

# GROWING TOWARD GREATNESS

by Steve Zeisler

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I'm grateful that the concept the Bible has of us is different from the concept our politicians seem to have of us. The media promotions telling us who to vote for this election year seem to assume that the electorate is childish, short-sighted, incapable of grasping complex issues; we need to be pandered to and treated as those too immature to think for ourselves, given pep talks in place of arguments and reason.

The Scriptures take the opposite view of us. They insist that we were made for greatness, that God can see possibilities in us before we can begin to see them in ourselves. One of the familiar lines from the letters of Paul is 1 Corinthians 13:11: "When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me." The goal of walking with the Lord and growing in truth is to eventually become mature, putting childish things behind us.

Or consider John 5:1-8, the story of Jesus' ministry to an invalid at the pool of Bethesda. Jesus asked the man an important question: "Do you want to get well?" The man answered, "Sir, I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me." (He believed that when the water was stirred, the first person in the pool would get healed.) His answer indicated abandonment of hope: "People like me don't get healed, they don't have a chance." He was describing all the self-limitation that his thirty-eight years as an invalid had produced.

Do you want to leave behind the inhibitions, the silliness, the shallowness, the self-centeredness, the fears, and so on that go with being a child, and become an adult? Many among us have abandoned the hope of emotional maturity; given up pursuing a life of godly purpose.

Jesus' question, "Do you want to get well?" will serve us as we turn now to Psalm 18:30-35 and continue trying to unpack all that this wonderfully concentrated section of Scripture has to say about us and about God:

As for God, his way is perfect;  
the word of the Lord is flawless.

He is a shield  
for all who take refuge in him.

For who is God besides the Lord?  
And who is the Rock except our God?

It is God who arms me with strength  
and makes my way perfect.

He makes my feet like the feet of a deer;  
he enables me to stand on the heights.

He trains my hands for battle;  
my arms can bend a bow of bronze.

You give me your shield of victory,  
and your right hand sustains me;  
you stoop down to make me great.

**God humiliates himself for us**

The statement translated in the NIV, "You stoop down to make me great" in the King James and the NASB is translated, "Thy gentleness makes me great." This word gentleness in many of its usages in the Old Testament has the idea of humiliation, affliction, being made low. Someone who has been beaten or captured in battle would be made to stoop at the feet of the victor. But the stooping, the humiliation, the reduction of God is something that he chooses himself. He is willing to limit himself, to deny himself.

We spoke of the rescue of God earlier in our studies of this psalm, when the cry of a drowning man in the desert is brought to the ears of God, and he flies to the rescue, not sending an angel or an emissary, but coming himself to meet the needs of an ordinary soul. In doing that God humbles himself. That is what David is reflecting on. He realizes that the intention of God in his self-limitation is to make us great.

In the last message we focused on the statement in verse 19: "...He rescued me because he delighted in me." The fact of his rescue taught David this lesson. Here in verses 30-35, once again David has drawn a conclusion from seeing the rescue of God. "He stoops down because his intention is to make me great." Let's look at both parts of that statement. First, why does God allow himself to be humiliated and afflicted? Why does he stoop down?

Some say that they don't need the merciful approach of God, that they can save themselves. Whatever difficulty they encounter in life, they can handle on their own. They will rise to every occasion, deal with every foe. That's immense foolishness, isn't it? Every person who has ever said or believed that about themselves will come to the end of their ability to perform. Everyone eventually gets sick, gets passed over, goes through the aging process, and finds they can't do what they once could. Then their needs outstrip their ability to handle life. They need to have someone who will stoop to where they are.

Some believe that the condescension of God is unavailable to them because they're not worthy of it. Such people say, "I don't deserve the gentleness of God. The pit I'm in is too deep, my life is too ugly, my tragedy is too despicable. The depth to which he would have to stoop to find me is too great." But that's foolishness also. He chooses to come to where we are because of his love for us. No depth of need is too great for him to stoop to. There's no place that he won't go to find us.

The humiliation of God is relentless. His willingness to reduce himself knows no limit. The reminders are frequently encountered--today's communion table, the upcoming message of Christmas: a poor couple's child born in a stable. God keeps parting the heavens and coming down. He keeps seeking us out. His humility disgraces our self-importance, and his mercy transcends our self-hatred.

### **God wants to make us great**

But let's look at the other half of this phrase that ends verse 35. What does he intend to do in his gentleness, in his humiliation? He intends to make us great! But we shouldn't conceive of greatness as the world does. It has nothing to do with being rich or well-known, or having power to affect the affairs of the world we live in. Greatness, as David speaks of it here and as the Bible conceives of it, is godliness. Greatness means being made like our Lord, having his character formed within us. Jesus said, "Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant" (Mark 10:43). But in addition, greatness includes purpose in life. It is being about the eternal business of God himself, so that the things you say and do count forever. Greatness includes joy, community, being partners with others who are involved in the same things, seeing God's name praised. Greatness includes wholeness.

I heard the author of the Dilbert comic strip on the radio the other day. He said that dozens of people have written and told him he's gotten them fired, because they cut out one of his strips and put it on their cubicle wall, only to find the boss was offended because the foolishness depicted in it was the very thing he or she was about to do. Dilbert is a comic strip about life in a modern technological firm, and everything that takes place is a testimony to how foolish, self-consumed, competitive, and ridiculous such environments often are.

But this psalm says that God stoops down to make us great, not ridiculous. He lets us be about things that are really important. We can have real purpose.

Too many of us settle for being good enough instead of great. We're willing to say on a macro level that all the great themes of the Bible are wonderful, God is sovereign over all, and Jesus is coming again to end all of history. But when we have to personalize it and say, "What about me?" the language fails us. Is God sovereign in my life? Is his love for me certain? Can I act on it? It's striking how difficult it is to read some of the statements in Psalm 18 with ourselves in view. Look at verse 24:

"The Lord has rewarded me according to my righteousness,  
according to the cleanness of my hands in his sight.

To the faithful you show yourself faithful,  
to the blameless you show yourself blameless...."

For many of us, using the words "righteousness" and "cleanness" of ourselves is too hard to imagine. We believe it's true of Christians in general, but we find it difficult to say it's true of us personally. And yet that's what we're being pressed to do here. God wants to make us great, he wants to see us changed. The cleansing, the new purpose, the engagement of life with righteous results all apply to us. He stoops down to make every one of us as individuals great.

### **Becoming like God**

Let's look carefully now at the details of verses 30-35 to see what we can learn. Verses 30-32:

"As for God, his way is perfect;  
the word of the Lord is flawless.

He is a shield  
for all who take refuge in him.

For who is God besides the Lord?

And who is the Rock except our God?

It is God who arms me with strength  
and makes my way perfect."

The first phrase of verse 30 is answered at the end of verse 32: "As for God, his way is perfect...." and "...God...arms me with strength and makes my way perfect." David is saying that if we could see God as he is to any degree, it would change us to be the same. The Scriptures declare that the purpose of God is to conform us to the image of Christ. Intimacy with our Lord makes us like him. He makes our way perfect, he makes our way right, he fixes what is broken.

David is also dismissing rivals: "For who is God besides the Lord? And who is the Rock except our God?" What other deity will make us great? And, of course, the conclusion you're intended to draw is none. But answering that question in the negative often involves some period of running the test, of trying to find what other gods pay off, of feeling as if the Christian answers were given before the questions were asked. But prodigal sons and daughters come home, the birthright becomes valuable, having once been sold for a meal, and eventually of verse 31 is affirmed. There is no other God. There is no other one whose love is consistent. There is no other deity who will meet the needs of the heart. So David is not only proclaiming apprehension of the perfection of God will change us, he's saying there is no other who will do so.

### **Climbing impossible heights**

Verse 33 is another wonderful word picture in this psalm:

"He makes my feet like the feet of a deer;  
he enables me to stand on the heights."

There are probably heights that you once stared at from a distance, things about which you've said, "I'd love to go there. I'd love to experience that. I wish I could accomplish that." But you've stopped imagining that it could be true of you. If Jesus were to come and say, "Do you want to get well?" you'd say, "People like me don't get put into the water on time." You've given up dreaming. But look carefully at what David says. He doesn't say that God flew him in a helicopter (or on angel's wings) onto the high place. What he says is, "He makes my feet like the feet of a deer so I can climb to high places." Training, enablement, and growth allow him to go to places that he had stopped even thinking were options for him.

## **Trained to fight back**

Verses 34-35:

"He trains my hands for battle;  
my arms can bend a bow of bronze.

You give me your shield of victory,  
and your right hand sustains me;  
you stoop down to make me great."

God teaches his beloved to fight (in the next message we'll talk more about what it means to do battle). This verse describes having your hands trained to fight back instead of always being beaten, to resist instead of absorbing painful attacks. If Jesus were to come and say, "Do you want to get well?" you would say, "I've tried too many times. I lose this fight every time. I've quit fighting. What's the use?" Too many people choose the same patterns of destruction over and over again. The person who is masochistic finds a sadist who will hurt him. The person who erupts by nature finds someone who absorbs anger. The person who lies habitually finds an enabler. They do a kind of dance of self-destruction in which each of them reinforces what's worst in the other. The enemy keeps winning in both cases, and everybody gets hurt. They can't fight back.

What David is saying is that God trains him and gives him this amazing weapon, a bow of bronze. That doesn't sound like much today when we have high-tech missiles, but in the ancient world a metal bow was a powerful weapon. Being strong enough to bend a bow of bronze meant the training had been significant. In the same way, a man or woman is trained, made great by God, so they can declare, "I'm not going to hide in humiliation anymore, I'm not going to be defeated by this same terror again and again. I'm going to start fighting back."

Whether it's climbing to heights that you've forbidden yourself to hope for or fighting enemies that have always defeated you, this psalm calls us to give up the process of self-negation that says, "I'm a child, and I'll always be a child. People like me never make it into the water. There's no hope of change for me." What David is announcing for us is that God condescends, gives up his rights to be worshipped and adored, makes himself smaller and smaller, comes into the pit where we are and finds us in our need. "Come with me," he invites us. His stooping down is to make us great.

"When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish things behind me." Let us stop being forever children, and grow to some stature that allows us to stand up, take on life, and enjoy his approval of us. Give yourself a chance to think in those terms personally. He stoops down to make you great.

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