

Special Section: Humility

At The Foot Of The Cross

What does it mean to humble yourself?

By Joni Eareckson Tada



Illustration by Matthew Baek

“Here’s how you exercise Joni’s legs,” my longtime helper, Arlene, explained to the new girl she was training. I sighed and turned my head on the pillow—on one hand, grateful a new person was learning to get me up and dressed; on the other hand, demoralized at inviting a near stranger into my bedroom and having to “expose” myself.

Out of the corner of my eye, I watched Arlene show the trainee how to lift and stretch my paralyzed leg.

“That’s not quite right,” I said. “In rehab they taught you to support the knee a little more.”

“Joni, I’ve always done it this way.

My demoralization changed to genuine irritation. *It’s my body that’s being handled here. Besides, I’m in charge.* I chose my next words calculatedly.

“That may be,” I shot back, “but I’ve been doing these exercises for 30 years.”

As soon as I heard my tone, I wanted to stuff the words back in my mouth. *Great witness I’m being to the new helper,* I groaned inwardly.

The rest of the morning was ruined. Arlene and I made feeble attempts to not-quite-apologize to each other.

“Why don’t we pray since we can’t get anywhere,” I grudgingly suggested later, to which she replied, “Not with your attitude like that!”

That did it. She wasn’t going to get the best of me. Before Arlene walked out the door, I narrowed my eyes and said, “It’s a shame that we are both such prideful people.”

I was finally right about something—not about my friend (yes, she’s still my friend), but

about me. I can be as puffed up with pride and mule-stubborn as the next person. And I hate it. At times, my dark side itches to flaunt and flail everyone with my ego. My enlightened side, however, longs for humility.



Illustration by Matthew Baek

As Elusive as Stardust

How we all ache to be like God in our best, purest moments. And so we walk (or in my case, wheel) up to our friend and say, “I am so sorry for hurting you. What you’ve observed about me is true: I am stubborn and very much in the wrong. Please forgive me.”

And then we wait and take whatever our friend offers, whether a smile and a pardon, or a diagnosis of our character flaws that cuts to the core.

Next, we resolve to be slow to speak and quick to listen. We thank the busboys who clean our restaurant table, we pray more fervently, we sign up to pinch-hit for the Toddler Praise lady who usually does diaper duty, we offer our spouse a foot rub, or we sacrifice an extra hour of sleep in the morning for a more earnest quiet time.

Before long, however, our hunger to be humble fades. We revert to our feisty, self-sufficient selves—treading on peoples’ feelings, ignoring hotel maids, praying blandly, and holding our nose to hand back the diaper bag. We grab for humility, and—poof—it disappears like stardust through our fingers. Pride is back.

If only we could nail ourselves to that desperate state when we first believed. If only we could sense again that urgent need for God that first drove us to our knees in humility long ago. How can we find that awareness of empty-handed spiritual poverty?

Following the Clues

Some Old Testament kings give us clues for solving this dilemma. In 1 Kgs. 21:28–29, wicked Ahab—the better half of Jezebel—repented, at which point “the word of the LORD came to Elijah the Tishbite: ‘Have you noticed how Ahab has humbled himself before me? . . . I will not bring this disaster in his day.’”

When King Josiah heard the Book of the Law for the first time, he tore his robes in anguish over the sin of his forefathers (2 Kings 22:19–20). The Lord responded, “Because your heart was responsive and you humbled yourself before the LORD . . . and because you tore your robes and wept in my presence, I have heard you . . . You will be buried in peace.”

The last clue is found in 2 Chron. 33:12–13. Manasseh, who threw infants on the sacrificial grill to appease pagan gods, was captured by the Assyrians, bound in bronze shackles, and led by a hook in his nose to Babylon. “In his distress he sought the favor of the LORD his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers . . . The LORD was moved by his entreaty . . . so he brought him back to Jerusalem and to his kingdom.”

Did you get the answer? *Humble yourself before the Lord.* When you do—you lose!

When it comes to gaining humility, the point is not to win but to lose. And our pride loses

big when it goes up against God. In *The Valley of Vision*, a puritan wrote, “Let me never forget that the heinousness of sin lies not so much in the nature of the sin committed, as in the greatness of the person sinned against.” If we’re looking for humility, we don’t gaze inward to see how widely we’ve missed the mark. We gaze at God. More to the point, at Christ. No, even more humbling, we drag ourselves to the cross. Pride is suffocated at the cross. Self becomes “hidden with Christ in God” (Col. 3:3)—and humility is the result.

Why the cross? Because the spirit of humility is lavished not on the deserving, but on the undeserving. Nowhere do we recognize ourselves as more undeserving than when we stand in the shadow of the cross.

How do you humble yourself before the Lord? Look up into the night sky. Jesus set suns and stars spinning in motion. He dreamed up not just our galaxy, which is 100,000 light-years across, but a billion other galaxies the Hubbell telescope will never photograph. This same Jesus determines the number of the stars and gives them names. He commands squirrels to hibernate and birds to fly south. He held together by His word the very sinews and joints in the hands that hammered spikes into His wrists. This Jesus bore His Father’s wrath against you and your sin on the cross.

Humility is just another word for the little-last-lost-least position we hold when gazing at Christ.

At the Cross

Pride forbids us to feel little and last, least and lost. This is why pride hates the cross. It prefers the more appealing aspects of following Jesus—whether it’s to a party where He changes water to wine, to a sunlit beach where He preaches from a boat, or to a breezy hillside where He feeds thousands. But to the cross? Pride has us digging in our heels. The invitation is so frightening: “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Matthew 16:24). Nobody can go to the cross for you. Or carry it for you. Burdens, yes. Thorns, possibly. But a cross? No.

That’s because the cross is a place of death. It is on the hill of Calvary where we must “put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to [our] earthly nature” (Col. 3:5). Who wants to do that? Who wants to drop all those nice-sounding names for sin? Who wants to lose control of his life? Who wants to ask her husband, “Honey, I want to be a better wife—would you please point out my faults?” and then have to bite her tongue when he responds, “Well, you really come across like a know-it-all sometimes.” Words like that wound. Yet the wound is not a blow to the spirit, but a laceration of self in all its haughtiness.

Nothing attracts us to the cross. Our dark side abhors it. Yet, our enlightened side recognizes it as home base.

Remember my run-in with Arlene? It’s true that afterward I placed a moratorium on my tongue . . . and my arrogance. Had I come across a busboy I would have treated him like a king. Had I been able, I would have changed a kid’s diaper. Such is the worldview of a truly humble person. But what makes such resolutions stick is first to humble yourself not before busboys, but before the Lord, who “did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing” (Phil. 2:6).

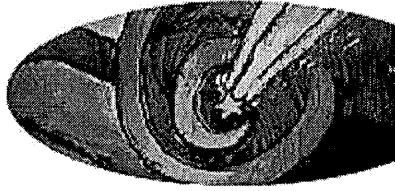


Illustration by Matthew Baek

Humbled by His Word

To humble yourself before the Lord is to ponder the loveliness of Christ and the horrible price He paid for our redemption. Think about this! Tackle a word study of *redemption* and *reconciliation*, *atonement* and *propitiation*. Meditate on exactly what occurred at the cross.

Every time pride raises its ugly head in my life, Scripture humbles me—especially the book of Jeremiah. Somewhere around Jeremiah 2:23-24, my pride deflates:

How can you say, “I am not defiled; I have not run after the Baals”? See how you behaved in the valley; consider what you have done. You are a swift she-camel running here and there, a wild donkey accustomed to the desert, sniffing the wind in her craving—in her heat who can restrain her? Any males that pursue her need not tire themselves; at mating time they will find her.

God’s Word hits home: My pride sniffs out trouble like an ass in heat sniffing the wind. How humiliating!

Good News for Losers

Little wonder the gospel is only good news to those who consider themselves losers. It is humiliating to be sandblasted to the core, to be told by the Spirit that we are not as wise or winsome or loving or patient as we thought. But when the mask of pride is ripped away, there’s something refreshing about knowing yourself at the core. The vulnerability. The transparency. The relief of nothing more to hide.

When we put pride to death, God imparts power and implants hope. We rise renewed. But when we revert to our self-sufficient ways, the Spirit presses in. And so we must return to the cross, mortifying the martyr in us, destroying the self-display. As we hold fast to the cross, God offers the spirit of humility. Stray from the cross and humility recedes, pride returns.

It is simple: It’s the cross. Again I say, the cross. I didn’t say it was easy, just simple.

» **See Also:** *On Your Own: The Way Of Humility*



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On Your Own
The Way Of Humility

1. Read the following accounts of people who humbled themselves.

Ahab, 1 Kings 21:17–29

Manasseh, 2 Chron. 33:1–12

Josiah, 2 Chron. 34:14–33

The prodigal, Luke 15:11–24

The tax collector, Luke 18:9–13

2. For each account, answer the following:

- For what reason did this person need to humble himself?

- What did he do to humble himself? What did it “look like”?

- How did God respond?

3. Describe in your own words what it means to humble yourself.

4. Joni writes about the roles that creation, the cross, and Scripture play in helping us humble ourselves before God. Describe a time when one or more of these helped you return to a spirit of humility.