

“Christ Jesus: Emptied and Exalted”

Philippians 2:1-13

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We’re going to talk about Jesus today. We’re going to go *really deep* on Jesus today!

Last week, we started hearing some excerpts from Paul’s letter to the Christians in the church at Philippi. Philippi was an important Roman city at the north end of the Aegean Sea that Paul visited at least twice. He had founded a church there – its first member was a woman named Lydia – and now he is writing a letter back to them, several years later. In chapter 2 he is offering them some general Christian counsel: “be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.” All of that is fairly straightforward – but then Paul suddenly launches into a pretty complex description of *who Jesus is* and *what Jesus did* and *why it matters*. These six verses are some of the most important sentences about Jesus anywhere in the entire Bible, and they merit some close attention. You’re going to want to have this passage in front of you as I walk us through this.

Now I should tell you at the outset that the biblical scholars are pretty solidly convinced that Paul is quoting here from a very early Christian hymn. Paul wrote his letter to the Philippians in about the year 60, so about 30 years have passed since Christ’s death and resurrection – three decades, during which time some Christians had already started to set their faith to music. We don’t have the music, unfortunately; we don’t know what this hymn sounded like. We probably don’t have all the lyrics, either; we don’t have any other copies of this song in any other pieces of literature, and it looks like we’re missing the beginning, like Paul bypassed the first few words. It would be like if I started talking about “that glorious song of old, from angels bending near the earth, to touch their harps of gold,” without quoting the first line of the song, “It came upon the midnight clear.” What the biblical scholars think is that this was a song that the Christians in Philippi already knew, and Paul is quoting from it to illustrate the points he is trying to make. Why do they think it was a song? Because, when you look at it closely in Greek, as they have done, it has a rhythm and a structure and that *feels* like poetry. It’s kind of a gut thing; it just *feels* like it ought to be music. For nearly a century now, virtually every biblical scholar who has looked closely at this passage has basically said, “Yep, I agree, it *feels like music*.”

Which means, these verses were probably composed some while *before* Paul wrote his letter. They may be among the *oldest* verses in the New Testament – perhaps the earliest Christian writing we have. But that’s not the only reason why they’re special. They’re also special because of what they *say*.

It begins: “... Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human

likeness.” There’s a *lot* here, in this partial little sentence. Let me walk us through it, piece by piece.

First: it says “Christ Jesus,” not “Jesus Christ”. Why? Well, that was common. Paul says “Christ Jesus” rather than “Jesus Christ” *a lot*. Remember that “Christ” was not a *name*; it was a *title*. It’s the Greek word for “Messiah.” It means “the Anointed One.” The words “Christ” and “Messiah” are interchangeable. The early Christians often put the title “Messiah” before the name “Jesus,” to emphasize that *that* is who he is. He’s not just Jesus. He’s *Christ* Jesus. He’s *Messiah* Jesus.

Second: “though he was in the form of God.” What does that mean? We’re talking here about *who Jesus was before he came to earth*. In the Gospel of John, we read, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was *with God*, and the Word *was God*. He was *in the beginning* with God.” (John 1:1-2) In Colossians, we read, “The Son is the *image* of the invisible God.” (Colossians 1:15) In the early centuries of the Church, there was a *tremendous* amount of discussion about these verses. How exactly do you *describe Jesus* before he took on human flesh? How do you describe his *relationship with God*? What does it mean that Jesus was “the *image* of God” and “in the *form* of God” and also *was God*, all at the same time? We covered this stuff in my introductory classes in theology and Christian history when I was in seminary; it gets *incredibly* complex; I was in *way* over my head; someday I’d like to find time to go back and read all that material all over again. I think I’d have a better grasp of it now than I did then. What the church ultimately settled on was the notion that Jesus Christ is *consubstantial* with God the Father. That means, he has the same *substance* that God has; they are of the same *essence*.

Third: “though he was in the form of God” – though they shared the same essence – Jesus “did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited.” Some translations say he “did not regard equality with God as something to be *grasped*.” A few translations, like the King James, use the word “robbery”: “who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God.” That’s a very literal way of rendering the Greek. The idea is that *Jesus could have taken advantage of his closeness with God*. That’s what Adam and Eve did, after all. If you go back to the story of the Garden of Eden in Genesis, when the snake tempted them with the forbidden fruit, the snake said, “when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God” (or “like gods”). Adam and Eve *grasped* at that fruit; they *wanted* the knowledge that it contained; they *took advantage* of their relationship with God. Jesus didn’t do that. Jesus had no interest in *grasping* at knowledge, at *seizing* power, at *taking advantage* of the situation, of *exploiting* his relationship with God. Jesus was *perfectly fine* just being *himself*.

Fourth: “but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.” This is Christ’s first great act of self-sacrifice. He *emptied* himself. He was in the form of God; he *took on* the form of a slave. He gave up his *divine* form to put on a *human* form. Now, his *essence* did not change. He still maintained his divine essence. But now it *looked* different. If you pour a gallon of milk into a bowl, the *milk* is still the *milk*. The *substance* hasn’t changed. But now it appears in a different *form*. It *looks different*. Jesus did not cease being *God* when he took on *human flesh*. His *substance* remained the same, even though his *form* changed. There’s a fancy word for this act of “emptying” that Jesus did; it’s the Greek word *kenosis*; my intro theology professor used that word all the time, and it took me weeks to figure out what he was talking about! If any of you decide to head off to seminary, you’re going to be a leg up on everybody else; you’re going to know what *kenosis* means – it’s that selfless act of Jesus in which he (temporarily) set aside his divine form so he could come to earth in a form *like ours*.

So Jesus, still *fully God*, also became *fully human*. Then what? The hymn goes on: “And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a

cross.” This part of the story is more familiar to us – it’s a one-sentence summary of Jesus’ *entire life!* He *humbled* himself, submitting himself to the divine will, when he had *every opportunity* to turn aside. Remember his prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane? “Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me ... yet not *my* will, but *yours* be done.” (Matthew 26:39; Mark 14:36; Luke 22:42; cf. John 6:38) He *became obedient*, all the way to his death – and not just any death, but death on a cross, death by crucifixion, a heinous and torturous form of execution used by the Romans only on the worst-of-the-worst criminals, and *never* on Roman citizens. So if you follow the movement of the hymn, Christ has gone from being at the *highest of heights* – side-by-side with God the Father Almighty! – to the *lowest of lows* – publicly executed in the most hideous and gruesome form of capital punishment that existed in that world.

But of course, that’s not the end of the story. “Therefore God also highly exalted him.” Resurrection and ascension. Christ returns from the grave back to the earth, and then from the earth back to the heavens. He had taken *two giant steps down*. Now he takes *two giant steps back up*. It is, of course, *God* who does this; *God* raises him from the dead; *God* brings him back to the heavenly realm. Jesus had *voluntarily* and *willingly* descended first to the earth, and then to death, but he does not bring *himself* back up. It is the work of almighty God, *exalting* the one who had *humbled* himself.

The hymn goes on from there: God “gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” That’s all very important, the *name* of Jesus Christ; in some translations, the word “Name” itself is capitalized. The idea here is that because of all that Jesus did for the salvation of humanity – *voluntarily*, on his *own initiative*, out of his own *humility*, because of his great *love* for all of us – God has *enthroned* him where he rightfully belongs, in the heavenly realm, and the only proper response for all those who truly understand the significance of the gift he has given us is to *get down on our knees* in joyful praise, thanksgiving, and adoration.

But what is Paul’s *point*, in quoting several lines of this all-important hymn? He had been giving the Christians in Philippi some general advice: “be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, *who ...*” – that was in Christ Jesus, who did *all that*.

It’s really quite simple. The theology is complex, but the point is remarkably simple. “*Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.*” *Have the same mindset* that Jesus did, when he willingly, voluntarily, *gave up everything he had* – except his essence – so that he could go on a *rescue mission* for the whole human race. He was in a seat of power! *He gave it up*. He was *right next to God!* He gave it up. *He was immortal!* He gave it up. He was *impervious to harm!* He gave it up. *Everything he had*, that was of any value, that would have been *prized* and *coveted* and *grasped at* by so many, *he gave up*.

Why? *Why did he give it all up?* Why did he humble himself? Why did he *empty* himself?

So he could save *you*. Because he loves ... *you*.

You want to be great? I mean, *truly* great? You want to be *powerful*? You want to sit in a lofty sit, adored and beloved by many? It doesn’t happen by *grasping*. It doesn’t happen by *exploiting*.

It begins with *humility*. It begins with *sacrifice*. It begins with *emptying*. It begins ... with *love*.

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