

Rescuing Ambition by Dave Harvey, Crossway, Wheaton, IL: 2010. (11 Quotes selected by Doug Nichols)

1. Ambition Conceived -- We Are Wired for Glory

“Along the River Wye in Wales, there’s a little market town know as Hay-on-Wye. This quaint village has earned an international reputation for its rather unusual trade -- buying and selling used books. With more than thirty used bookstores within a square mile (one occupying an entire castle), this place embodies story book charm.

“My friend Pete, an Irish Englishman living in Wales, frequented the town and its bookshops for years. He arrived each time with a single goal: to excavate the theology sections and unearth an original copy of *Lectures to My Students* by the great nineteenth century preacher Charles Spurgeon. But Pete wouldn’t settle for just any original copy; he wanted one signed by Spurgeon’s wife, Susannah.

“What’s with the signature? This remarkable woman was bedridden for much of her marriage but somehow managed to start a ministry called the Book Fund. Seeking to serve her husband and their church in the cause of the gospel, Susannah provided free copies of Spurgeon’s books to pastors all over the world. Before they went out, she typically personalized them with her own signature.

“Pete figured a few of these copies had endured a century of use and would eventually turn up in Hay-on-Wye. They are keys to their discovery, he told me, were patience, perseverance, and a keen eye. This guy was like Indiana Jones on a used book safari.

“On a visit with Pete to Hay-on-Wye, I stood in the theology section of a bookshop as my friend recounted his quest to find his treasure. As a first-timer to this Holy Land of Used Books, I was just honored to make the pilgrimage. I was also impresses with Pete’s dedication. To search for an original-edition Spurgeon book is a true measure of theological devotion. But to return to Hay-on-Wye time and time again to rescue a book with a symbolic signature makes its own statement. There was someone willing to pursue a valued prize with uncommon devotion.

“There among the shelves, as Pete chronicled his tale of miles traveled and hours logged in his still-fruitless search for Susannah, my vision focused on a book perched on the shelf behind his shoulder. Slipping his gaze for a second, I squinted at the title. Sure enough, string back at me was a dusty copy of *Lectures to My Students* signed by Susannah Spurgeon. I reached over his shoulder and pulled the book from the shelf. Without interrupting Pete’s continuing narration, I flipped open the worn cover and glanced down.

“You guessed it. In the rookie hands of this Hay-on-Wye green-horn was an original copy of *Lectures to My Students* signed by Susannah Spurgeon. A smile crept across my face. Oh boy, this was gonna be good.

“One of my greatest privileges in ministry is working with the church in the United Kingdom. But these mates describe Americans as a bunch of illiterates who sack the English language like a lordless fiefdom. Since I don’t know what a lordless fiefdom is, I usually just smile and nod. But right hen I knew one thing: in less than sixty seconds, I had nabbed this treasure for which my well-versed Irish-English-Welsh friend had spent years searching.

“While Pete kept talking, I held out the opened cover and said with my best Philadelphian Shakespeare, ‘Yo, dude, is this what you’re looking for?’
“Score one for the Yanks.” (p. 17-18)

2. Eight Cows and a Worthy Call.

“Ever heard of Johnny Lingo? He was a character in a short piece of fiction written by Patricia McGerr in 1965. Johnny was Polynesian and one of the sharpest traders in the South Pacific Islands. Strong, bright, and rich, he was a leader among the people on the island of Nurabandi.

“On the adjacent island of Kiniwata, there lived a woman named Sarita. She was no looker--plain, skinny, and in desperate need of some Mary Kay products. She walked the village with a fretful disposition, shoulders sloping downward as if she carried some unseen burden. But for reasons known only to poets and prophets, Johnny loved Sarita and wanted her as his wife.

“It was customary among the people of these islands for a man to buy his wife from her father--sort of a reverse dowry. Two or three cows would secure an average wife. Adding another cow would get you an upgrade; two or more would be a head-turning beauty and some Ginsu knives.

“In a transaction shocking the islanders, Johnny shelled out *eight* cows for Sarita. Why pay quadruple the going rate for Sarita? Simple. Johnny wanted her to know that in his eyes she was worth more than any other woman. It was a statement from him of her value. To Johnny, she was an eight-cow wife.

“Word of this unprecedented bride price spread far and wide. But that’s not the end of the story.

“One day a visitor came who had heard the story of Johnny’s marriage and wanted to see the bride for herself. When she did, she couldn’t believe her eyes. Sarita ‘was the

most beautiful woman I had ever seen,' the woman reflected. 'The lift of her shoulders, the tilt of her chin, the sparkle of her eyes all spelled a pride to which no one could deny her the right.'

"Sarita *became* what Johnny declared her to be: an eight-cow wife. She was walking worthy of her call.

"Like Sarita, we're called to become what God has declared us to be. Like the stranded airmen in Yugoslavia, we're rescued to start walking. God saved us, adopted us, forgave us, declared us righteous in his sight, and altered our desires so they bend toward him. Then He says to us, 'Now become what I have declared you to be.'

"John Murray puts it well:

To say to a slave who has not been emancipated, 'Do not behave as a slave' is to mock his enslavement. But to say the same to the slave who has been set free is the necessary appeal to put into effect the privileges and rights of his liberation. (John Murray, as quoted by Jerry Bridges in *Disciplines of Grace* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1994), 74.)

"Paul begins to explain what walking worthy looks like in the next two verses: '...with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace' (Eph. 4:2-3)." (p. 65-67)

3. Waiting Cultivates Patience.

"Two centuries ago the young English pastor Charles Simeon aspired to shepherd God's people. He was eventually appointed to the pulpit at Trinity Church in Cambridge. He was delighted, but the people were disgusted. Most of the members opposed his evangelical convictions and were intent on frustrating his ministry. For twelve years their opposition was expressed in a most unusual manner. They actually boycotted the Sunday service and locked the pews so no one else could sit in them. Folks coming to church had to sit in the aisles. During that time, Simon preached, pastored and waited.

"How does someone endure that kind of irrational opposition for twelve years?

"In this state I saw no remedy but faith and patience ...It was most painful indeed to see the church, with the exception of the aisles, almost forsaken; but I thought that if God would only give a double blessing to the congregation that did attend,

there would on the whole be as much good done as if the congregation were doubled and the blessing limited to only half the amount. This comforted me many, many times, when without such a reflection, I should have sunk under my burden. (H.C.G. Moule, *Charles Simeon* (London: Methuen & Co., 1892), 38.)

“Faith and patience prevailed. Charles Simeon eventually saw his pews emancipated and his pastorate at that church blessed for forty-four more years. As Simeon recounted the precious passages that sustained him during the earlier twelve years, he often quoted Lamentations 3:25, “The Lord is good to those who wait for him.” (p. 73)

4. God’s Sovereignty Ignites a Robust Faith.

“I know, there’s plenty of ‘faith’ teaching going around that instructs people to believe that faith generates its own creative power. But that Leads us inward and selfward, not upward and Godward. Our faith doesn’t create prosperity, healings, and breakthroughs. Our faith focuses fervently on God. Biblical faith confidently--even ambitiously--asks God to act according to his promises. True faith then accepts the answer. Our faith stands on the unchanging character of God.

“Now if you, like me, love all things Reformational, can I have a word with you? I love the confidence and emphasis on God’s sovereignty that characterizes the heritage of Luther and the other Reformers and the Puritans and lots of other folks like them. May that never change! But I believe there can be a tendency in our systematic world to allow a theological emphasis on God’s sovereignty--which is good and necessary-- to wrongly mute a conscious awareness of our need to actively grow in faith. If our understanding of doctrine creates passivity toward God’s caring control over all things, that knowledge should ignite robust faith toward Him and bold desire to act in our hearts. We see God more clearly so our ambition can reach further.

5. Ambition’s Path is a Paradox.

“Maybe you’ve heard the story of the violinist performing in a Metro station in Washington, D.C. Of course, street musicians play for money in subways all the time. But this guy was no street musician, and he certainly didn’t need the money.

“His name is Joshua Bell, a Grammy award-winning, world-renowned violinist. He was also playing a Stradivarius violin worth \$3.5 million--the 1713 Gibson ex-Huberman Stradivarius, to be precise. (I have no idea what that means, but just typing the name impresses me.)

“*The Washington Post* tapped Mr. Bell to conduct an experiment. They dressed Joshua in humble garb--blue jeans, casual shirt, and ball cap. Then they had him perform some of the most difficult compositions possible. (In case your mind works like mine, ‘The Devil went Down to Georgia’ was not on the list.)

“Master violinist Bell played for about forty minutes. During that time, more than eleven hundred people passed by. Only seven stopped to listen. The video footage shows that at the conclusion of each piece, there was no applause, no accolades--just the sound of subway trains whistling toward destinations around the city. Reflecting on the experience, Mr. Bell commented, ‘It was strange feeling that people were ...um...ignoring me!’ (Gene Weingarten, “Pearls Before Breakfast,” *The Washington Post* (April 10, 2007)

“The *Post* called it ‘a test of people’s perceptions and priorities.’ (Ibid.) Would people perceive the presence of an authentic violin master? Would they notice? Would they make it a priority to listen?

“They didn’t. I don’t blame them. Violin masters aren’t found in subways wearing blue jeans and ball caps. For that you need \$200 and the Kennedy Center stage. After all, if you are dressed like a master or performing where masters play, you’re probably just another schmuck like the rest of us, right?” (p. 99-100)

6. Evaluating Our Effectiveness.

“Hungering for help to determine where I’m gifted and limited, or where I need to be mindful of my motives, is a great start but a poor ending. Rescuing ambition includes evaluating how our efforts are bearing fruit.

“Fruitfulness is something that Christ is dead-on serious about. ‘By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples (John 15:8). In other words, God wants our godly efforts to be effective. If this is a main proof that we’re disciples, we should aspire to evaluate our effectiveness. Often.

“Christians are a funny lot. We’re ambitious to start things but hate to end them. Every initiative can seem right, good, and important--we’re sure God is behind it all. So we launch things as if great efforts in the name of God need no expiration dates. We assume that what’s effective in one season is effective for all time. Methods become monuments.” (p. 113)

7. Finding Humility in the Wrong Place.

“Humility is not a fabric softener on our aspiration--soothing, softening, and tempering our dreams to the point where we’re too modest to reach for anything. G.K. Chesterton warned against finding ‘humility in the wrong place.’ He appealed for a return to the ‘old humility,’ saying:

The old humility was a spur that prevented a man from stopping; not a nail in his boot that prevented him from going on. For the old humility made a man doubtful about his efforts, which might make him work harder. But the new humility makes a man doubtful about his aims, which will make him stop working altogether. (G.K. Chesterton, from “The Suicide of Thought,” chapter 3 in *Orthodoxy* (London: The Bodley Head, 1908).” (p. 116-117)

8. Our Humility to Harness Our Ambition.

Humility should never be an excuse for inactivity. Our humility should harness our ambition, not hinder it. Talking about our dreams for God isn’t proud--it’s essential. If you’re too humble to dream, maybe you have an incorrect understanding of humility. The servant who is faithful with little still has an eye on the much. John Stott has it right:

Ambitions for self may be quite modest...Ambitions for God, however, if they are to be worthy, can never be modest. There is something inherently inappropriate about cherishing small ambitions for God. How can we ever be content that he should acquire just a little more honour in the world? No. Once we are clear that God is King, then we long to see him crowned with glory and honour, and accorded his true place, which is the supreme place. We become ambitious for the spread of his kingdom and righteousness everywhere.” (John Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount* (Downer’s Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1993), 172-173).(p. 117)

9. We Are All in Decline.

“There’s an old saying: ‘Graveyards are filled with indispensable people.’ It’s a great reminder of an eternal truth. We’re all decaying. That means we’re all in decline; whether you’re in the spring, summer, fall, or winter of life. you’re going to be replaced. Whatever position you hold right now that fires your passion is only yours for

a season. The only irreplaceable position is the one occupied by the Savior who's seated next to the Father interceding for us." (p. 134-135)

10. Failure as Ambition Refused.

"One of most significant events in the spread of the gospel throughout the world over the past three centuries occurred in 1749 with the publishing of *The Life of David Brainerd*. this small book has a curious beginning.

"The great preacher Jonathan Edwards had befriended a sickly young man and brought him into his home to recuperate. The young man, David Brainerd, acquired a serious illness in a lonely and arduous ministry to the American Indians on the colonial frontier. He would never recover. He passed away at the age of twenty-nine in Edward's home, leaving behind all his earthly possessions. Among them were personal diaries that Edwards began to read in earnest. Believing the diaries contained rich spiritual insight from a man of uncommon godliness, Edward edited and published the material as *The Life of David Brainerd*. Little did Edwards know this small volume was to become the most widely read, reprinted, and influential of all his works for more than a century. Countless missionaries, including Henry Martyn, William Carey, Robert Murray McCheyne, and Jim Elliot, were inspired to the mission field by Brainerd's story. (The Yale University editors of the works of Jonathan Edwards note that his *Life of David Brainerd* 'was a major impetus and inspiration to the domestic and foreign missionary movement of the late eighteenth and through the nineteenth century.' From the Jonathan Edwards Center at Yale University; <http://edwards.yale.edu/major-works/life-of-david-brainerd>.)

"And yet, were it not for the single most devastating failure of Brainerd's life, his missionary efforts would have never gotten off the ground.

"Brainerd was born in 1718 in a small Connecticut town, Raised by devout Puritan parents until he was orphaned at fourteen, he was swept up in the Great Awakening and powerfully converted at the age of twenty- one. Fueled by ambition for pastoral ministry, he enrolled in Yale College to receive the necessary training.

"As a third-year student, Brainerd had proven himself to be bright, articulate, and at the top of his class. But like all of us, his tongue wasn't as smart as his brain. The overthrow of his dream came through a tongue too often loosed with immature fervor. According to Edward's biography of him, young Brainerd's character was colored by an 'intemperate, indiscreet zeal.' (*The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol.

2 (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1995), 321.) That's Edward's way of saying that Brainerd had a big mouth and knew how to use it.

“In an ill-timed display of that youthful indiscretion, Brainerd criticized one of his tutors, Chancey Whittlesey, announcing that he ‘has no more grace than a chair,’ and wondered that the man ‘did not drop down dead’ for his lack of support toward students awakened by God. (Ibid.) But Yale wasn't looking for customer feedback. Though he'd nearly completed the work for his degree and was about to graduate at the head of his class, (Ibid, 335.) , Brainerd was immediately expelled.

“To complicate things, one needed a university degree to pastor in Connecticut. This meant that Brainerd's remark was a career-ending comment. It shut the door to church ministry, cutting off oxygen to his ultimate dream.

“Shortly after the incident, he confessed, ‘I seem to be declining with respect to my life and warmth in divine things; have not had so free access to God in prayer to-day as usual of late.’ (Ibid., 321.). Brainerd didn't see it yet, but God was refusing his ambition for a better plan.” (p. 141-142)

11. A Second Chance.

I once hear a story about Thomas Edison and his team that invented the lightbulb. When it was finished, he gave it to a young boy to carry to another part of the building. You guessed it. The kid dropped the bulb. Edison was undaunted. He immediately had another made, then called the boy back, handed him the second lightbulb, and instructed him to try again. He actually gave him a second chance. I guess he made it, because I'm writing under a lightbulb right now.”