

## Descending Into Greatness

Passages: Matthew 16:21–28

Romans 12:9–21

In every country of the world...in every culture known to mankind...the word '**down**' can be a very bad word. Think about it:

- If you're a person who has a lot of shares on the stock market, you never want to hear the news that your stocks have gone 'down', do you? You only want to hear one word—that's '**up**'! --**Down is a bad word!**
- If you're the parent of a school age student, you never want to go to a parent/teacher interview and be told that your child's grades have gone 'down', do you? You want to hear that they've gone **up**! --**Down is a bad word!**
- If you're a family who lives in a unit with 3 bedrooms, would you want to move into another unit that only has 2 bedrooms? As far as comfort and convenience is concerned, that would be going 'down'! We'd rather go **up**...and move into a house with 4 bedrooms and 3 bathrooms! --**Down is a bad word!**
- This week, the Dictator of Libya, Colonel Mu'amar Gadaffi, is in hiding. He's under pressure to surrender to the rebel forces. They are trying to force him to 'step down'. Clearly, for Gadaffi, '**down**' is a bad word!
- Even here in Australia, down is a bad word. Look at our Prime Minister and the Labour Party-- they are 'down' in the polls! In English, we might also say that they are 'down' in the dumps! ...or 'down on their luck'. If things keep going the way they are right now, they may soon be 'down the drain' or 'down and out'! '**Down**' is a very bad word for them.

I hope you get the point: Whatever background you come from, it seems that we all want to go **up**, not **down**. **Down is a bad word!**...

...that is, unless your name is Jesus Christ! For Jesus, down was a very positive word! In fact, it is the one word that best describes His life amongst us.

1. **Down** is the word that describes how Jesus, the Son of God, came from heaven to earth. **He came down!** But, as you know, that's only the beginning of the story!
2. **Down** is also the word that describes how Jesus left behind the heavenly realms of perfect purity and light in order to be born in the filth and darkness of our world. **He came down!** But there's even more to it than that!
3. **Down** is also the word that describes how He willingly turned His back on His Father's riches and chose, instead, to be poor... a man without possessions. **He came down!** But that's still not the full picture.
4. **Down** is the also word that describes how Jesus left behind His glory and His status as King. Not only did Jesus 'empty Himself' of His equality with God and become a man, like us, but He even went below us, by becoming a servant ...a slave to humankind! **He came down!** But we still don't have the full picture!
5. **Down** is the word that describes how the all-perfect and sinless Son of God...the One "who knew no sin"... "became sin" for our sake. He took upon His sinless body the sins of the whole world. **He came down!**
6. And finally, **down** is the word that describes how our Almighty and Eternal God willingly died on a cross outside of Jerusalem's walls...and how He went down into death, for us. **He came down!**

Now, I want you to really think about this-- The one word that best describes Jesus is the one word that we all try to avoid! While the world frantically tries to go **up**...to increase its status, power, wealth, and self-fulfilment... Jesus goes in the opposite direction —**He comes down!** Why?

I think there are essentially three reasons:

**First**, Jesus comes down to save us...rescue us...deliver us. Sure, He is God. Sure, He could have watched from a distance. Sure, He could have sent a legion of angels. But, no! He left everything behind in order to come down to where we are... to come down into our sad predicament of sin and brokenness. Indeed, it is in this incredible descent of God, His love is most powerfully revealed! Jesus deliberately came down; He willingly shared our humanity; He willingly took our sin; He willingly experienced our death. Why? So that He might enter into every aspect of our fallen world and reclaim it with His life!

In the passage we read from Matthew 16, Jesus is talking to the disciples about the fact that He must fulfil His destiny by dying. Peter shouts, “**This shall never happen to you!**” Of course, Peter was simply thinking the way that most of us do—Although Peter correctly believed that Jesus was the Messiah, he had the wrong understanding of the direction that the Messiah was travelling. Peter imagined that the Messiah was moving up, and that He should be seated on a throne in triumph and glory. But Jesus knew the direction in which He was travelling! He accepted the fact that He was going down and that, very soon, He would be lying in a grave, humiliated and scorned!

You know, I think we would have all done the same thing as Peter-- All of us would have cried out, “**This shall never happen to you!**” “You should go up, not down! Down is bad word!”

All Jesus says to Peter is, “**Get behind me, Satan. You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.**” Clearly, Jesus was convinced that

‘down’ was the only direction for Him! He knew that it was only by going down...even into death and hell...that He would be able to save us from all the things that destroy us and hold us captive.

But there’s a **second** reason why Jesus came down. He came down to be a model for us of how we should live. You see, unlike the way the rest of the world thinks, in God’s economy, **down is the direction of true glory; down is the direction of true wealth; down is the direction of true greatness!**

Listen again to Jesus’ words in Matthew 16:24–26. *“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it.”*

Essentially, following Jesus means going **down** with Him...down into the death of self. And so, instead of pushing yourself to the top of the pile or to the first place in line, Jesus calls us to deliberately place ourselves at the bottom and to stand in solidarity with the weak and the helpless! And instead of climbing up the ladder of status and fame, following Jesus means climbing down the ladder, befriending the outcast and the lonely. To be like Jesus means that any power God gives us is to be used for the powerless; any wealth God gives us is to be used for the poor; any status that God gives us is to be used for the outcast and voiceless; any talents God gives us are to be used for those who lack them.

In other words, down is not only the word that describes Jesus—it’s the word that is also meant to describe us, as His disciples! This is exactly what the Apostle Paul says in Philippians 2.

*Phil 2:5-8* **“Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who... made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant...; he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!”**

A few years ago, I was invited to speak at St George Christian School at their end-of-year awards ceremony for year 12. Well, I spoke about this very subject, and I said to the kids, “Don’t let your parents tell you that you need to get a good education so that you can get a good job, so that you can make a lot of money and be happy. Tell your parents that idea is a lie!” The day after I

spoke, I got a message on my answering machine—one of the parents was so angry with me and told me that I should be ashamed of what I said to the kids!

All I can say is, “Read the Scriptures!” **‘Down’** is the direction that Jesus calls us to follow...even unto death...in service of others and not ourselves!

Of course, it’s not an easy lesson to learn! In Matthew’s Gospel, the disciples are caught several times arguing over who would be the greatest and who would sit at Jesus’ right hand in glory. Every time, Jesus rebuked them for these thoughts and said to them, **“Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many.”** (Matthew 20:26–28)

St Paul certainly understood this idea of discipleship when he wrote these words of advice to the Christians in Rome:

**“Honor one another above yourselves”**

**“Share with God’s people who are in need. Practice hospitality”**

**“Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.”**

**“If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.”**

**“Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”**

The overall idea is clear! Follow Jesus and take the low road...the road of self-denial...the road of servanthood...the road that goes down even into death.

But, you know, there’s a **third** reason why Jesus came down (and why we must follow Him in this downward direction). According to the Scriptures, **Jesus came down so that God, His Father, would be able to lift Him up!**

Remember how, at the end of His life, after He had suffered and died, Jesus was buried in a lonely tomb? He had finished His

mission. He had come down. But the Father did not leave Him in the grave! **Because Jesus had willingly agreed to come down, the Father was now able to lift Him up!** And so, three days later, Jesus was raised from death. And then, 50 days later, Jesus was raised from earth to heaven in the sight of His disciples! Indeed, we are told in the Scriptures that Jesus now sits at the Father's right hand in glory. Let me quote again from Philippians 2--

*Phil 2:9-11* **Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."**

Do you realize that this same pattern will be true for us as well? After our life is over...after we have walked the downward road of humility and selfless service, God the Father will also raise us up and seat us at His side in glory!

Listen to the words of the Apostle James—"Humble yourselves before the Lord and He will raise you up." (James 3:10) As we can see, the only pre-requisite to being raised **up** by God is that we first agree to go **down**...contrary to our culture!

- May our hearts be filled with the desire to serve!
- May our selfless actions be the pattern of our lives!
- May humility and servanthood be the hallmarks of our church!
- And may God the Father raise us all up into His Glory on the Last Day.

Amen!