

Today, we're talking about moats, and, wow, is that interesting! So, what's the basic purpose of a moat? Simple...a moat is, foremost, something that helps you defend something very valuable. Let's start with some background—many of us learned what moats were from history. A castle, say, in Europe, was where the king lived. Castles were often tall and imposing and on high ground, with a roof where you could easily launch projectiles to protect the king's valuable assets inside—assets from gold to family members to whatever else considered valuable. The castle walls were typically thick and often very hard to penetrate.

But there were always vulnerabilities. Could someone throw a weighted rope over, climb into your castle, and then open the castle gates for invaders? Could they destroy the main gate with a battering ram? People get pretty creative when they want to take over valuable property! So, some castle dwellers added a moat around the castle—basically a ditch that was both wide and deep and very often filled with water to make access very difficult. The castle would have a drawbridge to let down for friendlies, then the drawbridge would be drawn back up again. There are examples of moats around the world, from Japan to what's now Nigeria to some Native Americans' handiwork near the Mississippi river. In short, water moats were one highly effective defense mechanism for protecting a castle or other important buildings.

Frankly, from my perspective, the most effective mega-moats so far in history were the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, the moats inherently utilized by the United States in the 20th century world wars! You see, America has been fortunate to have relative isolation in the western hemisphere with its shared-border neighbors largely peaceful over the centuries. Its formidable enemies in world wars came from Europe and Asia. So, it's really hard to imagine those faraway countries "capturing" such a large land mass by surprise using the logistics necessary for massive sea-borne initiatives, then followed by taking and holding vast land areas. Yes, the Atlantic Ocean and the Pacific Ocean were pretty effective moats for America!

Now let's switch gears. In the past several decades, many leaders participating astutely in the business world have started talking a lot about moats. But this time, they're *economic* moats. The legendary investor Warren Buffet of Berkshire Hathaway fame is often given the credit for popularizing—if not inventing—this phrase that added the word *economic* as an adjective to the noun *moat*. And because Buffet has been so successful for so many decades and he attributes his great success largely to identifying and buying companies that have strong economic moats, that's why *moats* have informally become standard lingo for use in many business conversations. So, the idea is very useful, well beyond Buffet's very large companies down to the smallest enterprise—that range of enterprises where we all navigate!

Now, leaders should be able to answer whether *their* organization objectively has a great moat! But I have found that many struggle with being able to do that. Sadly, for such leaders, a couple of their competitors typically *have* learned exactly where these leaders' business models have real vulnerabilities! The lesson here? Even if you don't clearly know the identity or status of your moat, your competitors either already do or soon will! So, let's talk about moats for an organization, moats that defend an organization, moats that are the *competitive advantage* that allow an organization to survive and even thrive.

Well, to start, 21st century organizations often need way more than physical-solution moats. Yes, there are enterprises that are very valuable because they control a large portion of availability for something physical that is very highly valued in consumer or commercial markets, like diamonds or rare-earth metals. And that physicality can be a really serious issue, like for military reasons. For example, China kind of dominates the quantity of deposits of rare-earth metals used for tech and defense purposes globally. So, China has a powerful foundation for geopolitical advantage of great consequence to the rest of the world!

But, more generally, modern businesses create moats with factors that are much more intangible, factors like long-standing positive brand-identity...or maybe patents...or, in the case of powerful digital platforms like Google or Amazon, what's called a great "network effect," where the user can quickly have the broadest possible canvassing of possibilities and still end up with amazing specificity of results.

Now, Buffet has largely focused on non-tech companies like GEICO, Dairy Queen and Kraft Heinz to fulfill his goal of investing in companies with strong economic moats. That's fascinating, because the companies with the most valuable moats—as measured by top stock market values over a relatively long period of time—are tech-centric, like Amazon, Google, and Microsoft. And *you* know just what those companies' moats are for you as a consumer...just think why you use their services and *not* those of other companies!

This is important: every leader who stewards a business or nonprofit must know what its best competitive advantage or moat is! And, further, that leader must know when a bunch of dirt has settled in and the moat needs to be dredged. Does the brand perhaps need refreshing? Is it a patent that's going to expire relatively soon? Is it software design that's pretty easily reverse-engineered and not easily defended in a court of law? Has another firm's product-market fit displaced ours? Is the current executive team downplaying a legitimate moat in favor of shiny new distractions that hold little to no value as a moat?

Here's the thing. Moats—an enterprise's competitive advantage over others—often have a shorter shelf-life than their advocates would like to think. And that's especially true in our fast-moving era, with *digital* replacing *physical* in so much of product or service offerings. For example, many retailers have tended to locate in an ideally-located *physical* mall. But Amazon has captured countless shoppers via a *digital* mall with front-door delivery—a mighty moat that severely challenges the physical-mall moat-strategy of lots of retailers. The point? Leaders must challenge their enterprise's moat-strategy before competitors do!

Now, here's a rather astonishing story about God's purposes, His presence, and powerful spiritual moats. In the Old Testament, God directed that the Israelites build a portable tabernacle, which meant “dwelling-place.” This so-called “Tabernacle of Moses” was the portable place of worship while the Israelites were wandering the desert. The important thing? God's presence was at the mercy seat in the Tabernacle—He was with the Israelites. This undergirded the special relationship between God and the Israelites—God was their protection *wherever the Israelites went* with the Tabernacle. In short, God's presence was a *portable moat* that worked to defend the Israelites!

And God was clear: He never once asked for the building of a permanent building (1 Chronicles 17:5-6). Regardless, King David wanted to build a grand, stationary temple, and his son Solomon built it. And so it evolved that God's people utilized the Temple in Jerusalem to worship Him. But the Israelites transgressed a whole lot and by the time of Daniel, God allowed Babylon to destroy the Temple. And, as we know, *then* God was *still portably* with Daniel his entire life...without the Temple! “Yet God does not dwell in houses made by hands.” (Acts 7:48) Soon, though, Ezra and Nehemiah led the rebuilding of the Temple (known as the “Second Temple”), and it was central to Jewish life until Rome destroyed it in the year 70 CE.

In the centuries that followed, Jews' response to the destruction of the Second Temple was to re-double their focus on the Torah, to try to perfectly keep the Mosaic Law! But for converted, Christ-following Jews like Paul and Gentile believers, the answer had already been established for several decades: by His grace *God indwells believers wherever they go*—no Temple building needed! It does not matter that the Temple fell or if a church building is destroyed: “do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God?” (1 Corinthians 6:19) God's indwelling of each believer for power and witness is the most portable, dispersed moat ever!

Amazon's moat is very effective because it delivers exactly where prospective customers want—indeed, Amazon is not dependent on stationary, physical retail locations. Don't you find it amusingly ironic that Amazon is substantially mimicking God's outreach strategy? Believers—indwelt and empowered by God Himself—not dependent on any stationary physical location, portably moving about around the world, touching lives each day in homes, neighborhoods, and workplaces? Ponder...God Himself, dwelling in us, ever vigilant as our Defender and Advantage! Greater than castles, Buffet, and Amazon...*what a perfectly stunning moat!*

A&A: Application & Action

1. Just what comprises your organization's moat...its competitive advantage over others? And how far into the future do you think that moat will hold up? Be specific.

2. Do your church members and its leaders think "the church" is a building that is primarily an important safe haven from the outside world, with the protective moat being a members-only mentality that keeps secular invaders out? Or do your church members and its leaders think that "the church" is a moat embodied by the powerful army of God-indwelt believers being effectively, strategically dispersed throughout your local community and around the world? Discuss.

3. God has a history of effective portability for benefit of His people, for His purposes—from Moses and the highly portable Tabernacle for centuries, to individual anointings of David and Daniel and many Old Testament prophets, to the indwelling of every believer in Christ under the New Covenant. How does this understanding impact how you think about your daily life in your family, your workplace, and your neighborhood? Be specific.