

# DESCEND INTO GREATNESS

By Rev. Will Nelken

*Presented at Trinity Community Church, San Rafael, California, on Sunday, July 12, 2009*

---

Jesus began to tell His disciples how much He would suffer and that He would be rejected and killed, but would rise from the dead after three days. Not able to understand the last part of the story, Peter took Him aside and began to reprimand Him for saying such things.

Jesus abruptly stopped him, saying, *“You are seeing things merely from a human point of view, not from God’s”* (Mark 8:33).

Merely a human point of view...  
...not from God’s point of view.

How often do we find ourselves stuck or in conflict because we do not appreciate God’s point of view? Let’s try to discover it together today.

*Mark 8:34* Then, calling the crowd to join his disciples, [Jesus] said, *“If any of you wants to be my follower, you must turn from your selfish ways, take up your cross, and follow me. <sup>35</sup> If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake and for the sake of the Good News, you will save it.*

Jesus’ way of approaching life is upside down! Inside out! Which is exactly why so many of us struggle to retain a vibrant faith to the end of our lives. “Hang on to it and you will lose it.” “Give it away and you will save it.”

*Mark 9:1* Jesus went on to say, *“I tell you the truth, some standing here right now will not die before they see the Kingdom of God arrive in great power!”*

The Kingdom of God is not a geographic place. It is not a spiritual experience or a state of mind. It is the real and demonstrable presence and power of Almighty God influencing the tangible circumstances of our world.

That same week, three of Jesus’ disciples were led up a high mountain for the experience of a lifetime.

*Mark 9:2* Six days later Jesus took Peter, James, and John, and led them up a high mountain to be alone. As the men watched, Jesus’ appearance was transformed, <sup>3</sup> and his clothes became dazzling white, far whiter than any earthly bleach could ever make them. <sup>4</sup> Then Elijah and Moses appeared and began talking with Jesus.

<sup>5</sup> Peter exclaimed, *“Rabbi, it’s wonderful for us to be here! Let’s make three shelters as memorials—one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”* <sup>6</sup> He said this because he didn’t really know what else to say, for they were all terrified.

<sup>7</sup> Then a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, *“This is my dearly loved Son. Listen to him.”* <sup>8</sup> Suddenly, when they looked around, Moses and Elijah were gone, and they saw only Jesus with them.

They received a terrifying vision of God’s glory in His Son. Not in Moses, not in Elijah; in Jesus alone.

What significance had these two visitors, Moses and Elijah? The Law and the Prophets? The Truth and the Spirit? Intellect and experience?

Whatever it was, it was insufficient and no longer necessary. *“This is my dearly loved Son (full of grace and truth). Listen to him.”*

As Jesus led them down from the mountain top, He began to teach them God’s point of view.

*Mark 9:9 As they went back down the mountain, he told them not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead. <sup>10</sup> So they kept it to themselves, but they often asked each other what he meant by “rising from the dead.”*

*<sup>11</sup> Then they asked him, “Why do the teachers of religious law insist that Elijah must return before the Messiah comes?”*

*<sup>12</sup> Jesus responded, “Elijah is indeed coming first to get everything ready. Yet why do the Scriptures say that the Son of Man must suffer greatly and be treated with utter contempt? <sup>13</sup> But I tell you, Elijah has already come, and they chose to abuse him, just as the Scriptures predicted.”*

As they descended and mused about what this could possibly mean, they were distracted by voices arguing. The other disciples and some teachers of the Jewish religion were arguing, in the midst of a great crowd of onlookers.

*Mark 9:15 When the crowd saw Jesus, they were overwhelmed with awe, and they ran to greet him.*

*<sup>16</sup> “What is all this arguing about?” Jesus asked.*

*<sup>17</sup> One of the men in the crowd spoke up and said, “Teacher, I brought my son so you could heal him. He is possessed by an evil spirit that won’t let him talk. <sup>18</sup> And whenever this spirit seizes him, it throws him violently to the ground. Then he foams at the mouth and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid. So I asked your disciples to cast out the evil spirit, but they couldn’t do it.”*

*<sup>19</sup> Jesus said to them, “You faithless people! How long must I be with you? How long must I put up with you? Bring the boy to me.”*

About this time, the three disciples who had been on the mountain top with Jesus were wishing they had stayed there. What had happened to the glow? Shouldn’t they return?

Oswald Chambers offered some poignant thoughts (My Utmost for His Highest. October 1):

“We have all had times on the mount, when we have seen things from God’s standpoint and have wanted to stay there; but God will never allow us to stay there. The test of our spiritual life is the **power to descend**; if we have power to rise only, something is wrong.”

(My Utmost for His Highest. October 3):

‘We must be able to mount up with wings as eagles; but we must also know how to come down. **The power of the [child of God] lies in the coming down and the living down.** “I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me,” said Paul, and the things he referred to were mostly humiliating things.”

They brought the boy to Jesus, He rebuked the evil spirit and the boy was set free.

*Mark 9:28 Afterward, when Jesus was alone in the house with his disciples, they asked him, “Why couldn’t we cast out that evil spirit?”*

*<sup>29</sup> Jesus replied, “This kind can be cast out only by prayer (and fasting).”*

Where's the nearest mountain top? The disciples were looking for the glow and the power, and Jesus directed them instead to intentional humiliation (prayer and fasting). There's a time for soaking and there's a time for seeking. Soaking may inspire, but seeking empowers.

(My Utmost for His Highest. October 1):

"It is a great thing to be on the mount with God, but a man only gets there **in order that** afterwards he may get down among the devil-possessed and lift them up. We are not built for the mountains and the dawns and aesthetic affinities, those are for moments of inspiration, that is all. We are built for the valley, for the ordinary stuff we are in, and that is where we have to prove our mettle. **Spiritual selfishness** always wants repeated moments on the mount. We feel we could talk like angels and live like angels, if only we could stay on the mount. The times of exaltation are exceptional, they have their meaning in our life with God, but we must beware lest our spiritual selfishness wants to make them the **only** time."

(My Utmost for His Highest. October 2):

"We see His glory on the mount, but we never live for His glory there. Most of us can do things if we are always at the heroic pitch because of the natural selfishness of our hearts, but God wants us at the drab commonplace pitch, where we live in the valley according to our personal relationship to Him."

Abraham lived 175 years. He heard God's voice for the first time when he was 75. God spoke with him 5 times in the next 25 years. There is no record of any further conversations between them for his last 75 years. He lived out the end of his life "according to his personal relationship to God."

(My Utmost for His Highest. October 2):

"Peter thought it would be a fine thing for them to remain on the mount, but Jesus Christ took the disciples down from the mount into the valley, the place where the meaning of the vision is explained. "When you were on the mount, you could believe anything, but what about the time when you were up against facts in the valley? The last time you were on the mount with God, you saw that all power in heaven and in earth belonged to Jesus — will you be skeptical now in the valley of humiliation?"

Mountain tops are special occasions, but *we live* in the valley, in the desert, in the woods.

Sacrifice may take place on the mountain top, but life takes place in the valley below.

Revelation may take place on the mountain top, but communication takes place in the valley below.

Worship may take place on the mountain top, but ministry takes place in the valley below.

In his book, "Descending Into Greatness," Bill Hybels wrote: "Curiously, Christianity, in its purest form, is not bent on human self-fulfillment. Its overriding purpose is simple and to the point: God's Kingdom come. Christians, then, are those who roll up their sleeves to advance God's Kingdom. They give themselves away in love, so God and others might receive."

He adds, "It is obvious that Jesus would have flunked 'Self-Fulfillment 101.'"

Apostle Paul had this Kingdom-purpose in his life. A man of many revelations and of much service, he often faced a personal choice, as he described to the church in Philippi:

*Philippians 1:20* I trust that my life will bring honor to Christ, whether I live or die. <sup>21</sup> For to me, living means living for Christ, and dying is even better. <sup>22</sup> But if I live, I can do more fruitful work for Christ. So I

*really don't know which is better.* <sup>23</sup> *I'm torn between two desires: I long to go and be with Christ, which would be far better for me.* <sup>24</sup> *But for your sakes, it is better that I continue to live.*  
<sup>25</sup> *Knowing this, I am convinced that I will remain alive so I can continue to help all of you grow and experience the joy of your faith.*

“For your sakes...” Can we really live that way? If we see things from God’s point of view.

“Your Kingdom come.”