



# MINISTRIES

A Ministry of the Athens Universal Life Church  
Dr. Rob White – Senior Minister  
<https://aulc.us>

**TITLE:** Two Steps Forward & One Step Back

**SERMON IN A SENTENCE:** In his baptism, Jesus took one of three steps down (incarnation, baptism, and crucifixion) in preparation for two big steps up (resurrection and ascension).

**SCRIPTURE:** Matthew 3:13-17

Today's scripture lesson comes from the Gospel of Matthew, chapter three, verses thirteen to seventeen.

Starting at verse thirteen:

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him.

But John tried to stop Him, saying, "I need to be baptized by You, and yet You come to me?"

Jesus answered him, "Allow it for now, because this is the way for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he allowed Him to be baptized.

After Jesus was baptized, He went up immediately from the water. The heavens suddenly opened for Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming down on Him.

And there came a voice from heaven:

This is My beloved Son.

I take delight in Him!

May the Lord add His Blessing on the reading of His Word!

Hello Friends! I am Doctor Rob White with the A U L C Ministries with our message this week.

I am happy that you can take a few minutes out of your busy week to be with us this week!

- Has anyone ever told you, "You have a nice smile."
- Or, "You did a good job of mowing the lawn."
- Or, "You are a well organized individual."
- Perhaps you did well on a special assignment at work and received a bonus.
- Your supervisor may have said to you, "Well done, good job."

When a person lets you know they are pleased with something you have done, they are giving you a compliment. We all like to receive compliments and compliments from our bosses and peers are particularly nice. Compliments give us a good feeling and make us feel as if our efforts are appreciated.

Do you every give compliments? It is something to think about. When your wife has cooked something especially delicious, it would probably make her feel special if you were to tell her what a great cook she is. If your supervisor lets you do something a bit difficult on your own without any assistance, let him know that appreciate him for letting you show some skills you have.

Your friends like to be complimented too. Do you have a friend who is generous about lending you tools to fix your car? Tell that friend what a kind person they are. I'll bet you can think of other people you could compliment. A compliment is a way of saying, "Thank you for being who you are."

When Jesus was baptized by John, he received the best compliment that anyone could receive. Jesus was baptized in a river called Jordan. He went up directly from the water: and behold, the heavens were opened to him. He saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove, and coming on him. Behold, a voice out of the heavens said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (Matthew chapter three verses sixteen and seventeen).

Can you imagine being complimented by God in that way? Jesus came to earth to fulfill God's plan; to show us God's love and teach us about God's love. He was obedient and God's compliment was a way of saying "Thank you for being who you are. I am well pleased."

You have probably heard the phrase, "Two steps forward; one step back." The person who says that is usually in the process of taking one step back.

"Two steps forward; one step back" might sound cynical, but it can be the opposite—a statement of faith. The person who says "Two steps forward; one step back" might be saying, "You can never win"—or might instead be saying,

"I might be taking a step back right now,  
but I'M MAKING PROGRESS—  
perhaps not as fast as I might like,  
but I am getting there.

I'm taking one step BACK right now,

but I just finished taking two steps FORWARD."

Of course, there are times when we're tempted to turn that statement around—to say, "One step forward; two steps back." We all have days like that—days when nothing goes right—days when we lose and lose big. "One step forward; two steps back" is a way of acknowledging that kind of loss.

It isn't easy to keep the faith when we have to take a step back. It gets really difficult when we have to take two steps back.

- When that happens, it really helps to believe that we're in God's hands.
- It really helps to believe that when God closes a door on us, it is because he has an open door—the right open door—waiting around the corner.

Sometimes it takes a while to get to the open door. That's called "GOD'S TIME." God's time is usually slower than we would prefer. But real blessings await the person who can remember, even in difficult times, that God has a plan—a wonderful plan for our lives.

"One step forward; two steps back." For Jesus, it was "THREE STEPS DOWN; TWO STEPS UP." I don't mean that cynically—it's just the way it was: "Three steps down; two steps up."

So what do I mean by three steps down? I am talking about what Jesus did to save us. He started by taking three steps down—three big steps—three giant steps.

THE FIRST BIG STEP DOWN was BEING BORN into this world as a helpless baby in a backwater place. He was accustomed to better things. The Gospel of John says:

"In the beginning was the Word,  
and the Word was with God,  
and the Word was God.  
He was in the beginning with God.  
All things came into being through him,  
and without him not one thing came into being" (John chapter one verses one to three).

So the Son didn't come into being for the first time in a manger in Bethlehem. He was present at the creation —pulled the levers to create the world. A prince! A king! Accustomed to life in the palace! But then John says:

"And the Word became flesh and lived among us,  
and we have seen his glory,  
the glory as of a father's only son,  
full of grace and truth" (John chapter 1 verse fourteen).

So the prince came down to live among us. Athanasius, one of the great early Christians put it this way. He said:

"He became what WE are  
that he might make us what HE is."

So that was his first step down—coming to live among us. HIS SECOND STEP DOWN was his BAPTISM. John the Baptist was offering a baptism of repentance—calling people to turn to God and to let God turn their lives around.

Jesus came to John, and said, "Baptize me!" John protested, "I need to be baptized by you!" But Jesus said:

"Allow it now,  
for this is the fitting way for us  
to fulfill all righteousness" (verse fifteen of our scripture text today).

Scholars have debated for centuries about what Jesus meant by "to fulfill all righteousness." There are various theories, but I think it's pretty clear. Jesus had to take one step down to be born in our world—and then he had to take another step down to join us in a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Jesus' baptism had nothing to do with his sins, because he was sinless. But it was one more step toward his goal of drawing us to God—of bringing about our salvation. As one scholar, Harry Ironside put it:

"He who was to take the sinner's place  
came to be baptized of John,  
that he might thereby be identified with sinners  
for whom he was to lay down his life."

So Jesus took one step down by being born into our world—and a second step down by joining us in baptism. Then he took A THIRD STEP DOWN. Can you guess where? On the CROSS, of course! That was the final step down. Whipped with a lash—stripped of his clothing—nailed to a cross—Jesus bore the punishment for our sins.

Three steps down. But then he took two steps up. THE FIRST STEP UP was his RESURRECTION. He lived our life and died our death, but then he rose from the dead as a way of breaking the power of death—not only over himself, but also over us.

And HIS SECOND STEP UP was his ASCENSION into heaven—rejoining the Father in glory.

Three steps down and two steps up. That pretty well summarizes the work that Jesus came to do.

So what can we learn from that? I can't explore the answer in detail, because it would take all day—all week! But let me make this observation. God very often saves us by causing us to take two steps forward and one step back—or two steps back and one step forward—or three steps down and two steps up.

Let me put it another way: God sometimes allows us to LOSE so he can help us WIN.

That's difficult to appreciate sometimes—especially when we're losing. But the God who let his son suffer sometimes also allows us to suffer. But he is there with us in our suffering, and he can redeem our suffering.

In fact, sometimes God humbles us in order to save us. What do I mean by that? Let me give you an example.

Some of you may have heard of Elizabeth Kubler-Ross. She wrote a book entitled *On Death and Dying* that became quite well known. I can't imagine how many copies it must have sold. Kubler-Ross first published her book in 1969, but it has been revised at least once and reprinted many times. In that book, Kubler-Ross pioneered what she called the Five Stages of Grief:

- Denial
- Anger
- Bargaining
- Depression
- Acceptance

Understanding the journey represented by those five stages of Grief has been enormously helpful to dying people—their families—their doctors—and their care givers.

But this story isn't really about Kubler-Ross. It's about an African-American woman who was part of the maintenance crew in a hospital where Kubler-Ross was working. That woman made beds, cleaned rooms, and emptied bedpans.

But the staff noticed something special about that woman. In the rooms where she was doing her work, patients seemed to do better. They were more content—more peaceful. Kubler-Ross asked the woman what she was doing that helped the patients. Here's what that woman said:

"Well, I've been up the mountain  
and I've been down the mountain.

She said:

I've lived in many valleys.  
The worst was when I went to a public clinic  
with my three year old daughter in my arms,  
and before we could see a doctor,  
she died of pneumonia.

She said:

I could have become cynical and angry,  
but instead I decided to use my pain to help others.

She said:

I'm no stranger to death,  
and that's why I'm not afraid to talk and touch those that are dying.  
I try to give them hope."

Kubler-Ross put the woman in for a promotion. They made her a special counselor to the dying in that hospital.

Two steps forward; one step back. In that woman's life, it was one huge step back—followed by one long step forward.

It was worse than that. When her daughter died, it must have been like falling off a cliff. But she decided not to let her suffering rule her life. She decided to talk to people who were dying—to give them hope.

Sometimes that's the way God works. Sometimes God lets us hit bottom so that he can lift us up. Sometimes God allows us to go through the fire so we will be able to help someone else who is going through the same kind of suffering.

When you experience a tough time in your life, remember that Jesus had to take three steps down before he could take two steps up.

- He had to be BORN in a stable intended for sheep.
- He had to be BAPTIZED in a baptism intended for sinners.
- He had to DIE on a cross intended for criminals.

Jesus did those things to help us. As a result:

"God highly EXALTED him,  
and gave to him the name which is above every name;  
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow...  
and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians chapter two verses nine to eleven).

Sometimes it works that way for us too. Sometimes God lets life humble us—but we can be sure that God has not abandoned us. God might let us fall, but if we live in faith God will never let us fail.

That's our Lord's message for this Lord's Day and I hope you got a blessing out of it!

Go out this week and be a blessing and be blessed! For the more you are a blessing, the more you will be blessed!

Thank you all for watching and listening and we will see you all next week!

Copyright © 2024 – Athens Universal Life Church – All Rights Reserved!