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UP THE DOWN PATH: POWER, AMBITION, AND SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP

Bel Kaufman published *Up the Down Staircase* (1964/1991) over half a century ago—a book about a teacher, Sylvia, serving a difficult inner city school. She struggles with frustration over an incident in which a student is punished for going up a staircase that was intended for those traveling down. This incident initiates the case that Kaufman makes regarding institutional incompetence and mindlessness. The book doesn't deal with the possibility that a good and sound reason might exist for why students shouldn't go up a stairway designed for going down. Strange though it may seem, the biblical model of spiritual leadership deals with a similar question—up or down?

The Ascendant Model

Spiritual leadership offers similar options, up or down, and there are biblical rules that govern the directional choice—rules that have been and continue to be challenged by those who would travel their own way. The prophetic biblical narrative that foretells the rise and fall of the King of Babylon (Isa. 14:3-11) also includes a metaphorical comparison with the rise and fall of Lucifer (Isa. 14:12-21).

The Rise and Fall of Lucifer

The ontology of spiritual leadership is revealed in this depiction of his coveting the throne of God or at least a place of parity at the throne with God. Note the ascendant language in Isaiah's descriptive text:

For you have said in your heart:
“I will ascend into heaven,
I will exalt my throne above the stars of God;
I will also sit on the mount of the congregation

On the farthest sides of the north;
 I will ascend above the heights of the clouds,
 I will be like the Most High.” (Isa. 14:13-14, NKJV)

This egocentric upward focus is revealed in the use of the first person singular by the speaker, Lucifer (v. 12). His goals are not authorized nor has he been ordained to such lofty achievements; rather, he personally covets a position and a role to which he was never called. Lucifer journeyed counter to the direction established by the kingdom of God by climbing up the ladder of his dreams. From that ladder he fell with tragic results:

How you are fallen from heaven,
 O Lucifer, son of the morning!
How you are cut down to the ground,
 You who weakened the nations!
 . . . Yet you shall be brought down to Sheol,
 To the lowest depths of the Pit. (Isa. 14:12, 15, NKJV)

There are consequences revealed in this prophecy that validate the prohibition against self-ascendancy.

Ezekiel continues this metaphorical message in his lamentation of the King of Tyre:

“Son of man, take up a lamentation for the king of Tyre, and say to him, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD:
 “You were the seal of perfection,
 Full of wisdom and perfect in beauty.
 You were in Eden, the garden of God;
 . . . You *were* the anointed cherub who covers;
 I established you;
 You were on the holy mountain of God;
 . . . Your heart was lifted up because of your beauty;
 You corrupted your wisdom for the sake of your splendor;
 I cast you to the ground. . . .’ ” (Ezek. 28:12-17, NKJV)

The Mountain of the Lord

The setting for both Isaiah’s and Ezekiel’s depictions of prideful self-promotion and ascendant behavior is the “mountain of the Lord” (Isa. 14:13; Ezek. 28:14). In both narratives the offender covets position and glory that were not his own; in both cases the consequences are tragic. The goal of this model of rulership or leadership is dominance. In this view, coercion is considered fair play as a means to achieve that end. We must remember, though, that there are universal spiritual rules that govern issues of position and glory—in both of these biblical passages the characters assume an ascendant attitude inconsistent with divine laws that govern the universe. They went up the down path.

God as Ruler of His People

In the shadow of his successful defense against the threat of the Midianite army, the elders of Israel tempted Gideon to walk up the down path. The book of Judges records the event in this way:

Then the men of Israel said to Gideon, “Rule over us, both you and your son, also your son’s son, for you have delivered us from the hand of Midian.” But Gideon said to them, “I will not rule over you, nor shall my son rule over you; the LORD shall rule over you.” (Judg. 8:22-23, NASB)

Gideon’s response is a rare glimpse into the character of a man who was not motivated by the promise of position or power. It also reveals the unique leadership structure which seems to be God’s preferred model for His people. This is stated in the ongoing sense since an individual accountability to God through Jesus as priest and king is essential to the organization and structure of the early Christian church. It could be said of the early Christian period, “There was no central governance structure in those days and every man did what was right according to the Word, the admonition of the Apostles and the guidance of the Holy Spirit.”

God Is Our Ruler

There was no centralized human leader in the time of the judges and every man answered directly to the Creator as the leader of their nation. Each person behaved according to his or her personal commitment to the covenant of obedience and faithfulness to God (Judg. 17:6; 21:25). This seems like a risky approach to corporate faithfulness and even national order, but it was clearly Gideon’s understanding of the governance structure of Israel—no human king! National faithfulness was simply an aggregate of the faithfulness of each Israelite. Lest we mistake the judges for centralized leaders in possession of corporate authority, we should be reminded that the judges were charismatic figures who arose for specific deliverance missions or assumed civil mediation responsibilities but had no governance authority or power to tax.

The placement of a king over Israel near the end of Samuel’s prophetic service was seen by God as a rejection of Him as their king (1 Sam. 8:7). It was also a concession to the natural tendency of the human heart to exalt a human as the visible symbol of national leadership. The up path became a constant temptation, as demonstrated by King Saul’s move away from his spiritual calling and

assumption of an attitude of self-ascendancy that ultimately led to his rejection as king of Israel (1 Sam. 13:10-14; 1 Chron. 10:13-14). God's prediction to Samuel of the king's dominance over those served (1 Sam. 8:11-18) was quickly and consistently realized throughout the rest of Israel's history under the kings.

The tendency to climb toward glory and honor seems to have been a constant temptation for those who served as king and those who wished to be king. It remains a blight on our planet as "protectors" (Wren, 1995, p. 62) who began their service of leadership with good intentions inevitably migrate toward assumption of the role of tyrant.

The examples of ascendant behavior that could be cited in Scripture and secular history are multitude. The pain heaped upon mankind down through the ages by men and women committed to the ascendant model defies adequate description. It simply emphasizes the impact of the injection of Lucifer's leadership dominance-oriented behavior upon mankind in the period beyond the entrance of sin.

Down the Down Path

So what is the purpose of the "down path"? Let's revisit the mount of the Lord to note that the dwelling place of God is on its heights. It is here that "the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1, NASB). It was from this lofty site that Jesus began His journey of incarnation—"the Word became flesh" (John 1:14, NASB). He became Emmanuel not by requiring us to ascend the Mount but by coming down to serve our transformational needs. He dwelled with us (John 1:14), defied the strictures of polite Jewish society and ate with us—even with tax collectors and prostitutes (Matt. 21:32). He was betrothed to the church even while she herself played the harlot (Hos. 3:1), and He laid aside the prerogative of position and announced that His preferred relationship was "friend" rather than "Master" (John 15:15).

The Incarnational Model

Jesus modeled the behavior of the down path—He emptied himself (Phil. 2:7). Louw and Nida (1989) expound on this passage:

87.70 κενώωb: to completely remove or eliminate elements of high status or rank by eliminating all privileges or prerogatives associated with such status or rank—'to empty oneself, to divest oneself of position.' ἑαυτὸν ἐκένωσεν 'he emptied himself'
 Php 2:7. (p. 789)

The incarnational model of Jesus Christ sets the standard for leadership behavior by the Christian. While it may be said that this is

the standard for the church, such an assertion would carry the danger that we might assume incarnational behavior only toward fellow believers. Incarnational behavior, or walking down the down path, is our testimony of Christlikeness to the world. How we lead our families, our communities, our businesses, and work environments is the test that determines whether we are climbing the ladder of ascendancy to dominate or descending the path to serve. Our behavior toward others marks our leadership orientation—are we about service or control?

Descending to Serve

Notice how frequently Jesus' posture of service includes the element of descent: He sat down and taught them (John 8:2); He leaned down and healed them (Matt. 15:30); He leaned down to place His healing hand upon the little girl (Mark 5:32); He came down and healed (Luke 6:17); He cast forth the demon from the child at His feet (Luke 9:42); Zacchaeus was called down to be with Jesus where he quickly demonstrated a reversal of his dominance-oriented life by restoring what he had taken by fraud (Luke 19:5). Further, Jesus sat down with the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:6); He stooped down to write the words that delivered the woman taken in adultery (John 8:6); He looked down upon the paralyzed man and offered to heal him (John 5:6); He reached down to mix saliva with clay and anointed the blind man and give him sight (John 9:6).

Likely the most powerful expression of Jesus' descent to serve is recorded in John 13:

Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come from God and was going to God, rose from supper and laid aside His garments, took a towel and girded Himself. After that, He poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded. (John 13:3-5, NKJV)

In this act we have a clear statement of Jesus' expectation of us:

You call Me Teacher and Lord, and you say well, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you. Most assuredly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them. (John 13:13-17, NKJV)

The ultimate service of Christ was His death—He was lifted up on a cross where He died to serve our need of a sinless atonement. He

went down into the grave by His choice to serve our need to escape the penalty of sin and take hold of the promise of eternal life. He consistently modeled the downward movement toward service even to the point of His sacrificial death.

Laws That Govern Leaders

Jesus was discipling men to the expected end that they might lead the process of establishing His church on the earth—world class leaders who would within the first century stand at the head of a movement that changed the world forever. The expectation that spiritual leaders are called to walk down the down path could not be made clearer. Disciples of Christ are not to function as rulers after the pattern of this world where “lord[ing] it over others” (Matt. 20:25, 26, NKJV) is not only accepted but often encouraged. Greatness comes from service, not dominance. The Christian descends into greatness!

Traveling up the down path not only dishonors the Master, it ends in disappointment, pain, and ultimately death. The greatness of Jesus Christ was established by coming down to serve and ultimately down to the grave. He became the ladder that connects heaven and earth (John 1:51). He never lifted Himself up; rather, He asks us to lift Him up in our words and in our living (John 12:32) as a means of making His transformational gift available to all.

The laws that govern traffic on the leadership path find their foundation in the law of love—love of God and fellowman (Matt. 22:37-40). All other behavioral standards are nested in this great law—avoid selfish ambition and consider others before self (Phil. 2:3), bear the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23), apply the “golden rule” (Luke 6:31), and all of the other dictates that govern relational behavior. Spiritual leaders are others-oriented and the focus of their love, while appropriately honoring self, never obsesses upon self. Love is the motivator that urges us to descend to serve, while all that we are apart from Christ urges us up the down path in pursuit of dominance and self-glorification.

The Passive Nature of Ascent

There are subtle implications present in the predictions by Jesus of His death. Note the passive tense applied to the salvific impact of His death on the cross: “And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all *peoples* to myself” (John 12:32, NKJV). He came down to serve, but it would be others who would lift Him up to die, even though He

approached His death willingly. The lifting up of the crucified and risen Jesus as a redemptive proclamation to the world is done in an active sense by His followers. He does not lift Himself.

The upward movements of the Messiah at the end of His earthly ministry demonstrated a passive trust in others to lift Him up. The resurrection of Jesus is presented in the scriptures as an act of God upon the body of Jesus, with the apparent exception of John 10:17-18, where He claims possession of the power necessary to recover His life after His intentionally laying it down—a power available as a result of relationship rather than independent ownership. This submission to the power of the Father and the Holy Spirit again reveals a choice to ascend by being lifted up.

To the resurrection is added the clearly passive role He assumed in His ascension into heaven (Mark 16:19-20; Luke 24:50-51; Acts 1:9). He was “received up,” “carried up,” and “taken up.” Though He had every right to ascend on the strength of His own glory and power, He chose to demonstrate His emptying of self (Phil. 2:7) of desire for glory and honor by avoiding any sense that ascending to the throne of God could be achieved by one’s own strength or will. Any semblance of the upward path was eschewed as He submitted Himself to the Father and the Holy Spirit on His journey back to His place on the Mountain of the Lord. Like Lucifer in better times, Jesus was “established” by God in His rightful place upon the Mountain.

A Glorious Irony

There is a great irony contained in the narratives of these two models: the throne that Lucifer coveted (Isa. 14:13) and which incited his rebellion is given to the redeemed children of God (Rev. 3:21). While Lucifer is cast down from his ascendant climb, those who have submitted to their Creator and a life of loving service are lifted up and granted the privilege to sit on the throne upon the mount of God—a place to which they could never have climbed in their own strength. We will sit where God places us.

When we come to understand the striking difference between the two models of leadership that have been observed upon the mountain of the Lord, we then have a dependable gauge by which we may assess ourselves as leaders. Our actions will either be up or down, generative or destructive, loving or uncaring. By God’s grace and in the power of the Holy Spirit, we may travel down the down path as we follow the footsteps of Jesus. In the wake of our spiritual leadership, transformed

people will be found who are better off than when we found them—more capable of becoming leaders themselves (Greenleaf, 1977, p. 27). These disciples of Christ will continue His legacy of going down to serve.

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