

THE INCARNATION OF CHRIST

by Mike Burnham

A study of Philippians 2:5-11

What do we mean when we speak of the incarnation? This word is not found in the Bible but is a theological term that expresses the idea that in some sense God, without ceasing to be God, was made man.

Let's notice first our passage's connection with the preceding context. Paul has been encouraging believers at Philippi to *"stand fast in one spirit, with one soul, striving for the faith of the Gospel."* (Philippians 1:27). He pleads with them by every motive of Christian fellowship, not the least of which is their affection for himself, *"to be of the same mind, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind."* (Philippians 2:1-2). He goes on in verses three and four describing a mind that is different from that of common man.

Paul then proceeds to enforce his words by setting forth our Lord Himself as the supreme example of humility, self-sacrifice, and love (Philippians 2:5). He is thus led to speak upon one of the deepest and holiest mysteries of the Christian Faith (1 Timothy 3:16), the Incarnation of the Son of God, His voluntary self-abasement, His obedience *"even unto death, even the death of the cross."* The thing to keep in mind is that the Incarnation and human life of Jesus are set before us as the perfect example of the principle taught in verse four, *"Not looking each to his own things, but each also to the things of others."*

In verse six, Paul takes us back to the position which Jesus occupied in His pre-existence in eternity past. He shows us that supreme dignity and glory was His.

"Who (Jesus), being in the form of God"... First of all, Christ did not cease to be *"in the form"* of God when He became human. God doesn't have a body so the word form cannot refer to any physical aspect. *"Who being"* points to His Self-existence, He always was and is in the form of God. His being in the form of God intends that he is really and truly God; that he partook of the same nature with the Father, and was possessed of the same glory. The divine nature actually and inseparably subsisted in the Person of Christ. The Son of God could not possibly divest Himself of *"the form of God"* at His incarnation without ceasing to be God.

Secondly, these words *"Who being in the form of God"* affirms the absolute deity of the Son, for no mere creature could ever be *"in the form of God."*

"...Thought it no robbery to be equal with God;" the Father. Some believe that to be *"in the form of God"*, and to be *"equal with God"*, signify the same thing. But, whatever Paul is talking about, it has to be something that can be changed or be divested of because "But" as in but on the contrary, of verse seven expresses a direct contrast to what has gone before. God is immutable and in His person cannot change. For instance, God is holy; this can never change or He would cease to be God.

I believe that Paul is talking about equality of majesty, of glory, and of the prerogatives of Deity. Christ Jesus, in that present existence, didn't regard this equality with God of majesty, of glory, and of the prerogatives of Deity as something to be grasped with the greed of a robber, a prize or treasure to be held fast, but, on the contrary, He emptied Himself of this high dignity, or laid all that aside, and entered upon a new existence in the likeness of man and became our supreme example of humility. We can also

see the truth of this by His prayer in John 17:5. He prayed to be restored the glory that He possessed in His pre-existent state. The same glory that is possessed by the Father -- glory, majesty, honour, etc.

Verse 7 "*...But made himself of no reputation,*" are the same Greek words and mean "to empty or to make empty." Christ Jesus emptied himself of His high state of glory and majesty and took upon Him a lower existence or state, that of a servant, a state lower (inferior) than the angels (Hebrews 2:9). We might say that He became as poor as a beggar as He laid aside His riches of glory (2 Corinthians 8:9).

The "*form of a servant*" is here contrasted with "*the form of God.*" In comparison with God every creature has the form of a servant and is bound to obedience toward God. That's why we read in verse eight that Jesus "*became obedient*", namely, to God the Father. What is man but a servant of God his creator? He was born under the law, to redeem them that were under the law (Galatians 4:4-5). Also, "*form of a servant*" has the same essential meaning as "*the form of God.*" In the form of God Christ Jesus was by nature God, and when He took upon Him the form of a servant He was also by nature man. He who in pre-existence lived in a condition of divine glory condescended to assume the enslaved condition of our humanity.

Verse 8 "*...And being found in fashion as a man,...*" Found in fashion declares what Christ appeared to be in the eyes of men. Men saw in Jesus a human form, born of woman. He became hungry, thirsty, weary, felt pain, grief, sorrow, and death itself. In every way, a man is recognized and known as man. In this fashion, He was seen as a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.

"*...He humbled himself,...*" This marks a further step in that self-humiliation which began when He emptied Himself of His God-like majesty and glory. Both acts were voluntary, both sprang from the same mind and spirit of loving self-sacrifice, and both were accompanied by the same self-

consciousness of deity, implied by the fact that He was still subsisting in the form of God. It is this continuous self-consciousness of the Son of God that gives the true measure of His transcendent humility. By transcendent I mean that His humility was far above and beyond any humility a created creature could attain.

"...and became obedient unto death,..." He was obedient to the ceremonial law, to circumcision, the Passover, etc. to the moral law, to all the precepts of it, which he fulfilled out of love; and to the penalty of the trespass against it - death -which he voluntarily bore in the room and stead of his people. Reminds me of Romans 5:19: *"for as through the disobedience of the one man many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one many shall be made righteous."*

"...even the death of the cross." The supreme and final depth of Christ's self-humiliation was in submitting to His shameful death of the cross. The connection of death and sin must have made death all the more awful to our sinless Lord, especially when you find out that He humbled Himself just to behold the things that are in heaven and in the earth (Psalms 113:4-6). It was no ordinary death, but a death accursed in the eyes of the Jews (Deuteronomy 21:23; Galatians 3:13). When Paul quotes Deuteronomy 21:23, he does not mean that a man is cursed by God because he is hanged, but that death by hanging was the outward sign in Israel of a man who was cursed by God. He was, in fact, hanged because he had broken the law, and this brought both curse and punishment.

THE EXALTATION OF CHRIST

In the section we just studied, Christ is the acting subject, in this second section it is God who acts and Christ is the object of the divine action. We will see two major transitions: (1) Humiliation to Exaltation; and (2) Servant to Lord.

Verse 9 "*Wherefore...*" takes us back to the preceding verses and gives us the reason why Christ is to be highly exalted - because of His self-sacrificing love, and His self-humiliation even to the death of the cross.

"...God also hath highly exalted him,..." Paul proceeds to observe the exaltation of Christ for the encouragement of meek and humble souls; that whereas Christ, who so exceedingly debased himself, was afterwards highly exalted by God (Acts 2:32-33; 3:13; 5:30-31). So all such who, in imitation of him, behave to one another in lowliness of mind (Philippians 2:3) shall be exalted in God's due time (Romans 8:16-17). This exaltation of Jesus applies to His human nature only (Daniel 7:9-14). There is a contrast here between Christ's earthly condition as a servant and His highly exalted position. His Godly nature was already supreme though He prayed to the Father to restore unto Him the glory that He had before the world was and that He had laid aside when He became the Son of Man speaking of majesty, honor, etc.

"...and given him a name which is above every name;..." What is the name which is above every name? In light of verse eleven, the supreme name is that of 'Lord.' The root meaning of this word (Greek: kurios) denotes ruler ship. It is used in the LXX (Septuagint), which was used in the time of Jesus to translate the divine name Jehovah (Yahweh). The humanity of Christ was exalted to that of equality with the Godhead, and He sits at the right hand of the Father (Ephesians 1:20-22; Hebrews 1:3); no longer a little lower than the angels (Hebrews 1:4-6); having all authority (Matthew 28:18; John 3:35); the judge of the living and the dead (John 5:25-29 (notice the reason Jesus is given authority to execute judgment, He is the Son of Man); Acts 10:42; 17:31), the King of kings, and the Lord of lords (1 Timothy 6:15; Revelation 17:14).

Verse 10 "*That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,..."* Paul quotes this verse from Isaiah 45:23. Reading from verse twenty-one, we can see it is the LORD, Jehovah, Yahweh, who is speaking.

"...at the name of Jesus," What name? It can't be the utterance of the name, Jesus, that Paul is talking about. It is a common name among man, in the Old Testament, the New Testament, and today. In Hebrew, the name Jesus means "Jehovah is Salvation." This is the name above every name.

"...every knee should bow..." Bow as a sign of humbleness, in honor, adoration, and worship, homage given to Him who is worthy.

"...of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth." The universal authority of Jesus is expressed in this phrase. Angels, man, and devils will bow to Him. Even all creation (Ephesians 1:21-22).

Verse 11 *"And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,..."* Perfect God and Perfect Man united forever in One is worshipped and adored and acknowledged as Lord, their owner, ruler and sovereign. This is why everyone will bow the knee. We see the picture in Revelation 5:9-14.

"...to the Glory of God the Father.", from whom, as the original source, the whole scheme of salvation proceeds, is the supreme and ultimate object of the Savior's incarnation. In Jesus' life, the Father was glorified (John 17:4). Jesus glorified the Father in death (John 12:23; 17:1; 21:19). Jesus glorified the Father when the Father exalted Him.