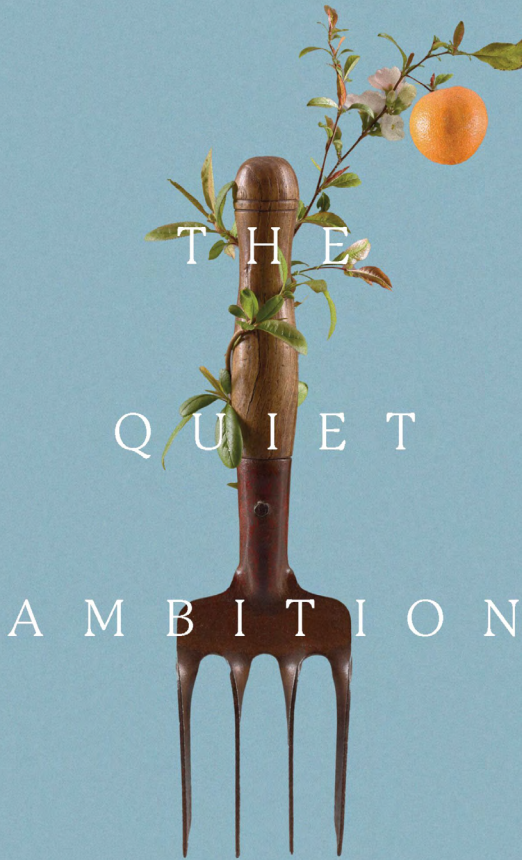


Ryan P. Tinetti



Scripture's Surprising Antidote
to Our Restless Lives



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Part 1

MAKE IT YOUR
AMBITION



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ESCAPING QUIET DESPERATION

ON THE FOURTH OF JULY, in the year of our Lord 1845, shouting distance from the “shot heard ’round the world” that birthed the American Revolution, as modern industry took hold and the fruits of Enlightenment ambitions thrummed and buzzed all around him, Henry David Thoreau moved into the woods.

In keeping with the nature of the holiday, he was staging a kind of protest. Drawing a line in the sand of existence, if you will.¹ He had good reason to do so. While his writing often reached to exalted heights, Thoreau’s everyday life had fallen down in the dumps. After graduating from Harvard, he ran through a series of jobs: teacher, surveyor, pencil maker (the family business). Whispers about whether he would make something of himself were not unfounded.

More recently, Thoreau’s name had become a byword in his small Concord community. He’s famous as a naturalist now, but in 1844 a campfire gone horribly wrong turned into a wildfire that destroyed some three hundred acres of the last remaining virgin woodlands surrounding the town. Neighbors taunted him for years afterwards as the “woods-burner.”²

Then there was the shadow of Henry’s brother and best friend, John. His first full day taking residence at Walden, July 5th, would

have been John's thirty-first birthday. Three years prior, however, John cut his finger sharpening a razor. Shortly thereafter, a lethal case of lockjaw set in, and in a matter of days John died a painful death cradled in Henry's arms.³

Thoreau therefore lodged his protest with existence by lodging in the woods. He was embarking on a quest to “live deliberately” and determine whether his life, already at twenty-eight so full of contradictory clues, might mean anything—or, he says, “If it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world.”⁴

“Thoreau wanted to make his life matter,” says the great historian David McCullough. “That's a very big lesson for all of us to keep in mind: to make your life matter. To walk off stage having done something that's beneficial, encouraging, stimulating, or inspiring.”⁵

In doing so, Thoreau sought to counteract a grave threat. Given some of the trials he had already encountered, it was surely a threat that he sensed lurking at his own door. A keen people-watcher, though, he detected its presence pervading society:

The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation. What is called resignation is confirmed desperation. From the desperate city you go into the desperate country and have to console yourself with the bravery of minks and muskrats. A stereotyped but unconscious despair is concealed even under what are called the games and amusements of mankind.⁶

Quiet desperation. A bone-chilling phrase, that. Thoreau doesn't bother to define it, and maybe he doesn't need to. I've come to think of it as the slow seeping of hope. The Latin *desperare* means literally to be “devoid of hope.” But quiet desperation doesn't set in with one decisive step, like the damned passing beneath the gates of Dante's *Inferno*: “Abandon all hope, ye who enter here.” It's more

like quicksand: you gradually seep into its clutches, inch by unconscious inch, until it's too late to escape. Or as C. S. Lewis describes “the safest road to Hell” in *The Screwtape Letters*: the quicksand of quiet desperation claims its victims by means of “the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts.”⁷

I believe that quiet desperation sets in when there's a disconnect between desires and reality, ambitions and actualities. As a pastor, I have occasion to conduct marriage counseling with couples. One thing that I warn them about is what I call the Zone of Frustration. The Zone of Frustration, I say, is the chasm that opens up when there's a gap between the expectations you have of your spouse and the person that he or she actually is (for better or for worse, you might say). When that chasm grows too great, mere frustration can morph into quiet desperation, and you lose hope for your relationship. This can happen in your relationship with your spouse, but I believe that it can also happen in your relationship to your life—and, indeed, to God. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

In Thoreau's day, he witnessed quiet desperation in the frantic toil of businessmen and the beleaguered forbearance of housewives. He observed it in people who were passing through their days the way they passed by the countryside in the newfangled railcars. “Our inventions are wont to be pretty toys, which distract our attention from serious things,” he writes. “They are but improved means to an unimproved end, an end which it was already but too easy to arrive at; as railroads lead to Boston or New York.”⁸

Restlessness and Resignation

Are things any better in the twenty-first century? To the contrary, it seems that quiet desperation has spread like a river that has overrun its banks. If it was seeping in when Thoreau moved to

Walden, now it's spilling over every plain and plateau. There's barely a solid place to stand. And in our day quiet desperation manifests itself in a pair of seemingly opposite responses: *restless ambition* and *resigned ambition*.

Restless ambition is desperate busyness. It's the anxious drive to do more, get more, be more. The supposition, more assumed than asserted, is that some ingenuity and good old can-do attitude can stave off that awful sinking feeling. Restlessness is reflected in recent years, for instance, in the rise of what's been called "hustle culture." Also known as "toil glamour" (who's coming up with this stuff?), hustle culture lionizes overwork and thanks God when it's Monday (T.G.I.M.). It boasts in skipping breaks and leaving leisure behind.

There are impressive facets to this attitude. Restless ambition is characteristically American, if not uniquely so, and it has certainly had a hand in the prosperity of our country. As Alexander Hamilton sings in the song "My Shot" from the insanely popular musical *Hamilton: An American Musical*, "Hey yo, I'm just like my country / I'm young, scrappy and hungry."⁹ Restlessness is how many Americans roll, and we all benefit from it.

There's undeniably a dark side to restless ambition, however. You can see it in dramatic fashion in the documentary *Conan O'Brien Can't Stop*, which follows the comedian on tour after he left the *Tonight Show*. It's at times humorous, but ultimately poignant as we witness O'Brien struggling with his need to keep on pushing ahead to wow the next crowd, to get the next laugh. At one point, in a moment of vulnerability, he confesses, "I'm like Tinkerbell; without applause, I die."¹⁰ Restlessness keeps the pedal to the metal.

To offer a suggestive analogy in this vein: several years ago there was a recall on some Toyota vehicles. Evidently the cars would be given to sudden and uncontrollable acceleration. Terrifying. But as Malcolm Gladwell uncovered in an episode of his podcast

Revisionist History, in most instances people did not even try to use the brake pedal.¹¹ When the gas pedal malfunctioned, they panicked—and kept pushing the gas. In one tragic instance, the driver of a carload of people kept accelerating until the vehicle went off a cliff.

The upshot of the analogy is clear. Restless ambition, like Conan O'Brien and the Toyota snafu, just can't stop. Inevitably it leads to burnout and worse. As journalist Erin Griffith wrote in an article for *The New York Times*, "For congregants of the Cathedral of Perpetual Hustle, spending time on anything that's non-work related has become a reason to feel guilty."¹² Ultimately, restless ambition attempts to stave off existential anguish with frenzied activity—to generate meaning by means of plugging away. But as Solomon wrote so many years ago, "What has a man from all the toil and striving of heart with which he toils beneath the sun? For all his days are full of sorrow, and his work is a vexation. Even in the night his heart does not rest. This also is vanity" (Eccles 2:22-23). The hum of restlessness might temporarily block out quiet desperation, but it cannot quell it.

So there is also an equal and opposite manifestation of quiet desperation: *resigned* ambition. Resignation is desperate surrender: waving the white flag on life. Already in Thoreau's day, he could say that "desperation is confirmed resignation." The hippie generation of the sixties will think of Timothy Leary's famous mantra, "Turn on, tune in, drop out."¹³ In our own times it may be reflected in the burgeoning trend of "quiet quitting." The polling firm Gallup defines quiet quitting as the phenomenon of workers "not going above and beyond at work and just meeting their job description." According to Gallup's recent research, "quiet quitters" make up 50 percent of the workforce, and perhaps more.¹⁴

Once again, as with hustle culture, there may be something to appreciate, if not admire, about this fledgling movement. At

its most mature, quiet quitting rightly recognizes the need to keep a career in proper perspective and to rebuff the harmful effects of workism.¹⁵ While the focus so far seems to be on addressing burnout, the gestures toward personal identity and self-worth hint at the larger ramifications to the conversation. This seems to have some promise for addressing the weaknesses of restless ambition.

But quiet quitting undoubtedly has problems of its own. The media guru Arianna Huffington insists, “Quiet quitting isn’t just about quitting on a job, it’s a step toward quitting on life.”¹⁶ Incidentally, it’s often mentioned in the same breath as the so-called Great Resignation: the phrase putatively refers to the (generally positive) movement of workers walking away from dead-end jobs, but I’m hard pressed to hear it without detecting a little irony.

Truth to tell, quiet quitting is only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to rampant resignation. Resigned ambition is detected even more acutely among young men. In his book *Heroic Fraternities* author Anthony Bradley, diagnosing the “self-resigned man,” writes, “He just wants to be left alone to do what he wants to do as long as he doesn’t hurt anyone. He has resigned from caring. . . . He doesn’t want to be bothered. He’s content playing videos, smoking weed, and hooking up with a girl or two.”¹⁷

This kind of resignation came home to me in a conversation I had with a young guy that I was playing basketball with not long ago. He shared in passing how none of the males from the graduating class at his small rural school (about twenty guys) went on to college. To be sure, college is not the path for everyone, and later in this book we’ll make a case for precisely the kind of trades that don’t require a conventional four-year degree. But I was struck that not a single one of these young men went the route of higher education and asked him why. “What’s the point?” he said. “We all

know we're gonna be stuck back here doin' the same junk." I could almost hear the hope seeping out of his heart.

And I would be remiss not to mention a still more grievous manifestation of resignation in the marked increase over the last decade of so-called deaths of despair: lives lost as a result of suicide, substance abuse, and social isolation. It's the quicksand of quiet desperation at its most lethal.

Restless ambition and resigned ambition: in the final analysis, two sides of the same dreadful coin. Whether by desperate busyness or desperate surrender, hope keeps leaking from the hearts of people; the quicksand-suck continues unabated. Nearly two centuries after Henry David Thoreau went to the woods, the cries of quiet desperation have only grown louder.

But all this talk of desperation, quiet or otherwise, surely doesn't apply to genuine Christians, does it? Old Henry David was, at best, an unconventional believer, and in our time and place the tide of faith has decidedly waned, leaving restlessness and resignation in its wake. Surely those who remain followers of Christ are immune to the threat of quiet desperation, are they not? After all, as Hebrews puts it, "We have . . . a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain" (6:19).

In many respects, I believe that this is most certainly true. For those who trust in Christ, properly speaking there can be no despair. Trials, yes; malaise, surely; doubt, most definitely. But despair is the share of those who have altogether abandoned hope, rather than merely struggled with it. It's the fate of Judas, not Peter.

And yet, if I may shift our metaphor, there exists a variant of the strain of quiet desperation that afflicts Christians in particular, and in fact—precisely since we know that the stakes are so high—may prove even more virulent. In order to diagnose it, we need to turn to one of Jesus' stories that has kept me up at night.

The Longing Hopes That Haunt Us

I am haunted by Jesus' parable of the talents. The parable can be found in Matthew 25:14-30 and Luke 19:11-18, with some variations. What follows is my own composite version.

The story is familiar. A nobleman goes on a journey, and when he does he entrusts his property to a trio of servants: to one he gives five talents, to another two, and to still another he gives one talent. Leaving them with no instructions (save to “engage in business,” per Luke’s version of the story), the man departs. The first two servants proceed to put their master’s gifts to work, each of them earning a 100 percent return. The third servant, however, daunted by the prospect of squandering the trust, opts to stash it away, burying it in the ground.

The nobleman returns from his journey to settle accounts with his three servants. To the first two he offers his unqualified approval: “Well done, good and faithful servant!” To the third, however, he expresses unmitigated disappointment. This servant makes matters worse by trying to explain himself: “I knew that you were a hard man, reaping where you do not sow, and I was afraid, and so I buried the talent.” The servant’s proclaimed prudence, however, is interpreted by the master as cowardice, bordering on impertinence. So the story concludes with the nobleman’s chilling command, “Cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

This is the Gospel of the Lord. *Thanks be to God?*

The ending of the parable would seem to make plain why I’m haunted by it: that I am cowed by the prospect of perdition. And to be sure, it’s a terrifying possibility—one that I don’t take lightly. That said, I’m a Lutheran. I’ve had beaten into my head (in the most loving way possible, mind you!) that Jesus died and rose to forgive

my sins. Most days I'm more certain that I'm saved by grace through faith than that the boiling point of water is 212 degrees Fahrenheit or that $2 + 2 = 4$. Worries about my eternal destiny don't typically keep me awake at night. Maybe they should.

In any case, it's not for thoughts of the afterlife that Jesus' story addles me; it's for thoughts of *this* life. The parable brings to light the deep desire of my heart. In the words of one hymn, "all the longing hopes that haunt me."¹⁸ It exposes what I really want from this life now—and perhaps just as significantly, what I *don't* want.

I remember when the realization sunk in. I'm sitting in the class of one of my favorite professors during my final term as a student in grad school, readying to head out into the world as a pastor. We're talking about vocation, calling—God's purpose for your life. I'd been thinking a lot about it at the time. A popular evangelical preacher had a sermon go viral (as much as they could twenty-five years ago), which he later turned into a popular book. The message was simple: don't waste your life. He contrasted a retiree whiling away his golden years collecting stones on the beach with a dauntless octogenarian who died as a missionary in Africa. It was clear which of the two you should be like.¹⁹

With this message bouncing around my brain, our class turns to Jesus' parable of the talents. The professor reads through it, puts down his Bible, and is quiet for a moment. Then he says, "What this parable tells us is this: use whatever gifts God has given you to the hilt. Don't ever let up until you make a mark for the kingdom. You've got to make it count."

And suddenly I thought, *That's it. I want to make a mark for the kingdom.* The notion took my breath away, it felt so ambitious. I want my life to mean something, to count. I want (it sounds ridiculous to say it out loud) to *do great things for God*. I want to use my talents faithfully, so that at the conclusion of a life well lived I

might hear that glorious commendation, “Well done, good and faithful servant!” *That’s* what I want.

I know I’m not the only one.

A little while back I was leading a Bible study with a group of young guys, all at the end of their college years. We got to talking about careers and aspirations. Eventually I just put it on the table: What do you want? There was some throat clearing, looking down at the table. No one wanted to go first. Then John, a thoughtful pastor’s kid, raised his hand. He bobbed his head back and forth like a shadow-boxer as he got up the gumption to speak. And then he said, “I know this might sound bad, but I want . . . importance.” Soon as he said it, John sat upright and cast embarrassed glances at his peers, but they were nodding their heads in agreement. Coming out of the mouth of this humble kid, I could hardly believe it. But I knew exactly what he meant. It wasn’t braggadocio or boasting. He wants to put his talents to use in a meaningful way. We all do.

As a pastor I’ve been privileged to be privy to many of these conversations. It’s after the second cup of coffee or when the dessert is almost gone (pastors eat a lot of meals; you may have noticed from their physiques), when the walk has circled the block the third time or when you’re standing in the doorway to go. In those fleeting moments of vulnerability, with hushed voices, we sheepishly admit that we want our lives to be lived—in the words of Robert Frost—“for Heaven and the future’s sakes.”²⁰ We don’t want to bury our talents; we don’t want our days to amount to nothing more than a mound of fear-filled hedged bets. We don’t want it all to be a waste.

But herein lies the rub. Desires make you vulnerable; acknowledging what you want opens you up to discouragement if it doesn’t come to pass. (Recall the Zone of Frustration.) Even more so when

we factor in the transcendent, heavenly horizon upon which our dreams rest. Four decades ago Philip Yancey wrote of this with respect to our relationship with the Lord. “For many people there is a large gap between what they expect from their Christian faith and what they actually experience,” he wrote in *Disappointment with God*.²¹ And in the words of Solomon, “Hope deferred makes the heart sick” (Prov 13:12).

No sooner do we admit that desire for a meaningful life of faith and we are faced with the ice-cold realization, How can my little labors make any difference whatsoever in the vast sweep of history? The prospect of doing enough to make a mark on God’s kingdom seems nigh impossible. It’s silly. There are seven billion people in the world—and that’s just the number who happen to be walking around at the moment! What hope do I have of leaving an impression on this enormous creation?

Some would say, without apology: none. There’s no such hope. In his bestselling book *4,000 Weeks: Time Management for Mortals*, author Oliver Burkeman offers this pointed conclusion: “What you do with your life doesn’t matter all that much—and when it comes to how you’re using your finite time, the universe absolutely could not care less.”²² Now, Burkeman is not writing out of a Christian worldview. We believe that not a single sparrow is forgotten before God. But even the psalmist grasped the point:

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars, which you have set in place,
what is man that you are mindful of him,
and the son of man that you care for him? (Ps 8:3-4)

In the workaday world of everyday life Burkeman’s perspective rings all too true. Given the smallness of our circumstances, it’s hard not to feel something like an existential inferiority complex.

Try as we might, like Thoreau, to draw a line in the sand of existence, it can't help but feel futile if you are living in the cosmic equivalent of the Sahara Desert. And worse yet, as Burkeman might also point out, it's quicksand: you are sinking all the time. Maybe, as Christians, we don't quite experience quiet desperation, but nevertheless (riffing off of Yancey) we do know quiet *disappointment*. Make no mistake: it's no less debilitating. Yancey writes:

No one is immune to the downward spiral of disappointment. It happens to televangelists and to ordinary Christians: first comes disappointment, then a seed of doubt, then a response of anger or betrayal. We begin to question whether God is trustworthy, whether we can really stake our lives on him.²³

Caught in the quicksand, how can we escape? We need a vision that is as solid as desperation is slippery, and as daily as disappointment all too often tends to be. I've found promise in an easy-to-overlook verse tucked away in a lesser read letter of Saint Paul.

The Quiet Ambition

Paul feared that his work had been a waste. He had ministered at length in the Greco-Roman colony of Thessalonica, but he knew that when he left them their faith was precarious. They were new converts, susceptible to outside influences and vulnerable to the incipient challenges of following Christ. Now he finds himself imprisoned with plenty of time to mull over the state of his Thessalonian friends. Finally he has enough of pacing his prison cell and sends his right-hand man, Timothy, to check on the young church. "When I could bear it no longer, I sent to learn about your faith, for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you and our labor would be in vain" (1 Thess 3:5).

He needn't have feared. Word of their "faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything" (1:8). So now he writes, not with anxious uncertainty but with fatherly concern. He exhorts them, in tones reminiscent of the parable of the talents, "walk in a manner worthy of God" (2:12). He knows the uphill climb they face: a tiny church within a vast empire, agitated by afflictions and dealing with the realities of life in this present age still marked by sin and death. He knows that some among the Thessalonians will be wrestling with questions not unlike his own: Is this faith thing for nothing? If people are still dying, then what's the point? Does it all really make a difference?

Thus he also brings glad tidings, lest they "grieve as others do who have no hope" (4:13). He reminds them that, in spite of the present toil that they are enduring, Jesus is risen and will yet return to redeem his creation and make all things new—"and so we will always be with the Lord." So he concludes, "encourage one another with these words" (4:13, 17-18). He doesn't want them to be swallowed up by despair.

Nestled within this encouraging dad talk to the Thessalonians, Paul drops some breadcrumbs on a pathway to peace. If you blink, you miss it. Right before gloriously proclaiming the grounds for hope in the resurrection and the promised return of Christ, he lays out, in a few mundane phrases, how hope can unfold in everyday life. Paul writes: "Make it your ambition to live quietly and to tend your own business and to work with your hands, so that you might walk gracefully toward outsiders and have need of nothing" (1 Thess 4:11-12).

A couple of matters here call for closer scrutiny. First off, Paul says, "Make it your ambition. . . ." Now, ambition is a sticky wicket for committed Christians. Paul knows this as well as anyone. A quick search of his letters and you see that "ambition" follows

“selfish” the way that “armpit” follows “smelly”; it’s practically redundant. The nineteenth-century novelist George Eliot speaks for many believers when she writes, “I feel that my besetting sin is the one of all others most destroying, as it is the fruitful parent of them all, Ambition, a desire insatiable for the esteem of my fellow creatures.”²⁴ From conniving King Rehoboam to scheming Simon the Sorcerer, biblically speaking ambition is nothing to aspire to.

And then there’s this other matter. Paul says, “Make it your ambition *to live quietly*.” Biblical commentators have long noted that this is an oxymoron, an apparent contradiction in terms. It’s as if he said, “Make it your aim to be aimless,” or “make it your plan to be spontaneous.”²⁵ What kind of ambition is quiet living? But this latter point resolves the first. After all, sloth is no virtue in the Scriptures. The soul that is utterly absent of ambition is often singled out for scorn; think of how Solomon relentlessly skewers the one he calls the “sluggard.” More to our point, no one aims to bury their talent.

Paul therefore puts forth a paradoxical proposal: what you might call an unambitious ambition—or as I put it, “the quiet ambition.” What do I mean by the quiet ambition? Simply stated, it’s a way that hope takes shape each day. Because if quiet desperation is the slow seeping of hopefulness amid the mundane stuff of existence—what the character Elaine Benes in *Seinfeld* decried as “the excruciating minutiae of everyday life”²⁶—then we need a correspondingly quotidian vision to counteract it. As I describe it, the quiet ambition is the unambitious ambition. I’ll use the phrases interchangeably.

In 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12, Saint Paul has encapsulated the shape of this everyday hope in these simple postures:

- Live quietly
- Tend your own business

- Work with your hands
- Walk gracefully toward outsiders

To be clear, this isn't some Prayer of Jabez-esque "secret" squirreled away in the attic of holy writ. (If you aren't sure what I'm talking about here, you can be grateful you missed part of early 2000s Christian subculture.) It is rather a neat nutshell of biblical teaching and provides a structure for our argument. As we'll see, it's a summary statement of themes that resound throughout the Scriptures.

The quiet ambition is about finding the largeness in littleness. Or to paraphrase Mother Teresa's famous dictum, it's about doing little labors with large love. It is more a matter of calling than climbing, digging deep than going big. Its role models are Eugene Peterson and Wendell Berry, not Joel Osteen and Steve Jobs. This unambitious ambition is a way of being in the world that weds together conviction with contentment, drive with depth. And it can be an antidote to the threat that Thoreau identified, a way to escape the quicksand of quiet desperation by leading quiet lives of hope.

A Very Little

Not long ago, I reread the parable of the talents in the Gospel of Luke, and a detail caught my attention that somehow I had missed. The nobleman returns to settle accounts, and the first servant comes before his master. He presents his offering, humble though it may be. And the rousing heavenly commendation is followed by this: "Because you have been faithful in a very little, you shall have authority over ten cities" (Lk 19:17).

Catch that? *A very little*. Jesus' message isn't that you need to go out and change the world in order to be reckoned faithful; his message is that genuine faithfulness means wisely stewarding

whatever gifts you have—however meager they may seem—in order that, by the influence of the Spirit, you might help move the ratchet of the kingdom one tick forward. And in the eyes of the master, that quiet life of hope, the little labor of love carried out in faith, is very large indeed. David too came to recognize God’s regard for the little: “What is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him? *Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor*” (Ps 8:4-5, emphasis added). This is the life-giving message of the quiet ambition.

Before we delve deeper into the shape of the quiet ambition, though, we need to interrogate this desire to “do great things for God.” Because it is not benign; it has a shadow side, and by facing up to it we will see more clearly not only how the longing itself can go terribly wrong—even apart from the fallout when it’s frustrated—but also how Jesus makes possible a more excellent way.

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