

2 Chronicles 16:9a NKJV

For the eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to show Himself strong on behalf of *those* whose heart *is* loyal to Him.

You can just imagine God, looking with intent over the whole earth, eager to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed towards Him. He wants to show Himself strong, He wants to strengthen them with **His** strength. There are many times when we need strength: when we face difficult circumstances, tough decisions, when we have lost a loved one, when we are facing exams, when we need wisdom in being a parent, when we have a job interview, or have had a very demanding day. God wants to strengthen us; He wants to pour His strength into our lives. His strength will carry us on. His strength will enable us to face anything. Just think, even now, as you read this, the eyes of the Lord are fastened on you, looking to strengthen you.

God desires to make you great – *in Him*. "In Him" are the key words of that phrase. You cannot strive to be great apart from God. Only He is great. Luke 9:43 says "and they were all amazed at the greatness of God."

The greatness of God is amazing. When you let your mind ponder just how great, powerful and majestic God really is it is boggling. Look at creation; think about the spider, the roach, the cats, dogs and other splendors of creation. Think about the human creation. Humans created in the image of a living God. Mediated on the power of God for a few minutes and see where your mind leads your thoughts.

Jesus, the Son of God, is God in human form. How great is our God. He knew you didn't have the ability to save yourself so He provides a substitute to pay the price for your sin. Your God is an awesome God. How can you not sing out with praise when you take a moment to consider the greatness of God?

Maybe circumstances in your life have left a shadow over you. God's power is greater than the shadow. He can remove the shadows of doubt, fear, anger and depression if you ask. He is a mighty God and quick to help His kids when you are in trouble. No circumstances on earth are greater than the power of God. Nothing you face is greater than God's goodness. God's greatest aspect is love. God is love, pure love, unconditional love expressed in Jesus Christ.

We should desire GREATNESS so that we can give God GREAT GLORY in our lives.

In 1715 King Louis XIV of France died after a reign of 72 years. He had called himself "the Great," and was the monarch who made the famous statement, "I am the state!" His court was the most magnificent in Europe, and his funeral was equally spectacular. As his body lay in state in a golden coffin, orders were given that the cathedral should be very dimly lit with only a special candle set above his coffin, to dramatize his greatness. At the memorial, thousands waited in hushed silence. Then Bishop Massillon began to speak; slowly reaching down, he snuffed out the candle and said, "Only God is great."

Matthew 20:20-27 NIV

Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favor of him.

"What is it you want?" he asked. She said, "Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom." "You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said to them. "Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?" "We can," they answered. Jesus said to them, "You will indeed drink from my cup, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father." When the ten heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers. Jesus called them together and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—

Most of the times, we have our own ideas of what greatness is: a degree, a job, etc. We strive after this form of greatness and then ask God to bless it. Problem is, if it wasn't His idea and will for your life, then you won't be fulfilled and your search for greatness will be fleeting.

Luke 9:23 NKJV

Then He said to them all, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me.

True greatness is really humility in Christ.

Taking up your cross daily is critical to being great in God. We must desire to become like Christ. We must also never forget the importance of the cross – where Christ gave us power to be great.

If you were to look at Rembrandt's painting of The Three Crosses, your attention would be drawn first to the center cross on which Jesus died. Then as you would look at the crowd gathered around the foot of that cross, you'd be impressed by the various facial expressions and actions of the people involved in the awful crime of crucifying the Son of God. Finally, your eyes would drift to the edge of the painting and catch sight of another figure, almost hidden in the shadows. Art critics say this is a representation of Rembrandt himself, for he recognized that by his sins he helped nail Jesus to the cross.

Luke 14:27-35 NLT

And if you do not carry your own cross and follow me, you cannot be my disciple.

"But don't begin until you count the cost. For who would begin construction of a building without first calculating the cost to see if there is enough money to finish it? Otherwise, you might complete only the foundation before running out of money, and then everyone would laugh at you. They would say, 'There's the person who started that building and couldn't afford to finish it!'

"Or what king would go to war against another king without first sitting down with his counselors to discuss whether his army of 10,000 could defeat the 20,000 soldiers marching against him? And if he can't, he will send a delegation to discuss terms of peace while the enemy is still far away. So you cannot become my disciple without giving up everything you own.

“Salt is good for seasoning. But if it loses its flavor, how do you make it salty again? Flavorless salt is good neither for the soil nor for the manure pile. It is thrown away. Anyone with ears to hear should listen and understand!”

The Bible makes it very clear that a **GREAT MAN** is an **OBEDIENT** man or woman.

The Bible contains many passages that teach the "trust and obey for happiness" principle (see Psalm 119, for example). In addition, many character studies from the Scriptures illustrate this same truth. Jacob is one such example. Jacob was a believer who had to learn over and over again throughout his life that "half-way" trust and obedience does not bring happiness and blessing. Is it possible that some of us are experiencing "down" times because of lack of faith and partial obedience?

In Genesis 31 we meet Jacob returning to Bethel. He had just spent 20 tough years away from home waiting for his brother Esau's anger to cool. Jacob had become the target of Esau's wrath because he had cheated Esau out of certain family rights and blessings (Genesis 25-27). The fact that Jacob felt he had to cheat to get these blessings may be the first indication of lack of faith on Jacob's part. God had previously promised that Esau would serve Jacob (25:23). Jacob did not have to "jump the gun" and manipulate the blessing from Esau. He could have "rested in faith" and waited on God to fulfill the promise in His own time and way. God has made many promises to us too. He has promised to give us joy and contentment in Christ and He has promised to meet all our physical needs (see Matthew 6:33 and Philippians 4:19, for example). We do not have to selfishly manipulate others or "force God's hand". Waiting for God's timing (marriage or summer jobs, for example) is often difficult but it is the best way in the long run.

Near the beginning of his long sad journey away from home Jacob stopped to camp for the night (Genesis 28). At this point, of course, Jacob had no idea that he would be away from home for a long time or that he would never see his beloved mother, Rebekah, again. During the night God gave Jacob a dream--the well-known "Jacob's ladder" dream. In the dream God declared His sovereign purposes for Jacob. God emphatically stated that He would be with Jacob, keep him, bless him, give him all the land that he was on and eventually bring him back to his homeland (28:13-15). What grace! God extends His grace to us in the same way. We fail Him so often with our half-hearted faith and obedience, but He is constantly faithful to His promises. "The Lord's loving kindnesses never fail. They are new every morning; great is Thy faithfulness" (Lamentations 3:22-23). It is true that, like Jacob, we must reap the consequences of our lack of faith and token obedience, but God is gracious and "will complete the good work which He has begun in us" (Philippians 1:6). It is significant, in this connection, that Jacob is included in the "Hall of Faith" of Hebrews 11--but note that it is near the end of his days (Hebrews 11:21).

Jacob's response to God's declaration in the dream is again indicative of the "mini-faith" he had at this time. Although Jacob shows some faith by renaming the place Bethel (28:19) which means "house of God", he hedges by vowing, "If God will be with me and keep me...and give me...and bring me back safely ...then the Lord will be my God (28:20-21). Does this sound like any of our prayers of "faith"? What kind of trust and obedience is this? Perhaps it is better called selfish bargaining with God rather than faith in God. God had stated in no uncertain terms His promises to Jacob, and yet Jacob had the audacity to hold back with an if-type of faith and obedience. But let's not knock Jacob's faith and obedience before we examine our own. Can we say without reservation that we simply trust and obey, or must we confess that we selfishly bargain with God? "If You help me pass this exam, God, I'll give more time to reading Your Word." "If You let me

look good in this event, Lord, I'll witness for You." "If You help me out of this jam, Father, I'll serve You more." This kind of "trusting and obeying" does not bring happiness and blessing. No wonder Jacob was unhappy with his experience in the presence of God. His reaction of fear and awe (28:17) does not exactly convey "happiness in Jesus"! During the next 20 years, in a land called Padanaram, God taught Jacob that happiness does not come through a selfish kind of trusting and obeying.

In Genesis 31, the long years of discipline were over and Jacob was ready to come home. He had taken some hard courses in the "school of God" and the time had come for the Lord to send him back to Bethel--the place of the dream and the promises and the selfish vow (31:3, 13). Notice that in 31:13 the Lord honored even the little faith that Jacob exhibited in his selfish vow made years before. How gracious and condescending is our God! In obedience to the Lord's command Jacob left Padanaram and traveled towards Bethel--and Esau! Jacob had improved in trust and obedience! In Genesis 32, on the eve of the reconciliation with Esau, Jacob had a wrestling match with the angel of God. Here Jacob learned that he must be completely broken of self and rely fully on God for blessing. After such an experience with God we would be inclined to close the story of Jacob by writing "...and Jacob was reconciled to his brother Esau and lived happily ever after and served the Lord whole-heartedly in godly trust and obedience." But the Bible doesn't give us any such fairy tale endings because the Bible tells the life stories of real people. God's Word "tells it like it is" with real people like you and me and Jacob. Jacob had certainly learned and matured and grown in his faith and obedience as a result of the 20 years of discipline which climaxed in the wrestling match (compare Jacob's prayers in 28:20 and 32:10). But all this was no guarantee that he would never fail in faith again, and that's exactly what we see in Genesis 33. We too may pass some long tough courses in God's school of discipline. We may even experience some traumatic wrestling matches with our God. He breaks us of self in order to bless us. As a result we may make great strides forward in trust and obedience--but this does not mean we are fail-safe. Have you ever failed the Lord in the very area you thought you had just conquered and given to Him?

Let us see how Jacob failed to fully trust and obey the Lord in Genesis 33. After his reconciliation with Esau, who had traveled some distance to meet him, Jacob did not continue on his way back to Bethel in full obedience to the Lord's command. Instead he went in a different direction and settled in Succoth (33:17). God had told Jacob to return home to his relatives and He would take care of him (31:3). There was no need to continue to fear Esau. But Jacob once again turned aside from the path of trust and obedience. He apparently decided to stay away from Bethel indefinitely since he built a house and barns in Succoth (33:17). As a result, Jacob experienced more years of unhappiness and loss of blessing.

Living in Succoth brought many associated problems. Not too far away was the pagan city of Shechem. It was "natural" for Jacob to spend some time there with his family for "business purposes". Perhaps he erected the altar nearby to "justify" his relationship with this pagan city (33:18-20). But believers cannot play around with token trust and obedience and expect to go unscathed. Genesis 34 records the tragedy that took place in Jacob's family as a result of his not going back to Bethel. Jacob's daughter was abducted and raped, and his sons Levi and Simeon became liars and murderers. What a lesson for us! There is always bad fall-out when faith and obedience come short. And it affects others besides us! God has given us many precepts and principles to guide our lives as growing Christians. His Word covers everything--control of thoughts, relation to parents, guidance in vocation, sex life, role of men and women, borrowing money, forgiving others, you name it. God does not expect us to question or change or compromise His commands--He expects us to simply trust Him and obey Him. That's "where it's at" for spiritual blessing and happiness.

Jacob was finally ready to listen with both ears to God. In Genesis 35:1 God said to Jacob, "Arise, go up to Bethel, and live there; and make an altar there to God..." Jacob got the message! The connections with

paganism were severed and in full trust and obedience Jacob came back to Bethel (35:2-6). Here he built an altar (35:7) and here God blessed him (35:9). If only Jacob had come back sooner! In 10 or 15 years will you look back and say the same thing about your life? "If only I had trusted and obeyed God more--right from the start!" God continued to work in Jacob's life. God continues to work in our lives. There is no short-cut to graduation in the school of God! God wants to bless us and make us "happy in Jesus", but that cannot be unless we trust and obey.

Psalm 75:6-7 NLT

For no one on earth—from east or west,
or even from the wilderness—
should raise a defiant fist.
It is God alone who judges;
he decides who will rise and who will fall.

Galatians 6:14 NLT

As for me, may I never boast about anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. Because of that cross, my interest in this world has been crucified, and the world's interest in me has also died.

Galatians 6:14 MESSAGE

For my part, I am going to boast about nothing but the Cross of our Master, Jesus Christ. Because of that Cross, I have been crucified in relation to the world, set free from the stifling atmosphere of pleasing others and fitting into the little patterns that they dictate. Can't you see the central issue in all this? It is not what you and I do—submit to circumcision, reject circumcision. It is what God is doing, and he is creating something totally new, a free life! All who walk by this standard are the true Israel of God—his chosen people. Peace and mercy on them!

John 17:14-16 NIV

I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it.

Matthew 16:26 NLT

And what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul? Is anything worth more than your soul?

Not everything that counts can be counted. Not everything that can be counted counts.

Matthew 23:1-12 NIV

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: "The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for

they do not practice what they preach. They tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them.

"Everything they do is done for men to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; ⁷they love to be greeted in the marketplaces and to have men call them 'Rabbi.'

"But you are not to be called 'Rabbi,' for you have only one Master and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth 'father,' for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. Nor are you to be called 'teacher,' for you have one Teacher, the Christ, and the greatest among you will be your servant. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.

The scribes and Pharisees explained the law of Moses, and enforced obedience to it. They are charged with hypocrisy in religion. We can only judge according to outward appearance; but God searches the heart. They made phylacteries. These were scrolls of paper or parchment, wherein were written four paragraphs of the law, to be worn on their foreheads and left arms, Exodus 13:2-10; 13:11-16; Deuteronomy 6:4-9; 11:13-21. They made these phylacteries bit so everyone could see them and think they were very religious. God appointed the Jews to make fringes upon their garments, Numbers 15:38, to remind them of their being a peculiar people; but the Pharisees made them larger than common, as if they were more religious than others. Pride was a big sin of the Pharisees, the sin that most easily beset them. Jesus spoke against the Pharisee's pride often. They really needed to get over themselves.

It is not how long you have been a Christian or how much you know about the word that makes you great. It isn't what you wear or possess that proves your right-standing with God. It's your relationship with Christ and the overflow of it into the world.

KEY STATEMENT: "GET OVER YOURSELF"

Basically, die to self or selfish desires.

Matthew 23:1-12 is part of a single speech from Jesus, spoken on Tuesday of Holy Week. That's the Tuesday after the Palm Sunday when He was welcomed triumphantly into the city of Jerusalem, three days before His execution on the cross, and five days before His resurrection on the first Easter Sunday.

In the first part of Matthew 23, Jesus is in the Temple and is addressing the disciples and those interested in following Him. He also begins to address the Scribes and Pharisees. The Scribes were professional religious men who had formal training in the scriptures. The Pharisees had no real formal theological training but were also religious rulers. Jesus condemned the practices of the Scribes and the Pharisees, not what they teach. What did he critique? (a) They say, but do not do; (b) They burden others with harsh religious obligations while failing to act on them themselves; (c) They act for the wrong reason, to make an impression on others.

Jesus switches his focus from the Scribes and Pharisees to the disciples, using "you" or "your" eight times in verses 8-12. He said they were to call no one Rabbi, or "my great one". He also warned against calling

others “fathers” or “teachers”. Why? Because the Pharisees loved people to look at their boxes on their heads and call them names that gave honor.

Jesus was saying in verses 11-12 that true leadership in the Christian community is to be servant leadership.

QUESTIONS:

1. How do you become great in God’s Kingdom?
2. Have you attempted greatness without God?
3. Have you been more interested in proclaiming your greatness or God’s greatness?
4. Are you humble or prideful? In what ways?