



What Makes God Great—The Fourth Trait

Perhaps you have never heard of Stephen and Emily Foreman. They served as missionaries in a country where Christianity is illegal. They had four children. Stephen was gunned down and murdered by El-Qaida extremists not far from the local mosque. One of the few Christians in the area had this to say of Stephen. "As you know, I have always dealt with fear not only for my own life, but the lives of my wife and children, but I tell you, that fear is gone. Did you know that Stephen had come to see me only days before his death and sat in this room? He was very sick with fever, but he had an unusual sense of joy in his voice when he told me"—Amir's voice cracked—"Amir, I don't know the number of my days. I could die tomorrow. Whether I die by illness or at the hands of extremists, life is too short. We must obey God while we still have breath in our bodies—before we no longer have a chance." Stephen Foreman sacrificed himself for the opportunity to help Amir and others know God and the way of salvation. Not everyone who sacrifices themselves for others lose their lives. It could be you know someone who sacrifices self for the sake of others. My mom was like that. As she was dying from cancer, she drove the older women of the church who couldn't drive to the store to help them get groceries.

We see people in the Bible like this. Abraham, the patriarch of the nation of Israel got into a quarrel with his nephew Lot because the two of them had so many livestock that the staff of each of them got into fierce disputes over whose flocks could graze where. It was so bad that Lot split off from Abraham and resettled in the plain near Sodom and Gomorrah. Later a marauding army came through where Lot was living and captured him, his family, and many others. As soon as Abraham, known as Abram at the time, heard, he gathered his servants and staff and went off to rescue Lot. **When Abram heard that his relative had been taken captive, he called out the 318 trained men born in his household and went in pursuit as far as Dan. During the night Abram divided his men to attack them and he routed them, pursuing them as far as Hobah, north of Damascus. He recovered all the goods and brought back his relative Lot and his possessions, together with the women and the other people.** (Genesis 14: 14-16 NIV) Keep in mind that Abram was at this time in his eighties when he led his men into battle to liberate Lot. It was Lot's selfishness and greed that brought him to the plains of Sodom in the first place. Abram however held no grudge and sacrificed his own safety for the lives of his nephew and family members as well as all the other people of Sodom he had never met.

We could mention David, who before he became king courageously led his small band of men against a great army of Amalekites who had captured their wives and children. **David fought them from dusk until the evening of the next day, and none of them got away, except four hundred young men who rode off on camels and fled.** (1 Samuel 30: 17 NIV) Now you might argue that it is not quite a sacrifice to risk your life to rescue your family members, but does it really diminish the value of the sacrifice to give up your life for those you love? The sacrifice of life is no respecter of persons and is just as lovely whether you know those you give your life to save or not. Consider the fascinating case of Moses. Sometimes we look at the supernatural calling he received to lead Israel out of Egypt from a point of view that doesn't bear in mind what Moses felt about it. Let's take a bit of time to look into that.

It was certainly dramatic the moment God connected with Moses. **There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. So Moses thought, "I will go over and see this strange sight — why the bush does not burn up." When the Lord saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, "Moses! Moses!" And Moses said, "Here I am."** (Exodus 3: 2-4 NIV) Why was Moses there in the first place. It was because forty years before, believing he was called by God to lead his fellow Israelites out of

Egypt, he killed an Egyptian slave master who was beating an Israelite. Moses was convinced that when the other Jews heard of his actions, he would be joined by them in an armed revolt. The opposite happened. Rather than following his lead and applauding Moses's courage, the Israelites turned on him. When Moses the next day rebuked an Israelite who was beating up a fellow Jew, he met the man's scorn. **The man said, "Who made you ruler and judge over us? Are you thinking of killing me as you killed the Egyptian?" Then Moses was afraid and thought, "What I did must have become known."** (Exodus 2: 14 NIV) Humiliated and afraid the Egyptian authorities knew he murdered the slave master, Moses fled for his life and wound up in Midian. Imagine Moses's feelings as he listened to God send him back to Egypt and lead the very Israelites who before rejected him. What reason did he have to take up that calling. His mother and father were surely dead as were he may have assumed, his brother and sister. He would be going up against the greatest military force in the world with only a ragtag collection of slaves behind him. That is, if they even chose to side with him. Why would anyone sacrifice his life for that mission? It would seem absurd. And yet Moses did, and we are forever grateful.

The sacrifice of self is not unheard of, but it is immense. Jesus said that it is the greatest of all levels of love. **Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.** (John 15: 13 NIV) I want to consider one very specific way God sacrificed Himself or laid down His life for His friends. There is a fascinating observation made in Paul's letter to the Philippians. Let me quote it as the NIV renders it and then translate it for you and comment on it. Speaking of Jesus, it reads, **Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.** (Philippians 2: 6-7 NIV) Paul uses an expression that is often misunderstood and handled incorrectly. What is translated, "made himself nothing" is literally, "emptied Himself". Countless numbers of explanations have been offered as to what it means that Jesus emptied Himself and there is not time to share them. Let me explain it this way. Jesus poured Himself out for us. He gave all He had. Marathon runners use the expression as do chemical engineers to describe their total effort at doing something. Jesus literally did give all He had. As Lord of Lords and King of Kings, Jesus has every right to demand of us all we have and when we don't provide it, destroy us. God however, seeing your plight as sinner gave all He had for your salvation.

The prophet Isaiah puts it this way regarding what God has done. **...because he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.** (Isaiah 53: 12b, c NIV) Many have given their all for someone and perhaps you have too. But no one could do what God has done for you. He bore your sins. Only Jesus could take upon Himself your guilt and gain for you eternal life. I am reminded of Adam who had the opportunity to lead all who followed him into perfect union with God, but the pleasure of forbidden fruit was enough to keep him from that glorious mission. Nothing kept God from His goal of dying for you. Not the pleasures of heaven. Not the thrill of public acclaim. Not even the need for a good night's sleep. He gave all He had for you and for me that our sin and sinning might be taken away and perfection could be ours. Whenever you wonder what God thinks of you, remember that He became a servant for your sake, dying to make you free. Paul puts it this way. **For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.** (Colossians 1: 13-14 NIV) There are a thousand different ways to think of God's greatness. This stands out above them all. God gave up all He had for you to have eternal life. What more could He do for you than that? In the end, it is again the Apostle Paul who puts it best. Consider this when it gets really rough, and you feel like you have nowhere to turn and no one in your corner. **What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all — how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?** (Romans 8:31-32 NIV) I'd say that alone makes Him pretty great!