

MARLENA GRAVES

The  
Way Up  
Is Down

BECOMING YOURSELF BY  
FORGETTING YOURSELF



InterVarsity Press  
ivpress.com

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Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL.

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# 1

## Self-Emptying

### THE MYSTERY OF OUR SALVATION

*The entire mystery of the economy  
of our salvation consists in the self-emptying  
and abasement of the Son of God.*

**ST. CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA**

*If I could become the servant of all,  
no lower place to fall.*

**MEWITHOUTYOU, "JANUARY 1979"**

I stood alone at our kitchen counter staring out the window at the menacing gray clouds. I read God the riot act: "Lord, nothing is left! I am empty. Barren. Your people or the scoundrels who claim to be—and you know I have more choice words for them than that in my heart—are a cabal of arsonists who set fire to our entire Christian community. We did nothing wrong and yet you let them burn it down to the ground. And

then let them off scot-free! We've given up everything to follow you. For once could the meek inherit the earth instead of being trampled on?"

It seems like God always has me carrying one cross or another. I'm putting one down just to pick another up.

I continued my litany of complaints: "What glory is there in this? What more do you want from me? I have nothing left to give. N-O-T-H-I-N-G. On empty. Bone dry. Just change my name to 'Mara' because with Naomi I am bitter."

A moment later I threw down the gauntlet: "Is this how you treat your friends?"

The question is one I stole from St. Teresa of Ávila. The story goes that Theresa was traveling with a band of priests and nuns. She was on her way to start a new convent. As the holy party crossed a stream, her donkey launched her into the air and she fell off. At that moment she heard the Lord say to her, "That is how I treat my friends." Without skipping a beat, she retorted, "That is why you have so few of them." Oh, how I can identify with her response! Another time she described life as a "night spent at an uncomfortable inn." When I tried that line on God, telling him that my life too felt like an uncomfortable inn, the Lord quickly countered with, "Well, at least you have somewhere to lay your head. And at least there's room at the inn for you." I was like, "I see how you are."

I take my permission to speak freely to God from the Bible, especially the psalmists and the great cloud of witnesses throughout history. I spend my days and nights telling him what I think—prayers, praises, laments, disgusts with evangelical and national politics, depressions, dreams, and inside jokes.

Sometimes we find ourselves in side-splitting laughter, especially when well-intentioned souls sing fervently but horribly off-key in church. When that happens, I lose my composure every single time. I laugh so hard that I shake, with tears running down my face. Then I have to exit my pew to flee to the restroom and regain my composure. My worst nightmare is when I am helping to lead the service and someone is singing loudly off-key. Beside myself, I look down as if I am praying or quietly contemplating what is being sung. Only I am not. I am trying not to die laughing and hoping not to make anyone feel bad or to distract the congregation, which, thankfully, has only happened once. But that's a story for another time.

On other occasions I'm overcome by God's holiness and lie flat on my face—prostrate, no words—speechless, for God is holy other. *Mysterium tremendum*.

### **ALWAYS ON MY MIND**

When I was little, my dad, whom I love deeply, would get in the silliest of moods. He attempted to humor me and my siblings, and also express love, with his rendition of iconic country singer Willie Nelson's song "Always on My Mind." Mostly my dad humored himself. My sister Michelle and brothers Kenny and Marco and I clapped our ears. He sounded more like a howling wolf. Maybe that's why I can't control myself when someone sings way off tune.

But I suppose that if I were to fiddle with the lyrics of the song by changing *were* to *are*, I could serenade God with "You are always on my mind. You are always on my mind." Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—God in three persons, blessed Trinity—are always and ever on my mind. The triune God is always on

my mind wherever I am and in whatever condition I find myself even if I read him the riot act and he chooses to plead the Fifth.

When God is silent and darkness covers the face of my earth, I just take a number and stand in a long line with the rest of them—Job, Jesus, and all those throughout millennia who've had God plead the Fifth on them. My greatest of tantrums, most brilliant protests, and intestine-twisting agonies seldom pry a straight answer or any answer at all out of him when I want one.

Even though I think I know that, after so long I find I am unable to wait anymore in the waiting room of life. So, I shoot up from the chair and try a different tactic. I pace back and forth like a caged animal. Stomp on the floor. Make all the noise I can. Wave my hands like a fool trying different antics to get God's attention. When that doesn't work, I head straight to God's door and start asking, seeking, and knocking. No, *pounding*. "I know you're in there. When you gonna show your face?" I figure I'll be the persistent widow. But God persists in responding in his own time, in his own way, and on his own terms. I am forced to sit down again, to trust him instead of giving in to despair while he has the right to remain silent. I can't stand it. Most of the time I can only trust him in the new round of waiting with the help of others. On my own, I fall apart. And yet even the waiting room of my life remains God-haunted. Really, what I am is God-intoxicated, a staggering drunk.

My daily and desperate need for him and the physical hunger I sometimes experienced as a child—emptiness—was sort of an involuntary fast. It all coalesced into my constant awareness of the manifest presence of God, into his always being on my mind, ever before me. And yet, on some days, I

still find myself empty. I do things like read God the riot act and insinuate his betrayal. How can this be?

I don't know.

Just like I don't know how Satan could have turned from God. Or how Adam and Eve could've sinned when they had everything they could have ever wanted in God. Or how Judas could've betrayed Jesus after spending three years with him. Or how Peter betrayed Jesus to his face shortly after promising he never would.

What if I, like Adam, Eve, Judas, and Peter, have everything I could possibly ever want right now in God and just don't see what is right in front of me? What if I am refusing to see it?

### **JESUS' WAY: EMPTY THAT WE MAY BE FULL**

After I read God the riot act in my kitchen, I had no more to say. I quit talking. Eventually, in the silence between us, I heard him respond to me in a faint whisper. This is one time when he didn't plead the Fifth. This is what he said: "Only when you are empty, can you be made full." And "My strength is made perfect in your weakness."

That is not what I wanted to hear.

Only recently have I begun to awaken to the depths of this word to me, its particularities, and to the knowledge that being emptied in order for God to fill me (and any one of us) is the pathway to deeper communion with him. It leads us to the depths and glories of the kingdom.

Wake up, sleeper,  
rise from the dead,  
and Christ will shine on you. (Ephesians 5:14)

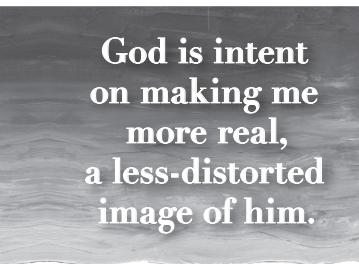
God's riptide is intent on moving me further and further away from the shores of self-centeredness. In the ocean of grace I cannot cling to my will or the illusions I possess; I have to swim by living into the fullness of reality. God is intent on making me more real, a less-distorted image of him. As I become more like him, I become more human. In turn, I will love him and others with a deeper love. I will become dependent on God to energize me with his life.

If I want to be full, open to receiving abundant grace—more human, selfless—first I must be emptied. He must increase, and I must decrease (John 3:30 ESV). The word I discovered is *kenōsis*. Oh, it's not that I never heard the word. On the contrary, I'm quite familiar with the idea. But it's one thing to define it and discuss it in a detached sort of way—to keep it at a safe distance. It's another thing altogether when God calls us to put it into practice. And he always calls us to put it into practice.

*Kenōsis* is a voluntary self-emptying, a renunciation of my will in favor of God's. It's a life characterized by self-giving. It is the kind of yielding Mary, Mother of God, displayed in her tender and trust-filled acceptance of God's birth announcement delivered by the angel Gabriel. "I am the Lord's servant," Mary

answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled" (Luke 1:38). Mary embraced poverty of self-will with a spirit of humility even when she had no idea what was happening and no guarantee that all would turn out well. Nevertheless, she risked everything on God. She gave

herself over to God's plans for her life instead of plotting her own. I wonder, *Could I be like Mary?*



God is intent  
on making me  
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a less-distorted  
image of him.



And could it be that Jesus learned the habit of voluntary self-emptying and renunciation of self-will by observing his mother? In relinquishing his own will for the sake of the Father's will throughout his earthly life, Jesus exhibited the same posture of his mother: "I am the Lord's servant. . . . May your word to me be fulfilled."

Jesus' trust in our Father's good will was tested over and over again. Our trust will be too. And yet God calls us to the same kind of life posture Jesus had:

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled [emptied] himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:5-8 ESV)

Jesus didn't cling to his rights. He repeatedly gave them up. His posture was "Not my will, but yours be done" (Luke 22:42). Similarly, each day of our lives God asks us to relinquish our rights in favor of his will—that our will and his will may become one. To choose emptiness entails a deep trust in God as we take the downward descent into servanthood and humility. We give up the endeavor of propping up ourselves. This ladder of success is inverted. This is the path of Jesus and of his disciples. It is the way of his mama. But it makes absolutely no sense from the human perspective.

Servanthood marked by this self-emptying, selflessness, or *kenōsis* begins with the surrender of our wills to God. Little by little in the strength of the Holy Spirit, we submissively

**To choose emptiness entails a deep trust in God as we take the downward descent into servanthood and humility.**

renounce our self-will and cooperate with God to empty ourselves of our Godless selves that we might be filled with God's life. It is the Galatians 2:20-21 life. I learned this one in the KJV: "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me." Notice Paul points out that Jesus gave, or offered himself up, for Paul (and you and me) out of love. That's what we're talking about here. It is a life characterized by offering ourselves out of love for God, others, and creation. We surrender to God so he might live in and through us. Our lives become a love offering. Plain and simple.

But not so simple.

Sometimes we don't want to do what God calls us to do. We fear the heavy toll it will take on us. Life already has us ragged. If we're honest with ourselves, we know we are habituated toward being self-serving instead of self-giving. We are inclined to choose ourselves first over God. We'd prefer to give God and others orders instead of taking them. Moreover, we worry that self-offering won't get us anywhere in the world or in the church. It probably won't. There won't be any standing ovations or saintly Nobel Peace Prizes awarded or even measly high-fives. Offering ourselves as living sacrifices (Romans 12:1-2), our heroic deaths, the kinds that legends are made of, will pass by mostly unnoticed by others. Yet our love and obedience are never wasted. One day they will be richly rewarded (1 Corinthians 15:58).

Caryll Houselander writes,

Many people feel that they could achieve heroic sanctity if they could do it in the way that appeals to them, for example, by being martyred. They can picture themselves cheerfully going to the stake . . . but if God makes no revelation but just lets them go on carrying out an insignificant job in the office day after day, or asks them to go on being gentle to a crotchety husband, or to continue to be a conscientious housemaid, they are not willing. They do not trust God to know his own will for them.

Hearing the call to renounce our wills in each new circumstance so God's will can be done in and through every part of us is the call to selflessness. It's not a one-time deal. It requires daily repentance and conversion to the ways of God. We'll constantly have to examine ourselves and decide whether we really want to go Jesus' way and surrender all control of the outcomes to God. Maybe like Peter we make grand promises at the beginning, tell Jesus that we'll go to any lengths for him, follow him anywhere, that we'd die for him. And then when push comes to shove and life doesn't turn out the way we want it to—when we finally realize what is at stake—we backpedal. We swear up and down that we don't know Jesus or what he is about or that it would require so much of us. Maybe we read God the riot act. We continue in this vein until some rooster in the distance shocks us awake to the reality of things, and then we are beside ourselves with sorrow and self-recrimination.

Or maybe our initial reaction is to run away (or want to run away) from it. We're Jonahs hopping aboard the first ship to Tarshish. We're like my three-year-old daughter, Isabella, who

has gotten into the habit of fleeing from me, of running away and hiding if she doesn't want to do what I have asked. She is bound and determined that her will be done, not mine.

There's always surrender to humiliation and crucifixion, an emptying, before the glory. There's no way around it. For my own part, I wish there were. Emptiness comes before fullness. We have to empty ourselves of anything that crowds out the life or grace of God in our lives. When we cooperate with the Spirit in this way, we become receptacles of grace. Like Jesus' mother Mary, we become God-bearers, pregnant with the divine. We are rich toward God and others. Filled full.

All this makes sense of why God told Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." And it explains why Paul could truthfully write, "Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12:9-11). Paul knew that God's strength could be unleashed in his weakness, that when he was empty, he was in the perfect position to be filled with God's power. In acknowledging and admitting our emptiness, being poor in spirit and contrite in heart, in taking the posture of a servant, we too can become open to realizing God's strength and power in us and in the kingdom. When we are full of ourselves or other things, we obstruct God's grace.

Father Stephen Freeman, an Eastern Orthodox priest, writes, "If we are to be transformed 'from one degree of glory to another' then it is towards the 'glory' of the crucified, self-emptying Christ that we are being transformed. . . . For there is no other

## SELF-EMPTYING

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kind of life revealed to us in Christ.” Crucifixion and self-emptying—there is no other kind of Christian life. This is the life God calls us to. And it takes practice. It takes God’s strength.

In the following pages, we’ll explore ways in which God is calling you and me to surrender continually to being emptied and then filled with his abounding grace. We’ll soon discover that this is the process whereby saints are made. This is the selfless-way, the God-shaped life.

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