

**Introduction:**

- A. **Illus.:** There was no question he loved her. He was absolutely bedazzled by her. Surprising, really, because she was plain, maybe even... well, (to someone else perhaps) disappointing. But then, he himself was a poor man who didn't have even two coins to rub together. He wasn't especially handsome, either. But he was good... a good and godly man, and he swept her off her feet, and won her heart. What makes that ordinary story extraordinary is the rest of the story.

The story—told by Soren Kierkegaard—actually begins, *“Suppose there was a king who loved a humble maiden.”* He was a great king and he could have whatever he wanted. Every statesman feared his wrath, every foreign state trembled before his power; they would have all sent ambassadors to the wedding.

He realized that if he asked them, his courtiers would say, *“Your majesty is about to confer a favor upon the maiden for which she can never be sufficiently grateful her whole life long.”* That was the problem! Even if she wanted to come with him, he would never know for certain if she would have loved him as an equal—loved him for himself. So he wrestled with his troubled thoughts alone. Finally he decided. If she could come up to his high station and be sure to love him freely, he must descend. And he must descend stripped of his royal power and wealth, for only then would he know if his beloved loved him freely, as equals. So he laid aside all his privileges and power, and came to her as her equal, to win her love.<sup>i</sup>

- B. Do you remember the prayer of Paul we've been studying in Eph. 3? He prayed that Christians would grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ. **Alexander Maclaren** wrote, *“How far is it from the Throne of the Universe to the manger of Bethlehem, and the Cross of Calvary, and the sepulcher in the garden? That is the depth of the love of Christ.”*<sup>ii</sup> Turn to **Phil. 2:6-11**. **Here, in this steep staircase of a passage—a kind of psalm of descents—is a measure of how deep Christ's love for us is.** This is the Christmas story seen from behind the scenes—behind the angel choir and the bright star. Here is the real story, the *rest* of the story.

**I. THE SON OF GOD DESCENDED TO SAVE AND LOVE US (2:6-8)**

- A. **V.6...** To be clear, the Greek here means *“being in the past and continuing to be in very nature God.”* God the Son cannot stop being God. Yet he *“did not consider equality with God something to be grasped;”* or as the TNIV puts it, *“...something to be used to his own advantage.”* Here we see the astonishing thought process of God's Son where he **reasoned** that though all things are his by right, he did not *have* to lay claim to all he was entitled to have. He could let them go and still be God. Though he could *do* anything he wished—he could *know* all things, be present *everywhere*, *do* anything—; and even though he deserved the worship and submission of all things he had created—he did not *have to cling to those advantages*, even though he is God. **He knew what so often escapes us—that for the sake of love, you can give up your rights and privileges without losing who you are.** Christ proved, in fact, that giving up our rights and privileges out of love is the very thing God himself has done!
- B. **V.7...** He followed through on his decision. The Greek behind this verse uses a very important word: *kenosis*, translated here, *“made himself nothing.”* Other versions say, *“He emptied himself.”* Like a man emptying his pockets, he set aside his God-abilities to know everything, to be everywhere, to do anything; he set aside his crown and with it, the obeisance of the universe; he laid down his scepter, and with it his authority to have his way. In the end, as we sing, he *“emptied himself of all but love.”*

Sometimes when we're reading the stories of Jesus' miracles in the Bible we think, *“Well, of course, he could do whatever he wanted to do. He's God!”* But that is not right. **Jesus could do no more on his own than we can do. He had laid aside all those divine prerogatives.** When he worked a miracle, he was not really showing his *power* so much as his *faith* in his Father's power to work through him, for he had relinquished his own capacities to change nature, or see the future, or raise the dead. **Jesus did**

**not give up his holiness, his infinite virtues, but he did lay aside all that lets God do whatever God wants to do.** That's what the carol means that says, "*mild he lays his glory by.*" Two steep steps down from the throne of God, and now in the next phrase, another...

- C. "Taking the very nature of a servant." Do you see how this is a poetic parallel with the first phrase, "*being in very nature God*"? It is a startling contrast. **God has always served people;** even rebellious people. What is our daily bread but God's kind service of us? But I think we would say that **his nature was to reign and rule.** He served people from his high position of infinite power and control, as a kind and generous King. But here the Son of God divests himself of all the mighty royal privileges of his God-nature, and instead fills his mind, emotions and desires with the very nature and heartbeat of a servant. A willing, bottom-of-the-ladder, whatever-I-can-do-for-you, towel-carrying, empty-pockets servant.

Jesus Christ was the servant, first, of God the Father. "*I have come to do my Father's will,*" he said. That I can understand, for there had always been among the Trinity a mutual kind of service. But he was also—incredibly—the servant of the very people he had created, and we treated him like one. Ignoring, demanding, using and abusing; never imagining that his greatest service, more lowly even than washing our feet, was to die in our place.

We believe and teach that Jesus possessed two natures—human and divine. **But is it any less amazing that the God eternally possessing the nature of a King emptied himself of that to take on the nature of a servant?**

- D. Now another step down: "Being made in human likeness" As you can see, that phrase is linked to, "*taking the very nature of a servant.*" Christ was born a man because that was the best way to serve us. The services we most needed—to have "*God with us,*" and to have God die in our place—meant he had to come to serve us in the flesh. But what a come-down! God as limited as we are. God born as a baby. God anchored to a one place, to a human mind, to the aches of the human heart. **John Donne** wrote, "*'Twas much, that man was made like God before, But that God should be made like man, much more.*"

The steps grow steeper and steeper. First, the Son of God decided to step away from his divine advantages. Then, stepping down again, he made himself nothing. Then, he took on the very nature of a servant. Then down again, being made in human likeness, the better to serve. Now another downward step...

- E. "And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and become obedient..." It is in the very nature of God to command. The Son of God had never taken an order in his eternal life! On the other hand, the most essential duty of created human beings to obey their Creator. Yet human beings do *not* obey God, as we surely should. Deep inside us rises up the protest, "*Who made you the boss of me?*" **So Jesus Christ, appearing in our world as a man with a servant's heart, humbles himself to the point of obedience.** It is humbling to be told what we must do. Even for the virtuous Jesus, obedience was hard. **Heb. 5:8-9** never ceases to amaze me: "*Although he was a son, he **learned obedience** from what he suffered and, **once made perfect**, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.*" We really only learn obedience when it is hard—in suffering. (We can barely call it obedience when we do what we already want to do.) Jesus, sweating drops of blood in the Garden of Gethsemane as he wrestled with the demands of obedience to God, was learning the hardest lesson a man has to learn—**that God must be obeyed no matter what.** Jesus had to *learn obedience in suffering* because that was the one thing the all-knowing, all-powerful Son of God had never done. As **Adam Johnson** put it to me, "*God proved that obedience is, in fact, something he himself can do.*"
- F. But the step goes lower, for obedience the Father required was that Jesus die. Could any command of God be harder to understand, let alone do? Could anything be farther from the throne of God than death, the ultimate weakness?! Could anything be less God-like than dying!?

Not only that, but death is the ultimate indignity. The best thing that anyone can say, seeing a human corpse, is, *“He looks so natural.”* Death is the shame of humanity. It is the ultimate measure of all our failures.

But there was even more at stake for Christ, for the death of the Son of God would seem to threaten the very nature of God himself, and it surely seemed to threaten the promises God had made to be fulfilled in his Messiah. But Jesus was humble servant enough to obey.

- G. Then comes the final phrase of this poem, as jarring as a smeared bloodstain, as jangling as a dropped cymbal: “even death on a cross.” There is only one step further down that the Son could take from death, and it was this *kind* of death. It was painful. It was humiliating. It was, for all appearances, a devastating defeat. **Wm. Hendriksen** wrote, *“Thus, while he was hanging on that cross, from **below** Satan and all his hosts assailed him; from **round about** men heaped scorn upon him; from **above** God dropped upon him the pallor of darkness, symbol of the curse; and from **within** there arose the bitter cry, ‘My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?’ Into this hell, the hell of Calvary, Christ descended.”*<sup>iii</sup>

SUMMARY: It is that infinitely long and steep staircase from God’s throne to the hell of the cross that stands behind the story we celebrate this Christmas. That is *the rest of the story* hiding behind Bethlehem’s star. But, of course, it is not the end of the story: **v.9-11...**

## II. GOD EXALTED HIS SON TO THE HIGHEST PLACE WHERE WE NOW WORSHIP HIM (2:9-11)

- A. Paul made up a word here in v.9, translated as *“exalted him to the highest place.”* That’s one Greek word and you can almost *hear* its meaning: *hyper-upsomen*. Hyper-exalted! Jesus Christ returned to the throne he once surrendered with even greater glory than he had before. How is that possible? Because he returned, not only as the Son of God, but also as the Son of Man. He was vaulted to heaven’s highest place as the Pioneer Resurrection Man, the Second Adam. What’s more, he carried with him his **obedience** learned in suffering so that he might sympathize with us as our High Priest when we pray for help in our suffering. But more, for he returned in his **Servant nature** blended as one with his Royal nature, both in this one Messiah, so that Jesus Christ lives forever to serve. What an astonishing thing for God to be!
- B. *“God gave him the name that is above every name.”* Once he was named the Son of God, but he returns as Jesus Christ. *Jesus—‘God saves’—“for he will save his people from their sins.”* Christ—Messiah, God’s anointed King. And that name is freighted with more glory, more honor, more meaning than *any* other name in heaven and earth. Long ago a songwriter wrote, *“How sweet the name of Jesus sounds in the believer’s ear!”* In that beautiful name lies all the saving graces of God, all the tender mercies of the heavenly Father, all the strong help of the LORD Almighty, all the understanding sympathy of the Son of Man, all the passionate love of our Bridegroom, and all the steadfast forgiveness of the Friend of sinners.
- C. **Vv.10,11...** That is the day when all shall be made right, for there is nothing more right, more true, more necessary in all this world than that all bow to the name of Jesus, and all confess that he is Lord. The truth has been muffled too long. For too long Satan has been loudly lying that men can be like God. For too long kings and presidents and generals have proclaimed their own greatness. For too long we have ballyhooed the virtues of athletes and actors, of soldiers and scholars. For too long men have trumpeted empty philosophies, petty platitudes and unkeepable promises. For too long, the name of Jesus Christ has been unmentionable; unwelcome in the conversations of men, except when they searched for an empty oath or a punctuating curse. For too long!

**But the time is coming when the truth will be told!** The cacophony of unbelief will be silenced. No more of this equivocating, shushing, doubting, cursing, denying or defying. For 2000 years the church’s most basic creed has been **Jesus Christ is Lord**. But it has always been a creed shouted into the world’s roar, drowned out in the clamor, intimidated by the tumult. But no more. No more!

**For when the door of heaven finally swings open for all to see, when eyes are opened, when the last battle is won, and Christ has triumphed;** when the church has been brought to her Bridegroom, and the accounts have been settled, *then* from every corner of creation, from heaven's courts and hell's dungeons, from 10,000 languages of men and angels, even from the creation itself which has groaned with waiting for his appearing, will rise one unison declaration: **Jesus Christ is Lord!**  
And God the Father will shine and rejoice!

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<sup>i</sup> *Philosophical Fragments*, Chapter 2: The God as Teacher and Saviour: An Essay of the Imagination; <http://www.religion-online.org/showchapter.asp?title=2512&C=2380>

<sup>ii</sup> A. Maclaren, *Ephesians*, p.168

<sup>iii</sup> W. Hendriksen, *Philippians*, p.113