

Down From His

Glory

The doctrine of the incarnation is at the heart of Biblical Christianity. The fact that Christ “became flesh and dwelt among us” is vital to the truths of His substitutionary death and glorious resurrection. Since apart from these events there is no salvation, one can quickly see how the “coming in flesh” of Jesus is so important to the Christian faith.

Many important passages in the New Testament discuss the doctrine of the incarnation. None, however, is more majestic and sweeping than the exalted poetry of Philippians 2:5–11.

In writing to the church at Philippi, Paul expresses his concern that its members maintain unity among themselves. But how are they to achieve this unity (1:27–2:4)? The answer is that each believer must maintain an attitude of humility (2:1–4). And how does one become humble? Paul gives the answer: focus on Christ who humbled Himself in becoming man (2:5–11).

In order to prove the great humility of Christ in becoming a man, Paul takes his readers on a journey. He takes us from heaven to earth and back to heaven again. In this journey he shows us the deity, the humility, and the glory of Christ, the incarnate Son of God.

The Deity of Christ

Our journey starts in heaven where Christ exists eternally with the Father. Paul states plainly that Christ exists “in the form of God” (v. 6). Furthermore, He does not consider it “robbery to be equal with God” (v. 6). To be “in the form of God” does not mean that God the Father has a physical form or shape and that Christ looks like the Father. The “form of God” refers to His very essence as God and to the functions and exercise of His attributes as God. Christ shares in the very essence of deity. He is one with the Father and the Spirit, and as one with them He possesses and exercises all of the divine attributes.

Since Christ is one in essence with the Father and the Holy Spirit, he did not think it “robbery to be equal with God.” In modern English the word *robbery* in this verse sounds rather strange. It literally reads, “He did not think equality with God was a thing to be grasped.” In other words, because Jesus exists eternally as God, He did not consider equality with the Father something He had to strive for or seek to hold onto since it was already rightfully His. It is clear from this passage that Paul did not consider Jesus to be just a prophet or a holy man. Nor did he think of Christ

as *a* god. Paul believed, as do all Christians, that Jesus Christ *is* God.

The Humility of Christ

The truth that confounds the human mind is that Christ, who is fully God, would humble Himself to become a man. This is exactly what Paul declares has happened. This is the second stage of our journey. It takes us to earth and to a manger in Bethlehem. Ultimately it takes us to a cruel Roman cross. In verses 7 and 8 the apostle expresses this condescension of Christ in the incarnation by using two phrases. First, he states that Christ “made himself of no reputation” and second, that He “humbled himself.”

The phrase “made himself of no reputation” has troubled interpreters because it literally means, “He emptied Himself.” The natural question to ask is, “Of what did Christ empty Himself?” Some have replied, “He emptied Himself of His deity.” This certainly cannot be the answer. If Christ is eternally God, as Paul has just proclaimed Him to be, then He is changeless and therefore cannot lay aside His deity. Others have interpreted this phrase to mean that, at the time of the incarnation, the Lord Jesus voluntarily gave up some of



His divine attributes or at least the free exercise of them. Again, this argument fails at the same point as the other. God is changeless and therefore can never stop acting as God.

To answer the question “Of what did Christ empty Himself?” we must go to the text of Scripture, instead of to the speculations of theologians, and let it have the final say. When we study the passage carefully, it soon becomes clear that Christ did not empty Himself by taking something *away* from Himself but by taking something *to* Himself. He emptied Himself by *addition* rather than by *subtraction*.

Paul explains in three phrases how our Lord emptied Himself. First, He “took upon him the form of a servant” (v. 7). That which He was not He became. He actively, willingly took the form of a bondsman. Though He eternally exists in the form of God, He now takes the form, essence, and functions of a servant as His own. Second, He “was made in the likeness of men” (v. 7). This does not mean that Jesus merely looked like a man. On the contrary, everything that constitutes a true humanity Jesus graciously received. Third, He was “found in fashion as a man” (v. 8). When others looked at Jesus they saw one

who was every bit as human as they were, with the exception of a sinful nature. His peers saw a real man. He was not a phantom. He was not a figment of their imagination. This is how Christ emptied Himself. He became incarnate.

Christ also humbled Himself. He did this by becoming obedient to the Father’s will, even though that meant death. It was no ordinary death to which Christ submitted Himself. It was the cruel and mocking death of the cross. The cross has become a universal symbol of Christianity and for some a trinket of jewelry. A brief pause to consider what the cross really means, however, will cause any serious thinker to realize the solemnity and shame associated with it. The cross was the Roman form of capital punishment for the lowest of criminals. It was such a terrible death that no Roman citizen was ever subjected to it without imperial permission. The humility of Christ took Him to the depths of this kind of suffering and death for you and for me.

The Glory of Christ

Our journey, however, does not end on earth and at the cross of Calvary. Paul knows of the Christ who died, but he knows nothing of a Christ who continues under the power of death. After three days God raised Christ from the dead and exalted Him to glory in heaven. This is the subject of verses 9-11.

God has exalted His incarnate Son. The Lord had promised this long ago through His prophet Isaiah, “Behold, my servant shall deal prudently, he shall be exalted and extolled, and be very high” (52:13).

At His ascension Christ went to His Father’s right hand, the place of privilege and honor. He went there as the God-man. Christ did not become man only for His sojourn on earth. The Father exalted the one who is both fully divine and fully human.

A key part of the exaltation is the name given to Jesus. A name signifies character. What is this name with which the Father honours the Son? It is “Lord.” Paul here alludes to Isaiah 42:8, “I am the LORD: that is my name: and my glory will I not give to another.” With such a position and name, the only proper response to Christ is submission and confession. This is exactly what Paul says will happen.

Though this journey has taken us from heaven to earth and back to heaven again, at its close Paul takes us forward in time to look at the last day. Here again he alludes to Isaiah. This time the reference is 45:23: “I have sworn by myself, the word is gone out of my mouth in righteousness, and shall not return, That unto me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear.”

On the last day every knee will bow and every tongue will confess the Lordship of Jesus Christ. The question is, will you confess that Jesus is Lord or will you confess that Jesus is *your* Lord? The distinction here may seem small, but it is very important. All men will confess that Jesus is Lord, but not all will confess that Jesus is *their* Lord. Some will confess that Jesus is Lord and therefore sovereign over their damnation. Others will confess his Lordship joyfully since He is their Lord and Saviour. Among which group will you be on that final, great day? ■

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