

Trinity College of the Bible

Our Lord Made Lowly

Main Assignment

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NT 317: Readings in Pauline Literature I I

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The Apostle Paul had a unique role in the Kingdom of God that was bestowed upon him by Christ. While the disciples began their ministry in Jerusalem, Christ specifically charged Paul with the task of spreading the gospel to the Gentiles, and he was obedient. In the midst of his missionary journeys he encountered many hardships, but he succeeded in fulfilling the charge that Christ gave him: he established multiple churches throughout the Roman Empire and preached the gospel to all who would hear. At the epicenter of the message that Paul shared was the testimony of Jesus Christ of Nazareth—for without him, there would be no gospel. In his letter to the church of Philippi, Paul wrote:

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on the cross.¹

In order to understand Paul’s assertion that Christ was in the form of God, one must acknowledge that Jesus Christ (the Son of God) existed in eternity prior to his earthly life. There are many passages that support Paul’s claim of Christ’s preeminence. For example, the Apostle John states, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made.”² In this passage, John replaces Christ’s name with the Greek word *λογος*.³ His bold replacement is tantamount to proclaiming Jesus as the word of life, as the Greek translation in this passage means “the divine WORD.”⁴ In addition, the author of

¹ *The Holy Bible (esv)* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2016), 1462.

² *Ibid.*, 1327.

³ Dirk Jongkind, *The Greek New Testament* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2017), 175.

⁴ William D. Mounce, *The Analytical Lexicon to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1993), 303.

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Hebrews writes: “but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power.”⁵ Paul further elaborates on Christ’s divine nature in his letter to the Colossians:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.⁶

Paul goes on to note that despite Christ’s glorified, exalted state of existence, he did not count equality with God as a thing to be grasped, and therefore emptied himself in order to obtain mortality and all that it encompasses. For a moment, attempt to imagine the unfathomable humility of Christ! Until his birth, he existed in the heavenly dimension of existence, where all is beautiful, pure, and without corruption. Day in and day out he was worshiped by the angels! Yet, the eternal logos, the active reagent for all of creation, did not cling to his exalted state.

While it has been made clear that Christ emptied himself willingly, it is crucial to recognize that Christ did *not* surrender his deity! Instead, he gave up his physical proximity to God the Father, the angels' songs of praise and constant accolades, and the perfect state of existence in which he dwelled to confine himself to a human body in a sin-infested world. First, imagine how dirty one feels after going a few days without bathing. Now, multiply that feeling times infinity; perhaps, that is how dirty Christ felt as he chose to walk amongst sinners in a world where even nature can’t escape sin’s corruption. Jack Cottrell elaborated perfectly on this matter, having written:

⁵ *The Holy Bible (esv)*, 1489.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 1465.

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What, then, does it mean to say that the Logos “emptied Himself”? Basically it has to do with function, not essence. Though the Logos continued to be equal with God in his nature, as the incarnate Son of God he voluntarily laid aside the prerogatives, privileges, and advantages of deity and chose instead to experience the limitations of human life, even in the role of a servant. He did not selfishly insist on his “rights” as a divine being. He did not cling to the glories and luxuries of his divine statues. Instead the unselfish Prince volunteered to live as a pauper.⁷

Forsaking his privileges and taking on human form couldn’t have been pleasant. What was it like for Christ to take on human form, the form of a slave?

When Christ Jesus became man he took slave’s form. The exinanition or humiliation pertained to his human nature alone and not to the divine. As man and not as God Christ humbled himself. He took slave’s form in order to fulfill his office on earth. His full deity remained (existence, form, condition of equality with God); all that his deity bestowed upon his human nature likewise remained a possession of this nature.⁸

However, his servanthood did not imply a lack of individuality or an existence of emptiness; Jesus experienced both human emotion and bodily limitations. He grew tired and weary (John 4:6), needed sleep (Matthew 8:24; Luke 8:23), and experienced thirst (John 19:28) and hunger (Matthew 4:2; 21:18). Jesus experienced anger and joy (John 15:10-11). He experienced sorrow when he learned of the death of Lazarus; he was grieved to the point of tears (John 11:33-35).

While Jesus experienced human emotion and bodily limitations, his life was not made easier by his familial situation or social class. According to Isaiah’s Messianic Prophecy, one can glean much about how Jesus was perceived by his community:

For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground;
he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should

⁷ Jack Cottrell, *The Faith Once for All* (Joplin, Missouri: College Press Publishing Company, 2002), 249.

⁸ R.C.H. Lenski, *Commentary on the New Testament: The Interpretations of St. Paul’s Epistles to the Galatians, to the Ephesians, and to the Philippians* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2001), 781.

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desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.⁹

Isaiah claims that the Messiah was like a root out of dry ground—the Bible has certainly confirmed his assertion. Although his immaculate conception was miraculous, the means of his conception were not believed by the masses. After Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, Mary and Joseph were commanded by God to flee to Egypt for a time; surely the Jews noted their absence, further solidifying their perception of Mary as an adulterer and her son, Jesus, as an illegitimate outsider, a product of sin. Based on Mary and Joseph's offering of two turtle doves as opposed to a lamb (Luke 2:24), it is clear that Jesus' family lived in poverty. Throughout the New Testament, there is nothing presented that contradicts Isaiah's claim that Jesus was plain or average in regard to his physical appearance. He became a carpenter (Mark 6:3) before his ministry began, a common job. The lack of majesty Isaiah refers to is not only corroborated by Paul's letter to the Philippians, but also by all accounts of Jesus' life in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

Although Christ was completely ordinary by human standards, he was entirely unique and one-of-a-kind in that his entire life and ministry are marked by his perfect obedience. While he lived a life that was lackluster and riddled with hardship, although he experienced every human emotion and bodily limitation and his own people chose to reject him, he was obedient to the point of death on the cross. Jesus' suffering was foretold by Isaiah:

Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.¹⁰

⁹ *The Holy Bible (esv)*, 913.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 913.

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The writer of Hebrews bolsters Isaiah's sentiments, having said: "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin."¹¹ Therefore, it is abundantly clear that his perfect obedience rendered him blameless in the eyes of God. However, God required sinless blood to atone for sin, making him the perfect sacrifice despite his perfect obedience. His deity enhanced his sacrifice; without his deity, his sacrifice couldn't have been eternal and retroactive. *This* is why Christ chose to take the form of a human! *This* is why he allowed himself to be made lowly! *This* is why he did not cling to his divine nature or heavenly position for dear life! By way of sin, Adam sundered humankind's intimate relationship with God, creating the need for a Savior, a need for Jesus' perfect sacrifice. While God imputed his wrath on Christ, his blood paid restitution for sin by way of atonement. "Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord."¹²

¹¹ Ibid., 1492.

¹² Ibid., 1462.

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