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EXALTING CHRIST AT CHRISTMAS

PHILIPPIANS 2:5-11

LET THIS MIND BE IN YOU, WHICH WAS ALSO IN CHRIST Jesus: (6) Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: (7) But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: (8) And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. (9) Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: (10) That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; (11) And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,

My dear reader and Christian brother or sister, have you ever been struck by the staggering paradoxes (if not outright contradictions) of the so-called Christmas season? Have you ever been struck by the strange combination of Christianity with a carnival mentality? How about the humility and poverty of the stable that is confused with the wealth and indulgence of selfishness and gift giving? How about the quietness of Bethlehem with the racket and chaos of the shopping mall? How about the *seriousness* of the incarnation compared to the *silliness* of the party spirit? How about the blinking colored lights compared to the star of heaven? How about the cheap toys of today compared to the priceless gifts of the wise men? Or how about angels being confused with flying reindeer? Or how about even the filth of a stable being confused with a so-called “White Christmas” as we sit in front of the fireplace with our stockings hung from the mantle?

Now, if all that does not strike us that something is wrong, how about the following, which appeared in *The Episcopal News - The Diocese of Los Angeles*, written by a Reverend Ben-nison, rector of St. Mark's Church in Upland, California?

There are few causes to which I am more passionately committed than that of Santa Claus. Santa Claus deserves not just any place in the church but the highest place of honor where he should be enthroned as the long bearded ancient of days, the divine and holy one whom we call God.

Santa Claus is God the Son. “You better watch out, you better not pout, Santa Claus is coming to town, he knows whether you’ve been bad or good, he slips into the secrets of the heart as easily as he slips down the chimney.” Santa Claus is God the Father, the creator of heaven

and earth in whose hand is a pack bursting at its seams with the gifts of His creation. Santa Claus is God the Holy Spirit who comes with the sound of gentle laughter, with the shape like a bowl full of jelly. And he comes in the night to sow the seeds of good humor. Santa Claus indeed deserves the exalted and enthroned place in the church for he is God the Son, God the Father, and God the Holy Spirit. I’ve seen him in the toy store, I even saw him in his car on the freeway the other day. And when I saw him with his crazy beard and his baggy suit, I saw more than the seasonal merchant of cheap plastic toys, I saw no less than the triune God. I hope you can see him too.

Does that appall you? In all my own years of ministry, I have read few things that equal that kind of blasphemy!

So, while it is almost certain that December 25 is *not* the day on which Christ was born, it is nonetheless the day that has been chosen to celebrate that event (even though, sadly, it was actually chosen to coincide with the pagan holiday of Saturnalia). But even at that, it has oddly become acceptable to do so. We therefore do so here but with an emphasis far different than the norm of our day. What *should* this day be about? Not about lights, gifts, Santa, or anything such thing. *It SHOULD be about exalting Christ.*

The passage before us does just that. In some ways this paragraph really stands in unapproachable majesty. This is one of the pure jewels in the Scriptures, “the most conspicuous and magnificent of the dogmatic utterances of the New Testament.”¹ Its beauties and depths are beyond human comprehension, yet it is necessary to understand, at least to the degree that is possible by the aid of the Holy Spirit. For Paul himself, it is the most comprehensive and moving statement he ever wrote about Jesus. It sweeps us along from Christ’s *inherent* glory in eternity past, to His *incarnate* purpose on earth, to His *infinite* exaltation in eternity future. The idea of exaltation is, in fact, at the core of the passage. The words **highly exalted** translate a Greek word that appears only here in the NT and whose full idea is “to elevate above others, raise to the highest position.”²

So, again, of all the times of the year—when we boast that “Jesus is the *reason* for the *season*”—this should be the one when Christ is **highly exalted** instead of being a *footnote* in

the shadow of all the *festivities*. This passage is, in fact, a mini-course in Christology. It teaches the divinity of Christ, his eternal preexistence, his equality with God the Father, his incarnation, his full humanity, his voluntary death on the cross, the certainty of his victory over evil, and the eternalness of his reign.

This passage has also been called “The Great Parabola of Scripture.” A parabola is an arc, where you start at a low point, go up to the highest point, and then come back down. When you shoot an arrow, for example, or hit a golf ball, it arcs up into the air, reaches its highest point, and comes back down, thus following the path of a parabola. In our Lord’s case, however, it is reversed: He started at the highest point (heaven, vv. 5–6), descended to the lowest point (earth, vv. 7–8) to die on the Cross for our sins, and returned to the highest point where He is exalted in glory (vv. 9–11).

Let us, therefore, meditate on this passage by exalting Christ in three areas: His person, purpose, and position.

Exalting His Person (vv. 5–8a)

Verse 5 sets the stage for the rest of the passage. The context (vv. 1–4) speaks of the unity of God’s people and the humility that each should demonstrate. The greatest example of this, of course, and the one we should emulate, is **Christ Jesus**. It is not by accident that Paul uses that great Messianic title. **Christ**, of course, is *Christos*, which means *anointed*, a term used in the OT to apply to anyone anointed with holy oil, primarily to the high priesthood (Lev. 4:5; 4:16). In answer to Jesus’ question of who the disciples thought He was, Peter answered: “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God” (Matt. 16:16). He testified, in effect: “You are the long awaited, repeatedly prophesied Anointed One, the people’s Greatest Prophet (Deut. 18:15, 18; Acts 3:22; 7:37), Only High Priest (Ps. 110:4; Heb. 6:20; 7:24), and Eternal King (Ps. 2:6; Zech. 9:9; Lk. 1:33).

In-turn, the name **Jesus** appears almost 900 times in the NT. It translates the Greek *Iēsous*, which in-turn is a transliteration of the Hebrew *Yeshua*, meaning “He will save” or “Jehovah is salvation.” While there has been (and still is) much debate about who Jesus was, this name erases all doubt in the believing heart—He was Jehovah God who came in the flesh (Jn. 1:1, 14).

There are two words here that are absolutely essential in understanding the person of **Christ Jesus**: **form** (v. 6) and **fashion** (v. 8). To the causal reader they appear to be just synonyms meaning basically the same thing, but they are in reality very different. **Form** (*morphē*) refers to the inward essential nature of a person that never changes. It’s used here both of Jesus as God in verse 6—the **[nature] of God**—and as a servant in verse 7—the **[nature] of a servant**. This is among the strongest statements in Scripture of the deity of Christ. This word unambiguously states that no one could be in the **form** (nature) of God if he were not, in fact, God. In contrast, the word **fashion** (v. 8) is *schema* (Eng. “scheme”), which refers to outward shape or appearance that can change from time to time. A human being, for example, is *morphē* in his or her **form** (nature), but in his or her *schema*, the **fashion** (appearance) can be an infant, toddler, adolescent, or adult.

To further underscore our Lord’s deity, Paul adds that Je-

sus is **equal with God** (v. 6). **Equal** (*isos*) means alike in quantity, quality, or dignity. This is, in fact, where we get the mathematical term “isosceles triangle,” one that has two sides of equal length.

Paul goes on to tell us that **Christ Jesus** was also the quintessential example of a **servant**, as He took on the **form** of a servant. But he adds something else: Jesus **was made in the likeness of men** (v. 7). The Greek behind **likeness** is another that is essential for the proper understanding of the incarnation of Christ. It is *homoïoma*, which means shape, similitude, or resemblance, that which is made like something else. Jesus was not a phantom, a close copy, or a clone. He was in every way human. He had human appearance, personality (intellect, emotion, and will), and even physical needs. He was, in fact, “in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin” (Heb. 4:15). He was what man was (and was supposed to remain) in the Garden of Eden.

What an exalting of **Christ Jesus** this is! He was both fully God and fully human. The teaching that insists Jesus emptied Himself of His deity is gross heresy and exposes an unregenerate heart (Jn. 8:24). Paul places the two realities side-by-side: *morphē theou* (**form of God**) and *morphē doulos* (**form of a servant**). As one commentator well says: “Christ’s incarnation was not an emptying of Himself of His deity, but a clothing of Himself in humanity—in order to be a servant.”³

There has been some debate concerning the rendering of the Greek behind verse 6: **Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God**. The Greek for **robbery** comes from a verb that means “to seize upon with force, to snatch or clutch.”⁴ One view, which is based on our AV rendering, says that Jesus did not need to seize or snatch at equality with God because He already had that by inherent and eternal right. Others (based upon the modern translation: “did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped” [NASB]) insist that it means, “He did not clutch at equality with God, as if to hug it jealously to himself, but laid it willingly down for the sake of men.”⁵ In either case, however, the result is the same. **Christ Jesus** is exalted in both His eternal Godhood and essential manhood.

Before we leave this first principle, it is amazing to observe how this passage parallels the emphasis of all four Gospels. As one commentator masterfully points out, Paul’s use of the messianic term **Christ Jesus** points us immediately to *Matthew*, for he wrote to Jews to convince them that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah. Jesus’ coming in **the form of a servant** points us to *Mark*, since he wrote primarily to Romans to picture Christ as the Servant of Yahweh. Jesus’ being **made in the likeness of men** directs our attention to *Luke*, for his audience was chiefly Greeks to depict Christ as the perfect man and, therefore, Savior. Finally, Jesus’ coming in **the form of a God** points us to *John*, whose Gospel presented Christ to the world in His full deity.⁶

Exalting His Purpose (v. 8b)

The word “cross” appears 26 times in the NT. The culmination of all four Gospel records of our Lord’s life, of course, is His death on the Cross. As one commentator astutely points out, in fact, each one devotes much of its content to the last week of His life: two-fifths of Matthew; three-fifths of Mark,

one-third of Luke; and almost one-half of John.⁷ Further, the Cross is the central theme of all Scripture, even the OT. Everything in the sacrifices foreshadowed the Cross. Further, as Jesus Himself said to the disciples on the road to Emmaus:

Then he said unto them, O fools, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken: Ought not Christ to have suffered these things, and to enter into his glory? And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself (Lk. 24:25–27).

Beginning even in Genesis 3:15, in fact, the Cross was in view as God declared: “I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel.” In blazing clarity, Isaiah affirmed:

Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel (7:14).

For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace (9:6).

Daniel likewise declared:

Seventy weeks are determined upon thy people and upon thy holy city, to finish the transgression, and to make an end of sins, and to make reconciliation for iniquity, and to bring in everlasting righteousness, and to seal up the vision and prophecy, and to anoint the most Holy. Know therefore and understand, that from the going forth of the commandment to restore and to build Jerusalem unto the Messiah the Prince [shall be] seven weeks, and threescore and two weeks: the street shall be built again, and the wall, even in troublous times. And after threescore and two weeks shall Messiah be cut off, but not for himself: and the people of the prince that shall come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary; and the end thereof shall be with a flood, and unto the end of the war desolations are determined (Dan 9:24–26).

Zechariah also stated: “Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, and against the man that is my fellow, saith the LORD of hosts: smite the shepherd, and the sheep shall be scattered: and I will turn mine hand upon the little ones” (13:7).

In dramatic contrast, “the cross is not a popular subject in human thinking. It was a hideous and humiliating death meant for criminals, as the words **even the death of the cross** imply. Paul’s readers would have immediately understood the stigma and other implications. So, for God to send His Son to such a death—as it is argued by some today who even call themselves evangelicals—makes Christianity a ‘slaughterhouse religion’ and even makes God a blood-thirsty barbarian. The Cross, they insist, was simply an example of sacrifice and servanthood that we should follow. Such reinvention of the Christian Faith is, of course, gross apostasy. Jesus Himself unambiguously declared, “This is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins” (Matt. 26:28). Paul wrote that Christ was sent to be ‘a propitiation through faith in his blood’ (Rom. 3:25).⁸

So, how, then, is Christ exalted in this kind of death? The answer is because **he humbled himself**. **Humbled** is *tapeinoō*, “to bring low, abase, or humiliate.” The very idea of belittling and humiliating oneself is abhorrent to all of us. No human who understood crucifixion would choose such a death in himself. To, therefore, actually voluntarily choose to be crucified was a supernatural act.

What an example this is for us! Do you understand? Do you realize that choosing to humble yourself is a “supernatural choice”? We live in an age of “self.” Everything is driven by personal feelings and wants, sadly, even among professing Christians. The last thing anyone chooses in our day is humility. Our Lord Himself, however, declared: “whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted” (Matt. 23:12). Our Lord also uses *tapeinoō* here. Later in this letter to the Philippians (4:12), Paul wrote: “I know . . . how to be abased,” which is again *tapeinoō*. How did Paul know this? Because His example was Christ Himself. Peter also used the same word when he wrote (1 Pet. 5:5–6): “God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble. Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time.” Peter of all people understood the supernatural change that must come before one can be humble. James likewise used this word: “Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up” (4:10). *So, let us, indeed, exalt our Lord in His purpose!*

Exalting His Position (vv. 9–11)

To illustrate once again “The Great Parabola of Scripture,” one commentator outlines our text this way: The Sovereign (v. 6); The Servant (v. 7); The Sacrifice (v. 8); and finally The Sovereign Again (vv. 9–11).⁹ So, as the arc of “The Great Parabola of Scripture” returns to Heaven, we see our Sovereign Savior exalted above all else. There is no passage of Scripture that better declares the exaltation of our Lord than does the opening verses of Hebrews (1:1–3, 6, 8):

God . . . Hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds; Who being the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person, and upholding all things by the word of his power, when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high; . . . And again, when he bringeth in the firstbegotten into the world, he saith, And let all the angels of God worship him. . . . But unto the Son [he saith], Thy throne, O God, [is] for ever and ever: a sceptre of righteousness is the sceptre of thy kingdom.

We also cannot help but be reminded of John’s vision of heaven in Revelation 5:11–12:

And I beheld, and I heard the voice of many angels round about the throne and the beasts and the elders: and the number of them was ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands; Saying with a loud voice, Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing.

So, let us note four features of Christ’s exaltation in our text.

The Root of His Exaltation (2:9a)

Wherefore obviously refers back to the verses we have just examined. In the shadow of our Lord's horrendous humiliation, the Father brought Him back to heaven in magnificent exaltation. While the natural man exalts himself, true *exaltation* comes only through *humiliation*. As noted earlier, the full idea in **highly exalted** is "to elevate above others, raise to the highest position" and is the only place in the NT that the Greek word appears. The *Servant* has now returned to His rightful place as *Sovereign*. He who was *mocked* has now returned to His *magnificence*. He who was *crucified* has now been *coronated*. As Paul wrote elsewhere:

[The Father] raised [Christ] from the dead, and set him at his own right hand in the heavenly places, Far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come: And hath put all things under his feet, and gave him to be the head over all things to the church, Which is his body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all (Eph. 1:20-23).

The Right in His Exaltation (2:9b)

Here is a staggering truth. As I meditated upon this, I was a bit overwhelmed. What **name** is Paul referring to here? What **name** has the Father **given** (i.e., graciously, wholeheartedly bestowed¹⁰) the Son? We know many of His names and titles: Jesus; Christ; The Son of God; The Son of Man; The Only Begotten; I Am; The Bread of Life; The Light of the World; The Door; The Good Shepherd; The Resurrection and the Life; The Way, The Truth, and The Life; The Vine; The Alpha and Omega; The Lamb of God; The Cornerstone; The Prince and Perfecter of Faith; The Savior; The Bridegroom, The Carpenter, and The Word.

So what **name** does Paul mean? The answer does not come immediately. Whatever that name is, however, it **is above every other name**. It excels all others known to human language in its character, dignity, honor, power, and position. This name, as we will see, places Christ in His rightful place. That leads us, then, immediately to our third feature.

The Response to His Exaltation (2:10-11a)

Verse 10 provides another clue to the **name** "which is above every name." At this name, every single **knee** in the universe is going to **bow**. This will be the fulfillment, in fact, of Isaiah's prophecy: "Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth: for I am God, and there is none else. 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" (45:22-23). Paul expounds on that very truth by specifying three classes of beings who will bow before Messiah. *First*, those **in heaven** will bow, which includes all the redeemed saints who are there as well as the 10,000 times 10,000 angels who are there (Rev. 4:8-11; 5:8-12). *Second*, those **in earth** will bow, which includes both believers and unbelievers who are still on this planet. *Third*, those **under the earth** will bow, which includes the exact opposite of those **in heaven**; these are the unbelievers and fallen angels who are now in hell awaiting final judgment and eternal punishment.

Ah, but Paul is not done yet! Not only will all creatures

bow before this name, but **every tongue** will also **confess** it. **Tongue** is *glossa*, which is used many times to refer to human language. So, every single individual, whatever his or her language or ethnicity, will **confess** Christ. The Greek behind **confess** literally means "to say the same words."¹¹ So, every individual who admits the truth, will actually agree with God on who Christ is. Think of it! Every being in the universe, in one way or another, will bow before Christ and acknowledge who He is. The believer will do it in adoration, while the unbeliever will be forced to do it even in his rebellion.

Paul finally reaches the climax to which he has been building. What is the **name** that is above all others? At what name will all creatures **bow** and **confess**? It is not **Jesus**, as wonderful as that name is. This was actually a common name and implied no superiority. The name, of course, is **Lord**.

The significance of this word cannot be overemphasized. The great title **Lord** (*kurios*) was the number one confession of the early Church, the title of *majesty, authority, honor, and sovereignty*. As Peter declared, "Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ" (Acts 2:36). Paul elsewhere proclaimed the essential doctrine of the Lordship of Christ in salvation: "If thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved" (Rom. 10:9). Contrary to popular teaching, salvation does *not* come first and then lordship later when we decide to obey. One who does not acknowledge Jesus as ruling Lord who they now obey is not a believer. In fact, because the natural man will never submit to the Lordship of Christ, Paul reminded the Corinthians, "No man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Ghost" (1 Cor. 12:3). Later he added, "If any man love not the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be Anathema Maranatha" (16:22). What does "Maranatha" mean? It's two Aramaic words (*maran atha*) that intensifies "Anathema" (devoted to destruction) and points to the approaching judgment of that very **Lord** when He returns. Is it any wonder that Jesus is called **Lord** more than 700 times, 92 of which are in the book of Acts where He is called "Savior" only twice? The so-called "Lordship Controversy" should never have arisen. Without Lordship there is no salvation.

Finally, this name **Lord**, in fact, will be further expanded, as the Apostle John declares: "And he hath on his vesture and on his thigh a name written, KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS" (Rev. 19:16). And so it is, as John Gill well said:

The holy angels confess him to be Lord, and their Lord truly, and are unfeignedly subject to him; and true believers heartily own him as their Lord, and cheerfully submit to his commands and ordinances; and the foolish virgins, and the goats on Christ's left hand, will, at the last day, call him Lord, Lord; and the worst of men, yea, even devils, will be obliged to own his lordship and dominion.¹²

The Reason for His Exaltation (2:11b)

As with everything else, the reason for all of this is God's glory. That dear pastor and expositor James Montgomery Boice offers us this mini-masterpiece:

This is not true of any honor given to humans. If you

glorify human beings, you dishonor God. You do so if you exalt yourself or your merits as a means of salvation, or exalt human beings as mediators between yourself and God, as saints who win God's favor for you, or exalt human wisdom as that which is ultimately able to solve the world's problems, or place your hopes for the future in psychiatry, science, systems of world government, or whatever it may be. If you exalt the ability of mankind in any of those ways, you dishonor God, who declares that all of our works are tainted by sin and that we will never solve our own problems or the problems of others except by turning to Christ and depending upon his power to do it. *The only way to honor God is to give honor to Jesus Christ.*¹³

So, my dear Christian friend, let us pray together that at this time of year we will exalt our Savior and *nothing* else.

Dr. J. D. Watson
Pastor-Teacher, Grace Bible Church
Director, Sola Scriptura Publications, a ministry of GBC

NOTES

- ¹ Handley C. G. Moule, *Philippian Studies: Lessons in Faith and Love* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1897, n.d.), 97.
- ² This is *hyperupsoō*. The root *hupsoō* simply means "to elevate," but the prefix *huper* intensifies it dramatically. It means "over, above, or beyond."
- ³ John Philipps, *Exploring Ephesians and Philippians: An Expository Commentary* (Kregal, 1995), 81.
- ⁴ This is *harpagmos*, which appears only here in the NT and comes from the verb *harpazō*.
- ⁵ William Barclay, *Daily Study Bible*, note on Phil. 2:5–11.
- ⁶ See Philipps' full discussion, 85–88.
- ⁷ James Boice, *Philippians* (Baker, 1971), comment on Phil. 2:8).
- ⁸ This paragraph taken from the author's *Seek Him Early*, 248.
- ⁹ Lehman Strauss, *Devotional Studies In Philippians* (Loizeauz, 1959), 111–116).
- ¹⁰ The Greek is *charizomai*.
- ¹¹ **Confess** is *exomologeō* an intensified form of *homologeō* (*homo*, "same," and *logos*, "word").
- ¹² *John Gill's Exposition of the Bible*.
- ¹³ Boice, *Philippians* (emphasis added).

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A Ministry of
Grace Bible Church
P.O. Box 235
Meeker, CO 81641
www.TheScriptureAlone.com
dwatson@thescripturealone.com
A F.I.R.E. Church
www.FireFellowship.org

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