

Descending Into Greatness
Philippians 2:1-11
Part 3—Choose Joy

Introduction

There is something that stirs deeply within us when a man or woman gives up their life for another. A few decades ago, Roger Rosenblatt wrote a moving tribute in Time Magazine. It was about a passenger on Air Florida Flight 90 that crashed into the Potomac River. The nameless 50-some-year old man was clinging to the tail section in the freezing water with five other passengers.

Every time the rescue helicopter lowered the lifeline the man passed it on to one of the other passengers. The story gripped the nation. Rosenblatt wrote, *“For at some moment in the water he must have realized that he would not live if he continued to hand the rope and the ring to others. He had to know it, no matter how gradual the effect of the cold...When the helicopter took off with what was to be the last survivor, he watched everything in the world move away from him, and he deliberately let it happen.”* The man gave his life so that others would live.

When someone dies for someone else it reminds us that the most noble moments of human existence occur when we sacrifice our rights on behalf of others. The opportunity to make the ultimate sacrifice will not come to everyone. But those heroic moments are metaphors which remind us that our best moments are those when we selflessly put others first.

The consummate example of this, of course, is Jesus Christ who said, *“Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.”* Never did a man live such a selfless life as Jesus. Never did a man focus more on serving others than our Lord.

This is the third message from Philippians in our series *“Choose Joy”* We turn our attention today to chapter 2:1-11. Our passage contains an ancient hymn widely regarded by scholars to have been part of the liturgy of the first century church. The focus of the hymn is Christ’s descent into greatness. Jesus descended from heaven where for all eternity he received the adoration of ten thousand times ten thousand angels. The Lord laid aside his rights to the glories of heaven and became a man destined to die on the cross for our sin.

The overarching theme in this passage is that God calls us to follow the pattern set by Christ. To follow Christ means that, like him, we’re also called to descend into greatness; to lay aside our rights and serve others. Yet this downward direction is contrary to everything around us. Our flesh, our training in society and the gravitational pull of the world all tug us incessantly upward to dominate and control others.

One pastor writes this. *“In the vocabulary of the world, ‘down’ is a word reserved for losers, cowards, and the bear market. It is a word to be avoided or ignored... especially*

in polite society. It is a word that colors whatever it touches...down and out, downfall, downscale, downhill, downhearted, and worst of all, down under. A word, it seems, only on the unfortunate lips of the weak, the poor or the dead.”

If all that weren't enough, there is this crowning blow against the word: Its antonym is 'up.' And up, in our high-voltage society, is a word that has come to be cherished, almost worshiped. It is a word reserved for winners, heroes, and those who know their bull. It is a word to be admired and pursued...the way to influence whoever is present: the upscale, up and coming, upwardly mobile, upper class. The word of the chosen few and the strong.”

Thus, the pull upward is incessant and powerful. It's a pull that uses pride and selfishness for its brick and mortar. And the influence of this upward pull is felt just as much in the church as outside of it. But those who choose to resist the pull, those who choose to follow Jesus by descending into greatness are always the ones who taste the greater portion of God's favor and joy.

I never cease to marvel at how God's ways are so different from the ways of the world. Consider, for example, some of the contrarian logic found in Scripture...

- *“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” (Matt 5:3)*
- *“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.” (Matthew 5:5)*
- *“I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 18:3)*
- *“Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.” (Matthew 10:39)*
- *“Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will lift you up.” (James 4:10)*

Our passage in Philippians reveals a similar kind of counter-cultural teaching. The focus in the text is on the relationships we have with others; how we treat other people. Here's the big idea I want us to grab hold of: Our best moments happen when we selflessly serve others. Would you repeat that out loud? Now, let's read Philippians 2:1-11. I encourage you to follow along in your message notes.

Therefore, if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion,² then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind.³ Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves,⁴ not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

⁵ In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: ⁶ Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; ⁷ rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. ⁸ And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!

⁹ Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Verse 1 begins with the word “*therefore.*” This refers back to Paul’s exhortation in 1:27 to “*stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel...*”

The letter to the Philippians is noteworthy because of the absence of apparent problems in the church. Most of the other NT documents were written to address problems. But Philippians is unique because it’s virtually problem-free. But the one issue that’s hinted at being a problem is church unity. A unified church is so much more effective than one that’s divided. God knows this and so does the devil. That’s why one of the persistent ways the enemy has neutralized the church throughout history is through division.

In verse 1 Paul makes four observations that he knew to be true about the Philippians’ experience in their church.

- They received encouragement from one another.
- They received comfort from God’s love.
- They experienced fellowship with the Spirit.
- They experienced tenderness and compassion.

Wouldn’t that have been an amazing church to be part of? And so many of those qualities are also what we experience here at ECF. As a result of those rich and wonderful blessings, Paul exhorts in verse 2 to make his joy complete by being even more united. Three hallmarks of unity are mentioned:

- Being like-minded.
- Having the same love (meaning they would deepen in the love they already shared in the church),
- And being one in spirit and purpose.

You might circle the word “*like-minded*” in verse 2. Literally it means to “*think the same thing.*” The Greek word for think is used ten times in Philippians. It’s a major theme in the letter. Do you know why? Because God knows that right thinking leads to right behavior. Proverbs 23:7. “*For as a man thinks within himself, so is he.*” What we experience in life begins with our thoughts. Thoughts become words. Words become actions. Actions become habits. Habits shape our character. And character determines our destiny.

Success, victory and Christ-likeness begin with our thoughts. Now seems like a good time to repeat our memory verse for this series. Would you repeat with me Philippians 4:8? “*Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.*”

We're to be like-minded in the church. This means we think alike regarding our commitment to Christ and his inspired Word. This means we recognize that what we share together as recipients of God's grace is always greater than anything that might divide us. Being like-minded does not mean we all belong to the same political party; nor that we all make the same choices regarding issues of life-style. We're to be like-minded regarding the core issues related to our faith.

In verse 3 the call begins to emerge to selflessly serve others. Selflessness, of course, is an important key to unity. Paul exhorts us not to do anything out of "*selfish ambition.*" This phrase carries the idea of quarreling, infighting and strife. In other words, we're not to build ourselves up by tearing others down. We're not to use flattery or false accusations as tactics to advance ourselves.

Nor are we to do things out of "*vain conceit.*" The idea behind "*vain conceit*" is to have an over-inflated self-image. This is the only time this word is found in the NT. It refers to a highly exaggerated view of oneself. Whereas selfish ambition pursues personal goals at the expense of others, vain conceit seeks personal glory, credit and acclaim.

Instead of selfish ambition and vain conceit, in humility we're to consider others better than ourselves. Humility means literally "*lowliness of mind.*" It's the opposite of pride. Humility is an indispensable virtue in our descent into greatness. All through the Bible we discover humility is something God values. Scripture says that Moses was "*very humble.*" Proverbs 16:19 says, "*Better to be lowly in spirit and among the oppressed than to share plunder with the proud.*"

Three times in two verses the Apostle Peter calls for humility. "*All of you clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because 'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.'* *Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time.*" (1 Peter 5:5&6)

In humility—with lowliness of mind—we're to consider others better—or more important—than ourselves. The best way to do this is to keep in mind our own sinfulness. That should keep us from ever getting puffed up. The Apostle Paul understood this. Even though he did amazing things to advance God's kingdom, his own sinfulness was never far from his mind. In 1 Timothy 1:15 Paul calls himself "*the worst*" of sinners.

The call to selflessness continues in verse 4. Each of us should not look "*to your own interests, but each of you to the interests of others.*" In other words, we're to live beyond ourselves. The focus of our life's activities and our investments is not to be only on us. What others need must be of concern to us. What others feel about things must be of concern to us.

Why? Because the model we've chosen to follow is Jesus Christ. Verse 5 is the hinge in this passage opening the door showing Christ as the ultimate example of everything Paul has been talking about. No selfish ambition or vain conceit was ever part of Jesus.

He's the consummate example of humility. He was gentle and humble in heart. He always considered others more important than himself. And he always looked out for the interests of others.

"In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus..." Jesus is not only our Savior he's also our model for how to live in a manner pleasing to the Father. The Apostle John put it like this. "Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did." (1 John 2:6) And the attitude that best describes Christ is selfless. Look again at the Lord's descent into greatness....

Verse 6—He emptied himself of his divine prerogatives.

Verse 7—He took the form of a servant and became a man.

Verse 8—He humbled himself and died on the cross.

I'd like you to mark several key words or phrases in your message notes:

- Circle "mindset" in verse 5. This is the same root as the word "like-minded" in verse 2. It literally means "to think" or "to have the mind of."
- Underline the phrase "made himself nothing" in verse 7. Think about that. Christ made himself nothing. He made the choice to give up his rights.
- Now circle the word "servant" in verse 7. This is the same word Paul uses to describe himself in 1:1. This is doulos in the Greek. A bondservant.
- Now circle two more words in verse 8: "humbled" and "obedient." Those two words powerfully describe Jesus' descent into greatness.

Then, beginning in verse 9, we see the wonder of God's counter-cultural way of doing things. With God the way down is the way up. Because Jesus humbled himself, because Jesus was obedient, therefore the Father exalted him to the highest place! Jesus descended into greatness by becoming a servant. And, as a result, God the Father lifted him up; God exalted him, he raised him up and "gave him the name that is above every name."

Throughout this passage we see this amazing theme of selflessness. We're to do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. We're humbly to consider others as more important than us. We're to look out for the interests of others, not just for good old #1. We're to have the same attitude as Christ...who gave up his rights...who humbled himself and became a servant.

This is completely contrary to the pecking order mentality that infects much of our society. Do you know where the term pecking order comes from? If you take ten chickens and put them in a pen together with some chicken feed within minutes, they will form a hierarchy based on dominance. They'll establish a pecking order. Even though they may have been strangers previously, instinctively they will determine who the number one chicken will be, and the number two chicken and so on all the way down to the unlucky number ten chicken.

Many people go through life operating under a similar philosophy. To them where they rank in the pecking order of life is huge. Different people use different gauges for their rankings, but they all have in common this constant concern about where they rank in the pecking order.

- Some people gauge the pecking order by the square footage of their house, or the kind of cars they drive.
- Other people gauge where they rank by how much power they wield in their organization.
- Or if they're not very high up in the power grid, some gauge their place in the pecking order by how close they are to people with power.

Yet in all of history no one was more qualified to be at the top of the pecking order than Jesus Christ. He created everything. He owns everything. He is Lord over all the earth. And instead of flaunting his position at the top of the pecking order, Jesus Christ let it go; he made himself nothing; he gave up his rights; he humbled himself; he became a servant. "For the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Mark 10:45)

Conclusion

I said this a few moments ago, but here's the big idea I want us to see: Our best moments happen when we selflessly serve others. Our best moments come when we have the same attitude as Christ. Our best moments come when we follow Christ descending into greatness by serving others.

Several years ago, a cab driver discovered this for himself. Listen as he tells his story. Because I drive the night shift, my cab often becomes a moving confessional. Passengers climb in, sit behind me in total anonymity and tell me about their lives. I encounter people whose lives amaze me, ennoble me, make me laugh and sometimes weep. But none touched me more than a woman I picked up late one August night.

Responding to a call from a small brick four-plex in a quiet part of town, I assumed I was being sent to pick up some partiers, or someone who had just had a fight with a lover. When I arrived at 2:30 AM, the building was dark except for a single light in a ground floor window. Under these circumstances many drivers would just honk once or twice then drive away.

But I had seen too many impoverished people who depended on taxis as their only means of transportation. Unless a situation smelled of danger, I always went to the door. This passenger might be someone who needs my assistance, I reasoned to myself. So, I walked to the door and knocked.

"Just a minute," answered a frail, elderly voice. After a long pause, the door opened. A small woman in her 80s stood before me. She was wearing a print dress and a pillbox hat with a veil pinned on it, like somebody out of a 1940's movie. The apartment looked as if no one had lived in it for years. All the furniture was covered with sheets. There

were no clocks on the walls and no knick-nacks. In the corner was a cardboard box with photos and glassware.

“Would you carry my bag out to the car?” she asked. I took the bag and then turned to assist her. She took my arm and we walked slowly to the curb. She kept thanking me for my kindness. “It’s nothing,” I told her. “I just try to treat my passengers the way I would want my mother treated.” “Oh, you’re such a good boy,” she said.

When we got in the cab, she gave me an address then asked, “Could you drive me through downtown?” “It’s not the shortest way,” I answered quickly. “Oh, I don’t mind,” she said. “I’m in no hurry. I’m on my way to a hospice.” I looked in the rearview mirror. Her eyes were glistening. “I don’t have any family left,” she continued. “The doctor says I don’t have very long.”

I quietly reached over and shut off the meter. “What route would you like me to take?” I asked. For the next two hours we drove through the city. She showed me the building where she had once worked as an elevator operator. We drove through the neighborhood where she and her husband had lived as newlyweds.

She had me pull up in front of a furniture warehouse that had once been a ballroom where she had gone dancing as a girl. Sometimes she’d ask me to slow in front of a particular building and would stare into the darkness saying nothing.

As the first hint of sun was creasing the horizon, she suddenly said, “I’m tired. Let’s go now.” We drove in silence to the address she had given me. Two orderlies came out to the cab as soon as we pulled up. They were solicitous and intent watching her every move. They must have been expecting her.

I opened the trunk and took the small suitcase to the door. The woman was already seated in a wheelchair. “How much do I owe you?” She asked. “Nothing,” I said. “You have to make a living,” she answered. “There are other passengers,” I responded.

Almost without thinking I bent over and gave her a hug. She held on to me tightly. “You gave an old woman a little moment of joy,” she said. “Thank you.”

I squeezed her hand, then walked into the dim morning light. Behind me a door shut. It was the sound of the closing of a life. I didn’t pick up any more passengers that shift. I drove aimlessly, lost in thought. For the rest of the day, I could hardly talk. What if that woman had gotten an angry driver, or one who was impatient? What if I had honked and driven away? I don’t think I’ve ever done anything more important in my life.”

Do you remember what I said earlier? Our best moments happen when we selflessly serve others. Don’t miss this! Follow Jesus by descending into greatness.