

3) Reach Great Heights Even Though You Are Small

Ezekiel 17:22-24 • 2021-06-20 • Series: Defy Expectations



In 1903 a man started a new automotive company. But he wasn't the man you'd picture to become a world-famous entrepreneur. In fact, this man was already 39 years old and had tried unsuccessfully to start two other companies. When he first developed a version of the early automobile, investors jumped on board. But he didn't sell a single car and couldn't pay back his investors. His "Detroit Automobile Company" had to file for bankruptcy. His second attempt didn't fare any better. He once again was unable to sell his new car design. And once again he was unable to pay back his investors. To invest in the "Henry Ford Company" meant to toss your money away. Henry Ford was a middle-aged, twice-bankrupt, business failure who couldn't sell any cars.

But then he found some investors and business partners and started the "Ford Motor Company." The rest is history. His modern assembly line was producing cars so fast that they only made them in black because the black paint was the only one available at the time which would dry fast enough to keep up with production. You couldn't drive far down any road in America for over the next one hundred years without passing something that rolled off his factory line. His multi-billion-dollar business is known world-wide. And it is the largest family-controlled company in the world. Have you ever envisioned yourself attaining an even greater rise to great heights? You are part of something that is growing much quicker and will continue to grow much bigger. Today we continue another part of our series "Defy Expectation." In Ezekiel 37 we will see how Christians defy expectations. Even though the Church starts so small, it grows far beyond all expectations.

The small little kingdom of Judah wasn't much on the big stage in history in Ezekiel's time. It was a middle-aged nation that had failed to secure independence and prosperity. Nebuchadnezzar, the king of the rising Babylonian Empire had taken King Jehoiachin as captive to Babylon. And in his place, he put Zedekiah on the throne in Judah. The tiny nation of Judah was supposed to pay tribute to Babylon and be subservient to them. But that didn't last long.

King Zedekiah had grand plans for a glorious kingdom which would be free from serving Babylon. Did he turn to the Lord and the promises of his God to find his rise to glory? Zedekiah didn't expect much from the Lord. He saw other ways to get his strength. He turned to Egypt for help in gaining independence from Babylon. But instead of getting the help he wanted from Egypt, his nation plummeted into ruin. Nebuchadnezzar came to crush his rebellion under the full weight of Babylon. And Zedekiah himself was captured and tortured while the city was laid flat in a rubble. So much for attaining great heights!

You and I might not be trying to build up a multi-billion-dollar company. And last I checked you weren't working to build up a kingdom that would become independent and dominate nations around you. But we, like Henry Ford and Zedekiah, are surrounded by a world which measures its success with its gains of wealth and power. And we can be tempted to think that we will rise to great heights if we can only attain more.

Where might we turn to attain great heights? We might be tempted to put our trust in our financial allies, our insurance coverages, and our own wit and wisdom. We work hard in protecting our own little kingdoms. We make financial contingency plans. We plan ahead. We invest. We believe the lie, "If I only have this career, that home, and these assets, I'll be living the dream." Do we always set our hearts on the Lord's kingdom and his plans? Or do our hearts sometimes chase after our own kingdom and our own plans to the point the Lord's kingdom is treated as only second thought. We reason, "Our church, our synod, the Christian Church is too insignificant to warrant any thought until after I get my own kingdom in order."

Like Zedekiah such efforts can only leave us sinking down deeper into a debt of sin and our curse under it. Just as nations fall, so do our own plans for life. What good is financial security when we've dishonored the Lord by failing to give back to him as we ought? What good is a career that pays well if that career takes the place of regular worship of the Lord? What good is a solid retirement account if your health fails you and you're soon approaching the grave? We might want to say, "Zedekiah! How could you forget to honor the Lord and chase after worldly power?" But then we must look at our own hearts and our own priorities. We must say, "All my efforts to attain great heights will only leave me six feet under the dirt. And with that I would remain under God's curse."

The problem in Ezekiel chapter 17 is that the Lord must decry Zedekiah for seeking to attain wealth and power so much that he dishonored the Lord's name as he grasped at power. He broke a promise made in the Lord's name -all for the sake of gaining for himself.

You see, the world looks at the efforts of Christians like you and me and it says that it is all wasted effort. The unbelieving world sees you going nowhere. It says, "Your time in worship is wasted since it could be spent on overtime or on leisure time. Your offerings given for the work of the gospel are wasted because they could be sitting in your own personal investment account." And they would be right. They would be if it were not for what God has already

done to lift us to the greatest heights. In grace he has promised all who trust in him they will rise to the highest heights.

When everyone in Ezekiel's time saw only loss and destruction, he shared God's promise of elevation and restoration. *This is what the Lord God says. I myself will take part of the tip of the cedar and plant it. From the topmost of its shoots I will pluck off a tender sprig, and I myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain. ²³On the high mountain of Israel I will plant it.*

Notice that the Lord himself is the one who will do everything. He doesn't say work to attain great heights. He promises to establish a small insignificant branch from the dying line of Judah's kings and make it great. This was never done in Israel for those who sat in worldly positions of power and made earthly alliances. But it was done for a branch from the line of David who appeared in all lowliness. He was a man who came from a poor family. He was so poor they placed him among the cattle's feeding trough at his birth. He lived so lowly and humble that he was despised for the backwater town he grew up in, Nazareth. But he didn't work to attain great heights. Instead, he entrusted himself to the father's plan to lift him up.

This man, Jesus was the branch long prophesied to come from the line of Judah's kings. He is the branch who would shoot up from the stump left behind by the Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, and Roman nations. He came as the king planted by the Lord to bring his kingdom to great heights.

Jesus, the Son of God, reached the lowest point as he lowered himself on the cross. He was tortured, killed, and then placed in the tomb. But from this lowest of points God would cause the greatest of growth. He had paid the price for our sinful striving. Then Jesus the Son of God and Son of David rose to life from his grave. And by his death he won for us a kingdom which can never be shaken. He ascended to his throne in heaven and now rules over all the earth.

From the small start of his Church in Jerusalem, he caused it to grow beyond all expectations. About 120 were gathered on Pentecost. But the Lord caused his Church to grow as it took hold in the hearts of more and more.

Each time that it seemed like the Church would perish, the Lord caused it to produce fruit and to grow. When the world tried to destroy it, it grew. When false teachings threatened to uproot it, it returned to its roots and thrived.

Still today the Church grows. Not by the power of worldly wisdom, not by financial strength or political will. It grows in every nation by the power of the gospel and the working of the Lord. He has planted his Church and it will continue. People from every nation find shade under its refuge. Great and small alike find healing in the fruit it bears. Just as prophesied: *"It will produce branches, bear fruit, and become a magnificent cedar. Flying birds of every kind will live under it. In the shelter of its branches, they will nest."*

The world might see you as lowly and see the church as powerless. But they are mistaken. You belong to the kingdom of the living King, Jesus. And he holds all power. He has promised to lift you up and bring you to a position higher than this world could ever imagine. He will bring you out of your graves and will give you what no retirement account, no investment, no career, or political movement ever could: life eternal. That's a bigger change than even what Henry Ford experienced. It is the highest height for you and me.

Don't put your trust in the things of this world. It is okay to have wealth and to have a secure home. But don't let that become your goal. Let your goal be to be a planting of the Lord. Let him take you from your fears and your pains and lift you up. Let him plant you securely forever in his care. Let him cause your life right now to flourish with fruits of faith so that you join the Church in praising him. Let your offerings and your time be given to honor him who lifts up the dead and lowly and brings them to the greatest heights.

When you do this, know that he will use your offerings of thanks. He won't do it because he has a need. The Lord can make his kingdom grow without us. But he will use your time and your support in grace to cause his kingdom to reach many others. When you support the spread of the gospel seed you are part of something eternally significant. Your time and your offerings go to more than just a tiny kingdom which will perish. They go to honor the God who gave you a kingdom that can never perish. And they will help in spreading the gospel seed to many more lives.

Reach great heights even though you are small. Defy the world's expectations that you put your hope in the riches and power of this world. Put your hope in the Lord. He will not fail you.

How can you be so sure? Look at what God has done so far for the branch which grew from Bethlehem and out of Nazareth. It produced life from the cross and the grave. The gospel of Jesus continues to bear fruit all around the world today. And the Lord promises that everyone will one day see just how he operates. *"Then all the trees in the countryside will know that I, the Lord, bring down the high tree and raise up the low tree, that I make the green tree dry up, and I make the dried-up tree blossom. I, the Lord, have spoken, and I will carry it out."*