

During a normal basketball season, right around this time of year, something very special would be happening in high schools and colleges around the country. Tournament schedules would have been set, and teams who locked up their place in the playoffs would have the opportunity to grant an experience that's truly unique; the "suiting up" of the team managers. In the last game of the regular season, maybe in the final minutes, a new player is announced on the roster - the kid who's been supplying towels and water to the stars of the team since the beginning.

It's incredible to see the effect this can have on a crowd! People who checked out of the game more than a quarter ago are back on their feet, screaming wildly for a guy they've never met and whose name they've only heard once. For those managers, it's a once-in-a-lifetime moment, with a gymnasium full of people cheering for them. And if they score? *Bedlam*. That manager who spent all season carrying water and gear for the players usually getting all the glory, gets to be carried out of the gym as a hero, even if only for a day. People love a good underdog story, don't they?

We sympathize with people who overcome adversity and "seize the day" because isn't that exactly what we want to do? We want to be able to grab something good for ourselves, and the winners and successful people of the world sure look like they have that figured out, don't they? But where do we turn to when they don't give us the answers we're looking for? Or, what about when our earthly security slips and we start longing for something more permanent? What do we have to hold on to then?

People look for the answer to this question in all kinds of places, but today we have some guidance from the apostle Paul, who directs our attention to Jesus. We want to pay attention to what Jesus reached for in His life, and how that compares to the decisions we make. At the same time, we see Jesus as far more than just an example of humility and trust - he is the source of our salvation, and something we can hold on to in uncertain times.

In fact, it was uncertain times that spurred Paul to write what he did to the Philippians! He wrote his letter from prison, a victim of persecution against Christians that was beginning to rise in the Roman empire. With enemies of the church becoming bolder and more active, Christians were beginning to worry. The Philippians had a lot on their minds, and it was affecting their personal and spiritual lives. Can you relate? Are you preoccupied with thoughts about a virus, the economy, your family? All of that uncertainty can hurt the unity of a church, and Paul knew that. To get us back on the right track, he directs our attention to Jesus - more specifically, Jesus' *attitude*. There's an important truth behind the way Jesus thought and acted in his time on Earth that can bring us comfort in troubled times.

This truth comes out in a single word that sits at the heart of Paul's message. It means "to claim by grabbing ahold of," and it's how Paul describes the way Jesus approached equality with God. Think of this word like a group of kids racing to the toy box. The one who gets there first gets to play with everyone's favorite toy, because they claim it by grabbing it before the others. Now, what does this have to do with Jesus and God? Jesus was already God - in fact, he has *always* been God - but what we're seeing here is that his attitude towards being considered that way is different. Because Jesus

didn't view his status as God something to "claim by grabbing ahold of," he shows us what he was willing to do to accomplish something truly great. Even though he was already the greatest of all, Jesus was willing to make himself lesser to achieve something greater.

Here's where this comparison between us and Jesus hits a roadblock; we don't act that way. Think about it - did anyone ever have to teach you to be the first to the toy so that you could play with it first? The fact is, it's in our nature to be selfish. It's a selfishness that grows from the sin we have in us from the moment we're conceived. It starts when we're young, and it doesn't go away as we age - it just changes.

What I mean is, maybe you don't feel like you need to be the first to the toy box any more, but what about the earliest to retire? The quickest to buy your own house? The first in line for the latest shipment of toilet paper? We're always competing to get things like these for ourselves because they make us feel safe and secure, and if we aren't the first in line our sinful minds fill us with unease. What if we miss out? Wouldn't that be awful!

If we work so hard to put our trust in temporary, physical things, but we're searching for lasting peace, is it any wonder that they don't give us what we're looking for? And this problem leads us into another - if our sinfulness makes us primed to be selfish, then how can we possibly have an attitude like Jesus? It seems like Paul is making an impossible comparison, and where's the comfort in that?

Friends, in our search for stability and peace in tough times, we reach out to anything that we think might bring us even a little safety and comfort. But in the face of our selfishness, we see perfect selflessness in the actions of our Savior. When we hear the call to be more Christ-like in the midst of hardship and fight against our selfish hearts, what can we hold on to for the lasting peace we so desperately need? Instead of reaching for earthly things, we reach for the hand of our Savior Jesus.

It's a good thing that there's more than one word for "grab" that Paul uses in our lesson, and when he uses the second, it's to tell us about how Jesus "grabbed" the form of a human being. But what makes this use significant? How much further you could get from a pure, holy, and eternal God than impure, unholy, and temporary people? And yet, that's exactly what Jesus did. Setting aside the power and glory of being God and putting on the flesh of a lowly human being is the greatest possible act of humility! Through his actions, Jesus tells us that he considered the greater thing - being the almighty God - not as worth taking hold of as the clearly lesser thing - becoming a human being.

Doesn't something seem a little... off? There has to be a reason for Jesus to do something so striking and extreme - to give up so much and get so little in return! And there is - it's so that he can die on a cross. Not much of a reward, is it? Crucifixion is a painful, shameful way to die. Not to mention, God is eternal, and so he *can't* die, which means Jesus willingly traded being unable to die for actually *experiencing* death! So what is it all for? It's all for you.

In order for this selfish, sinful world to be saved, there had to be a sacrifice to pay the debt sin owed. But not just any sacrifice would do. It would have to be *perfect*. And so Jesus humbly put aside his glory and took hold of humanity, just so that he would be able

to die as that sacrifice. He lived a perfect life and fulfilled the requirements of the Law in our place, and died on a cross to pay for the world's sins, offering himself in our place.

Now, we have something sure to hold on to! First, we know that Jesus' mission to save the world from sin was successful because God raised him from the dead as proof of his victory over sin, death, and the devil. God gives him a new name, one that is above any other and inspires every knee to bow down in awe, to mark Jesus as the victor. Second, Paul shows us that through Jesus, God is glorified. God's final goal is for "all people to be saved, and to come to a knowledge of the truth," for that exact purpose. If Jesus accomplished that goal, then his work was done according to God's good and gracious will!

When we look to Jesus for a better path, he does more than simply show us the way. He *is* the way! Through faith in the glorified Jesus, we have the opportunity to experience the same victory over sin, death, and the devil. In our baptism, we are connected to a Savior who has freed us from our worries and fears. He stands alone as our Rock and our unshakeable Fortress - something we can hold on to forever. Jesus became the lowest of all for us, and was made into the greatest of all by the Father - a comeback story for all time!

Watching a team manager put on a jersey and score a basket for his team makes for an uplifting story, and it's good to celebrate breaking expectations and accomplishing something when the opportunity presents itself. But even as great as those stories are, they can't possibly compare to our Lord Jesus, who made himself nothing for sinners like you and me, suffered and died for our sake, and then rose again to convince us of our own resurrection. Our Savior took hold of humility, so that we could receive glory. Through the faith he won for us, we reach for the glorified Jesus, who lives and reigns as Lord of All. Amen.