

Devotional

Taking Ground Together

There's something about watching a team work together to take new ground that is compelling to watch. Especially in football. Watching two guys duke it out in a boxing ring has its moments, but watching a group of guys huddle up, strategize, then execute a perfect play to take the 10 yards they need to keep going . . . that's compelling.

There are dynamics about a group working together that transfer to many aspects of life. Tech companies have found that groups of people who can collaborate on equal footing are likely to find a more creative solution to tech problems, than one person, no matter how brilliant, working alone. In fact, superstars on a team, usually end up lowering the performance of a tech team.

In 2006 Harvard researchers found that heart surgeons had improved performance when they worked with their own team in their usual hospital compared to when they worked with unfamiliar colleagues in a different setting. But it's not just working as a team. According to an economics professor at UC Santa Barbara, placing any emphasis on individuals within a team fosters backstabbing and information hoarding. A culture that incentivizes collaboration leads to enhanced group performance with information sharing and investing in other team members. The principle of $1+1=3$ puts the team ahead of the individuals on the team, so everyone wins. $1+1$ is more than 2. $1+1$ creates a community.

This principle can be seen in several Bible stories, but it is acute in the chronicle of the Israelites journey from Egypt to the Promised Land. The situation fell apart quickly after they crossed the Red Sea into what is now Saudi Arabia. There was no water, and it was every man for himself against Moses. God saved the day (not for the first time) (Exodus 14-15) and after giving them a year at Mount Sinai to develop a team mentality, to become a community, they headed for the Promised Land. You probably know what happened. Twelve were sent to assess the land. Two came back rarin' to go, but ten couldn't see it (Numbers 13). Entering their promised land went unrealized.

It took forty years of wandering in the desert for the nation to become a team ready and willing to act together under God and Joshua's leadership. When those who were enslaved to their individualism had died, only then could the team move forward to take new ground. Working together didn't mean they always got along. Just before crossing west over the Jordan River, about $\frac{1}{4}$ of the people decided they liked it on the east side (Numbers 32). Only when they put others ahead of themselves, agreeing to fight for those crossing the Jordan, was community restored: $1+1=3$.

Each contributed to the team with their abilities. Those who couldn't fight stayed with the livestock and the children. The priests did their job, blowing horns and carrying the ark of the covenant ahead of the others. The army followed Joshua, who was following God, circling the city of Jericho once per day for six days. On the seventh day, the wall fell, and the Children of Israel took their first ground in their Promised Land. It was a great victory (Joshua 6).

But something was amiss. Their next battle at Ai was a disaster and thirty-five men of the community lost their lives. God singled out Achan, the individual; Achan, the one who put himself above others. $1+1\neq 3$ for Achan. He disobeyed God and took some loot from Jericho, a thing God had strictly forbidden. After forty years in the desert, thirty-five men were able to spend only one day in the land they had

been dreaming of. Achan paid a high price for his individualism; he and all that belonged to him were destroyed (Joshua 7). But thirty-five others paid the same price.

That was a tough lesson for the Israelites. From then on, and for the rest of Joshua's life, they acted together in community and were able to take the land that had been promised. Most of us won't pay such a high price for our individualism. In fact, there may be times when we have to stand alone to stand with God. But in the church, we are bid to be together. We are a family (Galatians 6:10), we are a body (1 Corinthians 12:12-31), we are being built together to become a dwelling in which God will live (Ephesians 2:22).

Many of us are loners. And there are certainly times when each of us needs to be alone. We all need to find a time and a way to be alone with God. But it's only in community that we can enter the promised land, the place where God's blessings are abundant. It's only when we understand that $1+1=3$ that we can embrace Philippians 2:2-4.

Make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourself, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interest of the others.