assyrian attack on Judah) [Is. 13: 1-5].
- ❑ An attacking army can take different forms. For example, a misapplied ambition (that is, one that goes against God's purpose) can lead to arrest and jail (as in the case of criminals) or bankruptcy (as in the case of famous actors and sports stars). It can take the form of splits among a congregation or church.

As we approach end times, you need to reappraise the profile of your own personal ambitions. Consider the following issues:

- ❑ How did you set them? Did you ask God or you simply stumbled on them? What do you hope to achieve by each of them?
- ❑ Why do you think that you seem to make progress in some but decline or fail in others?
- ❑ What impact does each have on your relationship with other people? Where it hurts them, is it to chasten or to cheat them?
- ❑ What is in there for God? Are you pursuing His purpose(s)?
- ❑ Do you need to reconsider your life ambitions in the light of the imminent return of Jesus Christ?

May God bless your ambitions as you allow Him to use them as an opportunity to achieve His own purposes.