

The Humiliation of Christ

Scripture: Philippians 2:5–8

Code: 50-16

INTRODUCTION

Philippians 2:5-8 says, "Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."

A number of years ago the British author C.S. Lewis wrote a book he entitled *Miracles*. In the chapter called "The Grand Miracle," Lewis, in his inimitable way, described the incarnation of Christ: "In the Christian story God descends to re-ascend. He comes down; down from the heights of absolute being into time and space, down into humanity ... down to the very roots and sea-bed of the Nature He has created.

"But He goes down to come up again and bring the ruined world up with Him. One has the picture of a strong man stooping lower and lower to get himself underneath some great complicated burden. He must stoop in order to lift, he must almost disappear under the load before he incredibly straightens his back and marches off with the whole mass swaying on his shoulders.

"Or one may think of a diver, first reducing himself to nakedness, then glancing in mid-air, then gone with a splash, vanished, rushing down through green and warm water into black and cold water, down through increasing pressure into the death-like region of ooze and slime and old decay; then up again, back to colour and light, his lungs almost bursting, till suddenly he breaks surface again, holding in his hand the dripping, precious thing that he went down to recover. He and it are both coloured now that they have come up into the light: down below, where it lay colourless in the dark, he lost his colour, too.

"In this descent and re-ascent everyone will recognise a familiar pattern: a thing written all over the world. It is the pattern of all vegetable life. It must belittle itself into something hard, small and deathlike, it must fall into the ground: thence the new life re-ascends.

"It is the pattern of all animal generation too. There is descent from the full and perfect organisms into the spermatozoon and ovum, and in the dark womb a life at first inferior in kind to that of the species which is being reproduced: then the slow ascent to the perfect embryo, to the living, conscious baby, and finally to the adult.

"So it is also in our moral and emotional life. The first innocent and spontaneous desires have to submit to the deathlike process of control or total denial: but from that there is a re-ascent to fully formed character in which the strength of the original material all operates but in a new way. Death and Rebirth--go down to go up--it is a key principle. Through this bottleneck, this belittlement, the highroad nearly always lies" ([N.Y.: Macmillan, 1960], pp. 111-12).

That was how Lewis approached the incarnation, the central miracle of Christianity, which is addressed in Philippians 2:5-8. In those verses Jesus was shown to be the perfect model of humility--the perfect illustration of Paul's instructions in Philippians 2:3-4. He did nothing out of selfishness or conceit, but regarded others as more important than Himself. Yet beyond the example of Christ are the theological implications of Christ's humiliation.

LESSON

I. CHRIST WAS GOD (v. 6a)

"[Christ] existed in the form of God."

A.The Existence of Christ

Paul began by affirming that Jesus is God. That is the point where the incarnation began and from which Christ began the descent of His humiliation. The Greek word translated "existed" (huparch[ma]o) is not the common verb for being (eimi). Huparch[me]o stresses the essence of a person's nature--the continuous state or condition of something (cf. William Barclay, *The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976], p. 35). It expresses what one is unalterably and inalienably by nature. Paul's point was that Jesus Christ is unalterably and continuously existing in the form of God.

B.The Essence of Christ

1. The interpretive issue

The meaning of the Greek word translated "form" (morphe) is crucial for a proper understanding of this passage. In English we have used that word to form terms like endomorph and ectomorph. Morphe "always signifies a form which truly and fully expresses the being which underlies it" (James Hope Moulton and George Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1930], p. 417). The word describes the essential being or nature of what it refers to--in this case the essential being of God.

Morphe is better understood when compared to the Greek word schema. Both words are translated in English as "form." That's the best English word for each term, but the meaning of each is not properly represented unless a distinction is made between them.

Morphe expresses is the essential character of something--what it is in itself. Schema emphasizes outward form or appearance. What morphe expresses never changes, while what schema represents can. For example, all men possess manhood. They possess manhood from the time they are conceived until they die. That is their morphe. But the essential character of manhood is shown in various schema. At one time a man is an embryo, then a baby, then a child, then a boy, then a

youth, then a young man, then an adult, and finally an old man. The morphe of manhood remains the same, but the schema changes.

In using the word morphe in Philippians 2, Paul was saying Jesus possessed the unchangeable essential nature of God. That interpretation of the first phrase of verse 6 is strengthened by the second phrase, which says Jesus was equal with God. Being in the form of God speaks of Christ's equality to God.

2. The scriptural support

The deity of Christ is the heart and soul of the Christian faith. Inevitably when people attack the Christian faith, they attack the deity of Christ.

a) John 1:1--"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." John--under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit--began his gospel by affirming the deity of Christ.

b) John 1:3-4--John further declared Christ's deity when he wrote, "All things came into being by [Christ], and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being. In Him was life; and the life was the light of men."

c) John 1:14--Christ "became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father."

d) John 8:58--Jesus said, "Before Abraham was born, I am." Jesus appropriated to Himself the name of God, who said, "I am who I am" (Ex. 3:14).

e) Colossians 1:15-17--Paul wrote of Christ, "He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation. For in Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities--all things have been created by Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together." Christ is the Creator.

The New Testament gives many examples of His ability to create. He made fish and bread (Matt. 14:15-21), an ear (Luke 22:50-51), new legs (John 5:2-9), new eyes (Matt. 12:22), new ears (Mark 7:32-37), a new mouth (Matt. 9:32-34), and new internal organs to replace diseased ones (Mark 5:25-34)--all acts of creation. Because Christ is the Creator He is God.

f) Hebrews 1:3--"[Christ] is the radiance of [God's] glory and the exact representation of His nature." Christianity begins with the recognition that Jesus Christ is in essence the eternal God. The simple and profound truth is that God became man and we are to be servants like Him.

II. CHRIST DID NOT CLING TO HIS EQUALITY WITH GOD (v. 6b)

"[Christ] did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped."

The Greek word translated "equality" (isos) describes things exactly equal in size, quantity, quality, character, and number. The English word isomer comes from it. Isomers are chemical molecules that vary according to structure from each other, but are identical according to atomic elements and weights. We could say their forms are different while their essential character is the same. Isomorph (equal form), isometric (equal measures), and isosceles triangle (a triangle with two sides of equal measure), are all English terms descriptive of equality. Christ is equal to God, and existed in the form of God. A literal rendering of the Greek text into English is: "He did not regard the being equal with God"--a tremendous affirmation of the divinity of Christ.

The first step in the humiliation of Christ was that He did not hold on to equality with God. Yet though He did not cling to that equality, there is no question that Jesus claimed it and that the people who heard Him knew He claimed it.

A. John 5:18 -- "The Jews were seeking all the more to kill [Christ], because He not only was breaking the Sabbath, but also was calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God." Today some people want to deny that Jesus is equal to God. Yet at the time Christ lived even His worst enemies--the apostate religious leaders --didn't miss what Jesus claimed about Himself.

B. John 10:33 -- When Christ asked the leaders why they wanted to stone Him, they answered, "For a good work we do not stone You, but for blasphemy; and because You, being a man, make Yourself out to be God." They knew what He claimed.

C. John 10:38 -- Jesus said to them, "If I do [the works of the Father], though you do not believe Me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in Me, and I in the Father."

D. John 14:9 -- Jesus said to Philip, "He who has seen Me has seen the Father."

E. John 20:28 -- Thomas addressed Jesus as, "My Lord and my God."

Though He had all the rights, privileges, and honors of being God, Christ didn't grasp onto them. The word translated "grasp" originally meant "robbery" or "a thing seized by robbery." It eventually came to mean anything clutched, embraced, held tightly, prized, or clung to. Paul meant that though He was God, Christ refused to cling to His favored position with all its rights and honors, but was willing to give them up for a season.

The incredible message of Christianity is far different from the world's manmade religious systems. If you go to India you will see people trying to appease various gods so they won't be angry with them. But Christianity says that God looked down on wretched sinners who hate Him and willingly yielded His privileges to give Himself for their sake. The incarnation expresses the humility and unselfish nature of the Second Person of the Trinity.

III. CHRIST EMPTIED HIMSELF (v. 7a)

"But [Christ] emptied Himself."

Note the contrast between verses 6 and 7: Christ didn't think equality something to be grasped, but instead emptied Himself. Paul used a contrasting connective to show that being equal with God didn't lead Christ to fill Himself up, but to empty Himself.

The Greek verb translated "emptied" (keno[ma]o) is where we get the theological term kenosis: the doctrine of Christ's self-emptying as a part of His incarnation. The verb expresses Christ's self-renunciation, His refusal to cling to His advantages and privileges as God. The God who has a right to everything and who is fully satisfied within Himself emptied Himself.

What did Christ empty Himself of?

A. He Remained God

Christ did not empty Himself of His deity. He is co-existent with the Father and the Spirit, and for Him to have become less than God would have meant the Trinity would have ceased to exist. Christ could not become less than who He truly is.

Christ didn't exchange deity for humanity. Only God can die and conquer death, create, do miracles, and speak as Christ did. Christ retained His divine nature.

B. He Renounced His Privileges

1. Heavenly glory

However our Lord did give up His heavenly glory. As C.S. Lewis put it, He dove into the water and went all the way down through the black cold water to the slime and ooze of this world. That's why in John 17:5 Jesus prayed, "Glorify Thou Me together with Thyself, Father, with the glory which I had with Thee before the world was." Christ gave up the glory of a face-to-face relationship with God for the muck of this earth. He gave up the adoring presence of angels for the spittle of men. He gave up the shining brilliance of heavens glories and emptied Himself.

Every now and then on earth the glory of Christ peaked through, such as on the Mount of Transfiguration (Luke 9:28-36). There were glimpses of Christ's glory in His miracles, attitude, words, at the cross, at His resurrection, and at His ascension. But Christ emptied Himself of the continuous outward manifestation and personal enjoyment of heavenly glory.

2. Independent authority

Christ emptied Himself of His independent authority. He completely submitted Himself to the will of the Father and learned to be a servant. Philippians 2:8 says He was obedient, and we see that illustrated when He said in the garden, "Not as I will, but as Thou wilt" (Matt. 26:39). "He learned obedience from the things which He suffered" (Heb. 5:8), and affirmed that He came to do His Father's will (John 5:30)--not His own.

3. Divine prerogatives

He set aside the prerogatives of His deity--the voluntary use of His attributes. He did not stop being omniscient or omnipresent. He remained omniscient--He knew what was in man (John 2:25). He was omnipresent--though not physically present, He saw Nathaniel under a tree (John 1:45-49). He didn't give up any of His deity but He did give up the free exercise of His attributes, limiting Himself to the point of saying that He did not know the time of His second coming (Matt. 24:36).

4. Eternal riches

He gave up His personal riches. "Though He was rich, yet for [our] sake He became poor, that [we] through His poverty might become rich (2 Cor. 8:9). Christ was poor in this world; He owned very little.

5. A favorable relationship

God "made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf" (2 Cor. 5:21). As a result our Lord cried out on the cross, "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?"

Though Christ renounced all those privileges, He never ceased to be God. At any moment He could have blasted His enemies off the face of the earth, but He didn't. He voluntarily emptied Himself.

IV. CHRIST BECAME A SERVANT (v. 7b)

"[Christ took] the form of a bond-servant."

A. A Servant by Nature

When Christ emptied Himself, He not only gave up His privileges, but also became a servant. Paul used the Greek word *morphe* ("form") again to indicate that Christ's servanthood was not merely external (Gk., *schema*), but of His essence. It was not like a cloak, which can be put on and taken off. Christ was truly a servant. The only other New Testament use of the word *morphe* is in Mark 16:12. There Jesus appears in a resurrection *morphe*--a form fully expressing the nature of a resurrection body. In Philippians 2 Christ is shown as a true bondservant, doing the will of the Father. He submitted to the Father and the needs of men as well. Jesus was all that is portrayed of Him in Isaiah 52:13-14--a Messiah who was a servant.

B. A Servant by Position

As God Christ owns everything. But when He came into this world He borrowed everything: a place to be born, a place to lay His head (many nights He slept on the Mount of Olives), a boat to cross the Sea of Galilee and to preach from, an animal to ride into the city when He was being triumphantly welcomed as King of kings and Lord of lords, a room for the Passover, and a tomb to be buried in. The only person who ever lived on this earth who had the right to everything on it wound up with nothing, and became a servant. Though King of kings, and Lord of lords, the rightful heir to David's throne, and God in human flesh, He had no advantages or privileges in this world. He was given little, but served everyone. That was the incredible destiny of whom it is written, "All things came into being by Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being" (John 1:3).

V. CHRIST IDENTIFIED WITH SINNERS (v. 7c)

"[Christ was] made in the likeness [Gk., *homoi[ma]omati*] of men."

The descent of Christ continues as we move through verse 7. He was given all the essential attributes of humanity, being homogeneous to us. He was more than God in a body. He became the God-man, being fully God and fully man. Like a man, Jesus was born and increased in wisdom and physical maturity (Luke 2:52).

A. Colossians 1:22 --Christ "has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death." He had a body just as we do.

B. Galatians 4:4 --"God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law."

C. Hebrews 2:14 --"Since ... the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same." Christ had the same flesh and blood that we have. When He came into the world He came in normal human flesh that felt all the effects of the Fall. He knew sorrow, suffering, pain, thirst, hunger, and death. He felt all effects of the Fall without ever knowing or experiencing the sin of the Fall.

D. Hebrews 2:17 --Jesus "had to be made like His brethren in all things, that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest." For Christ to feel what we feel, He needed to be made like us. He experienced all the tests and temptations we do, but never gave in to sin. That's why He's such a faithful and understanding high priest.

E. Hebrews 4:15 --"We do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin."

VI. CHRIST LOOKED LIKE A MAN (v. 8a)

"[Christ was] found in appearance as a man."

At first glance that sounds like a repeat of the end of verse 7, "being made in the likeness of men." We could paraphrase verse 8 to read, "He was discovered to appear as a man." The difference between that and verse 7 is a shift in focus. Now we view the humiliation of Christ from the viewpoint of those who saw Him. Christ was the God-man, but as people looked at Him they saw the appearance (Gk., schema, "outward form") of a man. Paul was implying that though Christ appeared like a man, there was much more to Him that could not naturally be seen.

For Christ to become man was humbling enough. For Him not to be recognized must have been humiliating. He performed miracles and taught authoritatively, yet there were typical responses: "You are a Samaritan and have a demon" (John 8:48) and "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does he now say, 'I have come down out of heaven'?" (John 6:42) (because their minds were darkened by sin people recognized His humanity but missed His deity). They couldn't recognize who He really was. They not only treated the King of kings like a man, but the worst of men--a criminal.

VII. CHRIST HUMBLING HIMSELF (v. 8b)

"[Christ] humbled Himself."

Instead of fighting back, Christ humbled Himself. After all the humiliation He suffered to this point, if we had been Him we would be screaming, "That's enough! I want My rights! Don't you know who I am?!" We would have blasted everything to bits. But Christ humbled Himself.

Consider the trial of Christ. He said not a word to defend Himself through unbelievable humiliation. He admitted who He was only by agreeing with what had been asked: "You have said it yourself" (Matthew 26:64). They mocked Him, punched Him, pulled out His beard, treating Him like scum--yet He didn't say a word. He was silent and accepted man's abuse through each phase of His mock trial. He didn't demand His rights, but humbled Himself.

VIII. CHRIST WAS OBEDIENT TO THE POINT OF DEATH (v. 8c)

"[Christ was] obedient to the point of death."

At no time did our Lord say, "Stop--that's enough": not in the middle of His trial, not when He was mocked, not when forced to walk half naked through the city of Jerusalem with a cross on His back, and not even on the cross. Christ was obedient to the point of descending all the way down through the muck and slime of death that He might bring us out of death into the color of life.

IX. CHRIST DIED ON A CROSS (v. 8d)

"[Christ faced] even death on a cross."

"Even" calls attention to the most shocking feature of Christ's humiliation. Christ suffered not just death, but death on a cross--the most excruciating, embarrassing, degrading, painful, and cruel death ever devised. Crucifixion came originally from the Persians and was adopted by the Romans. It was used to execute rebellious slaves and the worst of criminals only. The Jewish people hated it because of Deuteronomy 21:23: "Anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse" (NIV). Galatians 3:13 says, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us--for it is written, 'Cursed is every one who hangs on a tree.'" The God who created the universe suffered the ultimate human degradation--hanging naked in the sky before a mocking world with nails driven through His hands and feet.

CONCLUSION

Somewhere along the path of Christ's descent you'd think He'd say to Himself, These people really aren't worth redeeming. This is too degrading and humiliating! But the grace and love of God toward sinners was such that Christ stooped to die for you and me. At the end of Paul's doctrinal survey of salvation in Romans, he said, "Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways!" (11:33). He was in awe of God's plan of salvation, something no man would have devised.

If we had planned the incarnation, we would have had Christ born in a palace. His family would have been wealthy and prominent, and He would have been educated in the finest universities with elite teachers and the finest tutors. We would have orchestrated events so that everyone loved, revered, honored, and respected Him. He would have been in all the prominent places and met all the prominent people.

We would not have Him born in a stable to a family in poverty and spend His time in a carpenter's shop in an obscure town. Rather than a rag-tag band of followers to minister with, we would have made sure He had only the best people to be His disciples--who had passed stiff qualifying tests for the privilege.

We would not have allowed Him to be humiliated. So we would have imprisoned or executed anyone who spit on Him, pulled His beard, mocked Him, or hurt Him. Our plan for the coming of the Messiah

would be very different from God's plan, and as a result, no one would be saved. It's no wonder the psalmist said, "Thy judgments are like a great deep" (Ps. 36:6). God's ways are unsearchable, His truths profound. And as deep as God's divine purpose is, it was accomplished in Christ on our behalf.

Focusing on the Facts

1. The perfect illustration of Paul's instructions in Philippians 2:3-4 was.
2. In Philippians 2:6, Paul began by affirming that Jesus Christ is.
3. What does the Greek word *morphe* mean? Why is that important?
4. How do the Greek words *morphe* and *schema* differ in meaning?
5. Is it important that Paul chose to use the Greek word *morphe* to describe Christ? Why or why not?
6. What does Colossians 1:15-17 say about Christ? What does that say about his deity?
7. What does the Greek term *isos* in Philippians 2:6 tell us about Christ?
8. What does the incarnation express about the Second Person of the Trinity?
9. When Christ emptied Himself, did He stop being God? Why or why not?
10. What did Christ give up when He emptied Himself?
11. When Christ emptied Himself, what did He taken on (Phil. 2:7)?
12. Was Jesus Christ truly a man? Why or why not?
13. By using the Greek word *schema* in verse 8, what was Paul implying about Christ?
14. Why couldn't those who knew Jesus see that He was God?
15. How far did the humility and obedience of Christ extend (Phil. 2:8)?

PONDERING THE PRINCIPLES

1. It can be easy to let the great theological truths of Philippians 2:5-8 can obscure the practical intent its context. Those truth are but an illustration of the humble attitude that is to characterize every believer (see v. 5). The Puritan Thomas Watson observed, "Love is a humble grace; it does

not walk abroad in state; it will creep upon its hands; it will stoop and submit to anything whereby it may be serviceable to Christ" (All Things for Good [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1986 reprint], p. 87). The love of Christ was such that He was humble enough to die on a cross--an excruciating obedience that brought salvation to mankind. Consider whether you are willing to humble yourself for the sake of Christ and others.

2. In Philippians 2:5-8 we see how the Savior lived and died for the glory of God. The early nineteenth-century American preacher Gardiner Spring wrote, "The cross is the emblem of peace, but it is also an emblem of ignominy and suffering: it was so to the Saviour--it is so to his followers; nor do they refuse any of its forms of reproach and suffering, but willingly endure them for the name of Christ" (The Attraction of the Cross [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1983 reprint], p. 192). Christ said that those who came after Him must take up their cross and follow Him (Matt. 16:24). In agreement with the example of Christ, have you taken up the cross of living for His honor and glory--no matter what?

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