

ABC Palm A Proper 21	Descending into Greatness Philippians 2.5-11 by Tim Isbell	Preached 4/13/2003
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Thesis: We are called to follow our Lord's example and descend into greatness.

I'm not sure the place where I found the original source material for this sermon, but it was almost certainly from Willow Creek. Probably a sermon from John Ortberg or Bill Hybels, or from Bill Hybels' book Descending into Greatness. Either way, this is an effective sermon.

Read Phil 2.5-11 with the congregation

Reflexive quiz

Just say the first thing that comes into mind ...

Your boss says your company is being reorganized and your job is history. But good for you, there are 2 other positions that you can apply for. One represents a promotion, the other a demotion. Which interests you more?

You get the promotion, and this means you are going to move offices. There are 2 offices for you to choose between. One is a hard walled office; the other is a cubicle. Which do you want?

At this new level you have access to the executive dining room. The prices are the same as in the cafeteria, but there are tablecloths on the tables, waiters/waitresses to serve you, and a quieter/cleaner ambiance. Do you eat in the executive dining room or in the employee café?

At this new level you need to travel. You can fly first class or coach. So, when you book your first flight, do you choose first class or coach?

Do you see a pattern?

We have an almost incurable pull up and to the right, where we expect to find joy and a sense of satisfaction.

But when the value of our house is down, job availability is down, and front page of newspaper features terror/war in many places of the world... when these are the case we in a national funk.

The Bible teaches us to question “up and to the right.”

It offers strong warnings about the dangers of that kind of life.

Prosperity damages more souls than adversity.

“Up and to the right” is dangerous territory when it comes to the health of our spirit, our relationship with God, our relationships with other because we are easily addicted to power and achievement. Pretty soon we don’t have time for God, our family, and real friends.

It’s why Jesus said if you are going to gain the whole world, be careful, you can easily lose your soul.

The Bible says it’s sometimes good when our chart goes down!

Because our openness to God grows, reliance on other people grows; willingness to engage in relationships grows.

Let’s think about that scripture we read at the outset.

It says that Jesus left the splendors of heaven to take a series of voluntary demotions to come and live among us.

God’s 1st step is BIG! It’s hard to imagine the gap between heaven and earth.

Consider moving to a roach-infested, bare-cupboard, motel room on Monterey Road where you pay the bill day-to-day or they toss you out on the street.

Because we’ve only known earth we don’t reflect much on what it meant for Jesus to leave heaven and come to this place called earth.

Scripture says heaven is environment of spectacular beauty. These are the sights and sounds and smells that Jesus knew from eternity past.

But one day he wakes up as a baby on planet earth. The 1st thing he sees is a barn roof. 1st sounds are made by chickens, sheep, and cows. 1st smells are of animal urine and manure. What a wake-up call!

In heaven Jesus was surrounded by legions of angels singing, full-time, “Holy, holy, holy. There is none like you.”

On planet earth a few curious people and farm animals surround him.

In heaven Jesus lived full-time in the perfect relational patterns of the Trinity: uninterrupted, perfect, intimate relationships.

On planet earth he’s alone in a manger cared for by a 14 year old girl with zero experience and not much of a support system.

In heaven he says a word and the world comes into existence; he has unlimited power

On earth he lies in a cattle-feeding trough hoping his mother will change his diaper and feed him on time.

Stop and think about it: Jesus’ first step was BIG!

2nd step isn’t easy either: he becomes a man.

Some of us know what it's like to be hungry, exhausted, pushed aside at the mall, the object of someone's anger.

Jesus takes all the hits and blows that we take, and more - for the 1st time.

3rd step: becomes a servant/teacher

It's hard enough to teach objective material, but harder when we have a difficult message to teach that requires people to respond to a high challenge and high truth and where the goal is for them to change their lives.

Most people resist messages like that.

Up in heaven he's recognized as a member of the Trinity, everyone says "We adore you. We worship you."

On earth he's a teacher of the human beings that he and the Father created, but they roll their eyes and resist his message. Parents know a little of what this is like.

4th step: he volunteers to die!

Some of us know what it feels like to sit with a person who is dying. But how awful would it be to watch a friend die like Jesus died? To watch _____ suffer from torture over a long period of time.

Now think of the 2nd person of the Trinity, who had only known adoration from eternity past. He takes all these demotions and winds up beaten, naked, with a crown of thorns on head, bleeding and dying, voluntarily.

Can you conceive the distance between heaven and the cross?

Can you imagine signing up for such a downward spiral?

Nobody has ever willingly signed up for more demotions than Jesus.

And because he did, the Bible says that God honored him above every name that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow...

Let's step back a minute. Why did Jesus do this?

Assuming he knew that this lie ahead, why?

- Was he bored in heaven and wanted to check out action on earth?
- Did he just want to teach and heal some people that bad?

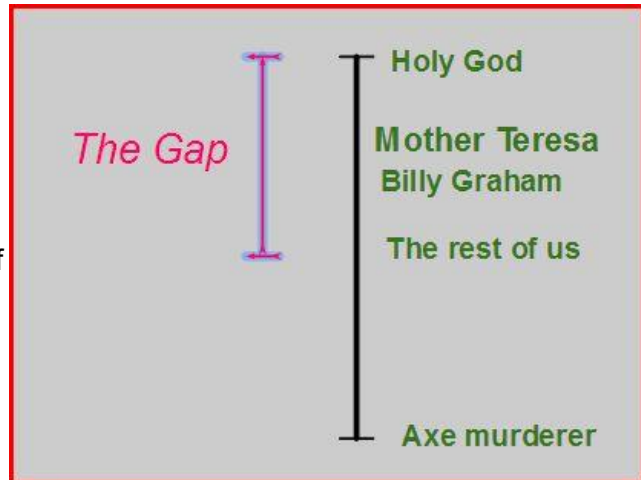
Scriptures say he came because of a 3 letter word: SIN.

Remember our diagram?

(This refers to a visual that I used in an earlier sermon, and which you can see in the [Google Slides file](#) that goes with this sermon. I think I first saw it at a Willow Leadership Conference. I also think it is packaged in the Willow material: Just Walk Across the Room.”)

The visual is sometimes referred to as Bill Hybels’ Morality Ladder illustration. It goes something like this:

First Bill draws a vertical line to represent a ladder. The top of the ladder represents the holiest thing we know of: God’s holiness. The bottom of the ladder represents the worst evil we can think of, maybe an axe murderer of children. You get the point. Essentially the ladder portrays the span of morality from the very worst to the very best.”



Bill then reasons something like this: “Mother Teresa would probably qualify for a rung about three-fourths of the way up. She essentially says so.” (So he puts MT on the ladder).

“And just as a guess, Billy Graham probably falls right below her.” (Put BG on the ladder)

“I guarantee I land lower than those two.” (At that point he places his initials relative to the other two on the ladder, leaving an honorable amount of space between BG and BH (Bill Hybels)).

“I know my place. Then I hand over the pen. Inevitably, the person I’m in conversation with writes his or her initials just south of me.”

“‘Okay,’ I say. ‘Here’s my only question: What is your plan to make up your gap? Mother Teresa had a plan for her morality gap. It was the cross of Jesus Christ. Billy Graham has a plan for closing the gap between his level of morality and God’s standard of perfection. It’s the cross of Jesus Christ. So what’s your plan?’”

God is holy, absolutely. Nobody has ever lived up to his standards of holiness. We all fell short.

So, who is closest? Maybe Mother Teresa or Billy Graham. The rest of us fall somewhere far behind them.

The problem we all face is the gap between our moral standing and the perfection of God. So we have this gap.

Okay, just how many candidates are available to solve that gap?

I heard about a guy in prison in Michigan

8 men were housed in an 14' cell.

Let's say one of these guys has had a real change of heart and is now a really good guy. In a burst of love he says to the others: "Because I love all of you, I'm going to serve out your time. You, you have 6 months left – go free, I'll add your time to mine. You have 2 years left. Add it to my time. All you guys can go free; I'll serve your time."

Would Michigan justice department allow that? No. Why? Because our friend is serving his own time. You can't serve someone else's time when you're paying your own debt back to society.

In the same way no one of us can pay the sins for anybody else. Nope, we all have our own gap that we can't even pay for.

God the Father saw there was only one who could solve the gap between our sin and his standard of holiness.

Someone from outside our sin-filled world, someone who is sinless, who owes nobody anything – who has no gap.

There is only one candidate: Jesus Christ.

Knowing all that was involved, he came and took these downward demotions to pay the price for our sins.

That explains why we needed Jesus to come and suffer.

But it does not explain why he chose to do come.

That was love.

Some parents understand this

They pray, conceive, and they're glad they are having this child.

The next thing that happens is mom takes a demotion. Her stomach gets queasy, there's morning sickness. It's a comfort demotion

This slender, lovely person becomes large. It's also a fashion demotion.

And dad takes a demotion because if mom's not happy, dad's not happy. And he has to work more hours to pay more bills, and he has to fix up the nursery.

The baby comes and both mom and dad take a sleep demotion.

Then it's on to other seasons of life: soccer, gymnastics, and music recitals. Mom and dad pour emotional energy into the child's life.

Then comes college and parents sign up for more years of poverty.

They love this kid, which is why they accept these demotions.

Parents unwilling to accept demotion, who think they can raise kids while going full

speed up and to the right, usually wreck their kids.

Parents willing to accept the demotions that go with parenting tend to wind up with kids at a higher level and families who know real joy.

Some of us who want better friends understand this.

We say, "I wish I had a richer relational life. How do I do that?"

We invest in friendship building. We accept some demotions to build friendships.

Bible says our attitude should be the same as Christ Jesus, who appeared in human form. Want more friends ... "appear" ... "in human form" ... "with an attitude like Christ's."

Those of us who join the church understand this.

We attend, come to services and go home, but we won't find the real richness in our experience with the church until we accept a series of demotions.

Let's say we take the first step and volunteer to chip in someplace.

Then we set aside time to pray for church.

Join a consistent serving team.

Invest money in Kingdom building.

We do this and we wind up with a sense of ownership and astonished at how God is using us. Our whole church experience changes.

The Philippians passage said

Have this attitude in you that was in Christ Jesus, who took all the steps down because sin required it, and because love required it.

So, here's the challenge

This month, follow Jesus and descend a bit.

Serve somebody, in a practical way. Write a note, help them with something.

Stash an extra \$20 in your wallet, or maybe \$100. Start looking and praying for God to put someone into your life who needs it. When you spot that someone, give it to them.

Sign up for some a serving opportunity around the church. Maybe it's a one-shot opportunity. Just give something a try.

Or maybe you've been doing that and you're now ready for something consistent.

Pray for our church.

It is the way of our Lord Jesus Christ; it is the way of the Kingdom.

Other resources:
Click on the link for the Google Slides for this sermon. (Similar to PowerPoint)
Audio file: On 10/16/2006 we started audio posting New Life sermons online, on 10/16/2005. To find the audio file for any sermon: go to the upper right hand corner of the first page of this sermon notes file and get the earliest preach date. Then go to New Life Recordings and search to see if the sermon is listed for the date on the sermon notes.
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