

No Greater Love

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In John 15:13 Jesus declares, "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." This scripture is a self-portrait of Jesus himself. It tells his whole story in one verse. What the verse does not tell is when and how Jesus laid down his life for us.

In reality Jesus laid down his life long before the cross. The crucifixion of Christ was the climax of a life laid down for thirty-three years. From birth until death Jesus was the ultimate expression of what the scripture means when it calls upon us to "deny ourselves" (Matthew 16:24,25.)

At birth Jesus became the weakest, a baby. This mode of entrance into time and history, of putting himself in the hands and at a level with man whom he came to save and who would kill him, was a metaphor of his whole life. His power was not to be that of the world's. His stance was to be the least, the last, the poor, the simple, the lowly. He was not just talking when he said the last would be first (Matthew 20:16.) Jesus lived it out and then said follow me.

Paul in Philippians 2:5-11 tells us that Jesus "emptied himself and took on the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men and being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross." The stance of power and influence so sought after in our culture was not that of Jesus. When we take our place in the ranks of his followers, he hands us a bowl and a towel and says "I washed feet. Go and do likewise." No reading of scripture can wring servanthood out of Sonship without doing great violence to the message of Jesus. We are as

Jesus' followers, sons not slaves, but Sonship in the style of Jesus was wrapped in servanthood out of deep love for his friends.

This humbling of Jesus began at birth and was a continual process of yielding his will to the Father all through his life. He was to be about his Father's business, not his own. When the devil left him after the initial encounter with Jesus in the wilderness, the passage goes on to say "he departed from him until an opportune time" (Luke 4:13.) Then in Luke 12:50, Jesus says, "I have a baptism to be baptized with and how I am constrained (or hard pressed) until it is accomplished." The Greek word used here by Jesus translated "constrained" was used to speak of a grain of corn being crushed between two grinding stones. The implication is that all through his ministry, Jesus was tempted and pressured to not listen to the Father, to turn from his appointed course and save himself from a terrible end. He was tempted in all points like as are we (Hebrews 4:15) and continually are.

When Jesus says "take up your cross daily" (Luke 9:23,24) he is talking from his own experience. Jesus knew he could do nothing of himself. Only as the Father gave it to him could he act. Jesus makes that very clear in John 5:19 and John 5:30. Daily he listened to the Father. Daily he took up his cross in life. It is as if by daily bearing his cross (listening to the Father and doing the Father's will rather than his own,) Jesus was constructing the cross and driving the nails in his own body for the world could not tolerate such love for the Father and for mankind. It is not man's natural style. We are more prone to power and force.

Someone may ask, "what did he lay down daily?" It could be described as "self", "ego", "flesh" or the desert fathers called it "the passions." In Matthew 15:12-20 we are told what these passions are like and where they come from. These passions arise out of the heart and if they are not laid before the Father, humankind will act out of them and eventually they will control our lives. Jesus laid them before the Father.

But someone may object, Jesus couldn't have had to deal with these, he was divine. Yes, he was, but according to the scripture Jesus surrendered his independent use

of these divine powers during the incarnation. He did not surrender his divinity, but I repeat, he did surrender his independent use of these divine powers. We have already seen that he says as much in John 5:19 and John 5:30. Also in the Philippians 2:5-11 passage Paul tells us he "emptied himself." Likewise, on the cross when the taunts were made that he come down off the cross and save himself Jesus refused. Why? Because there was no problem about divinity getting through death. The problem was whether humanity could get through. Had Jesus used divine power to overcome the tempter in the wilderness or on the cross he would have used something none of us have ever had. We would have a great case against God for holding us accountable for our sin when even His own son could only overcome sin by using something we never had, divine power. No, Jesus overcame through obedience to the Father. He increased in wisdom and stature and favor with God and man (Luke 2:52) in his humanity and he did not "know" he was going to rise from the dead. He believed (placed faith in) the Father's word. The Father had told him he would rise on the third day and Jesus believed the Father. He overcame sin, the tempter, and death by the same avenue open to Adam in the beginning, listening to the Father. Now Jesus has given humanity a new beginning and born our sin away and humanity in Jesus is now seated at the right hand of the Father. So sure of this is Paul that he can say that already we are seated in heavenly places in Christ Jesus. (Ephesians 2:6.)

Jesus laid all things before the Father. There would have been no need for Jesus to pray if he were going to use divine power apart from the Father. But to be our saviour he had to overcome in our world the very thing that brought man's fall in the beginning. He had to be tempted in all parts like as are we yet without sin (Hebrews 4:15.) At any point along the way Jesus could have said no. He could have come off the cross. He had the power. But as soon as he did he would have no longer been able to be our Messiah, our Saviour, our Lord. Jesus laid all things before the Father.

The cross was the final act of Jesus humbling himself. This is not the world's way. Whether the world

is in the market place or in the church it acts the same way. Force, condemnation, and a dominating power not love, acceptance and forgiveness. Religion and secular power combined forces to condemn Jesus. The world still works in both spheres of influence. Humbling self is not the world's way, but it is Jesus' way. The way of Jesus was in the glory of the Father who raised Jesus from the dead (Romans 6:4.) And the glory of the Father is love, not love defined by the world, but as defined by God's character and action as revealed to us in his son Jesus Christ.

It says in Hebrews 5:8 that Jesus learned obedience through suffering . It was the same power of God's glory that raised Jesus from the grave and gave him power to die to self. The resurrection of Jesus confirmed Jesus' way as the way the Father had ordained that man was meant to live. Jesus defeated the enemy, removed our curse, and bestowed the power of his way upon us through the work of the Holy Spirit within us. Now we are followers of the way (Acts 9:2.)

We all know we cannot live this life in our own strength. We have tried before and since our conversion to do it in our own strength. We have failed each time. Ego-driven, self-willed, passion-possessed, flesh-formed patterns have been our stock and trade in the world. We all learned our lessons well. We were worldly-wise long before yielded to our Fathers call in Christ Jesus. Now we are shedding skins so to speak. But we all know it is only by the power of the Holy Spirit that we can overcome destructive patterns of sin and death that stubbornly cling to their foothold in our hearts. But what is our part?

As Jesus was tempted like as we are (Hebrews 4:15,) he could only live this life of obedience through intimacy with the Father. Only then could he live out this "no greater love." If we are going to love as he loved, we must follow his lead, but how do we do it? We know we are to do the Father's will. We have heard this. We do not need more pressure of what to do. We know we are to love as he loved, but how?

Deal With Your Passion

First, if we are to love as he loved, we will deal with our passions. Jesus did and we are followers of his lead. The desert fathers listed the passions as eight in number as follow:

Gluttony - The desire to fill ourselves up with things from outside ourselves yet still things of this world, such as food, drink, possessions, or people to name a few examples.

Avarice - The root of this is fear of the future. We are unwilling to share our resources with others and hoard them for ourselves.

Impurity - Lusting after bodies, not only sexually but certainly this is included. Conquest, power, and security drives are at the root of our impurities.

Depression - This is rooted in a kind of grief. Unfinished business from the past, something lost or never had that causes nostalgic regret and deep pain.

Anger - This is the most fierce of the passions. It grows out of a sense of entitlement. Self-esteem problems are involved and it is the passion most destructive of love. To express anger does not, as once advocated by some, remove the anger. Something more is needed.

Acedia - This is restless boredom. Often this overtakes us because of exhaustion or a lack of leisure. Our culture is big on this because all of our production and use of time-saving inventions are eating up our time. We are time impoverished.

Vainglory - Coveting praises and recognition until desire for approval replaces our appropriate goal. The need to be liked is so great that our actions are determined by our need.

Pride - This is the inverse of humility. Devaluing others is at the core, but it does not consist so much in too high an opinion of self as too low an opinion of others. It produces a self-righteousness in us.

Stay Close To God

The answer is going to sound too simple. Like little children with their parents, stay close to God. The means for this are prayer, Bible reading, and study and fellowship with believers. In light of these means each of us will see our own darkness. Either time alone with God and his word or time rubbing up against the rough edges of others we serve and serve with, will reveal to us the shape of our darkness. Abba Moses, one of the desert fathers, said, "Sit in your cell and your cell will teach you everything."

Remember God's Love Trusts Us

As broken as we know ourselves to be, God knows and reveals to us a deeper truth. We are healed by Jesus' stripes. We are children of God. And he trusts us with the task of telling and living out his truth. This is a part of the reason of Jesus' Ascension. Had Jesus remained with us, would we not have done like the twelve? Whenever someone came for healing and grace, we would shout, "Go get Jesus, he will do it. Go get Jesus."

But God wanted us to grow up. To know our worth and value to him, ourselves and others. God is much like a parent allowing a teenager to take the family car on his own for the first time. The parent knows the immaturity, the dangers, the risks, but he also believes in the child who is emerging into responsible adulthood, though slowly, sometimes painfully so. God is for us, believers in us, and trusts us with his most treasured truth.

God Sends Us What We Need

God is concerned about his sheep. He tells us so in John 10. He knows when we need to be led into the pasture and when we need the shelter of the fold. Remember also that a shepherd is not into showing off himself. He shows off his sheep. When he takes them to

the county fair the sheep are on display and the shepherd isn't saying, "Hey, look at me! Look at me!"

Also, remember that no matter how much you love the sheep, as an undershepherd you cannot expect the sheep to bless you. In fact, the one you work with the most may turn and butt you at the moment you least expect it. We are to feed, nurture, set boundaries, tend their wounds, and sit up with them at birthing time, but to do this work of an undershepherd we will need the care of the Good Shepherd ourselves. Remember - God will send what we need if we humble ourselves and ask. The asking for help is sometimes the hardest part.

No greater love has any man than to lay down his life for a friend. We must lay our lives down like Jesus did long before his cross and as we follow his lead we will lead as we follow. As we become simple and small, we will grow young and full of life - the fruit of the Spirit. For no greater love. . .