

# Philippians 2:6-8

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 13 December 2020

Preacher: Chris Roberts

[ 0 : 00 ] Turn back to the passage that we read, Philippians 2.! If you want to find out who Jesus is, and why he is the most important man who's ever walked on the face of this earth, this is a really good place to start.

Paul plots the magnificent height and depth of his coming down to earth from heaven, and his descent into a hellish death, and his launch into glory.

And for this Sunday and next Sunday, we're going to take the time just to meditate on a couple of verses at a time, and to focus our attention on each of these moments in Jesus' life.

So this morning, the apostle begins with the birth of Jesus Christ. Look at our verses for today.

We're going to focus on verse 6 to 8. Paul says, I want us to see three things this morning about the birth of Jesus at Christmas time.

The first thing that Paul shows us is, who was he? Or who he was? Who was he? If you want to know somebody when you first meet them, one of the questions you ask is, well, where are you from, isn't it?

[ 1 : 51 ] And what's your name? Where did you come from? Find out who they were before you met them. What's their background? What's their history? And Paul says, to know this man, Jesus Christ, you need to know who he was before you met him.

That doesn't sound too strange. Who he was before the world met him. And he says that there was a time in the past before the world met him when the person named as Jesus Christ, the man that we read about in the Gospels, before he was born and he walked on the earth, was, we almost miss that, don't we, in verse 6, Jesus, who though he was, he was, now, we've got to stop there, though he was, the person of Jesus Christ was something before he became a man, before he took on the likeness of men, he was.

It's interesting, when you look at the family trees of Jesus in the Gospels, only two of the Gospel accounts, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, give a kind of family tree, Matthew and Luke.

Mark and John don't really give a family tree. You follow the family tree all the way to the top, don't you, to find out where a person has come from. Where did they begin? What's their history?

And if you go to John's Gospel, to the beginning, you expect a family tree of Jesus, but you don't get one. And you keep going all the way to the top, but there's no beginning of Jesus' family tree.

[ 3 : 37 ] If you go to the beginning of John's Gospel, Jesus is called the Word, isn't he? And he has no beginning. He tells us that he was in the beginning with God and all things were made through him.

And you can't find a point where the person born as Jesus Christ actually began. Jesus Christ, what's your name and where did you come from?

And we discover that there is no beginning to him. No time when he was not. He always was.

John says that in the beginning, this person who he calls the Word already was in the beginning. And when everything came into being, there was one thing that did not come into being.

He was already there. So we find, don't we, first of all, that Jesus Christ is utterly unique as a human being. You can't say for any other human being what you can say for him.

[ 4 : 44 ] That before he was born, was. And philosophers have kind of debated this about the human self. But the Bible's view is that human beings don't have an existence before they're conceived and before they're born.

God knows his people, doesn't he? That they're in his mind. And he chooses his people before we're created. But we are created, aren't we? At conception, we go from not existing to existing. It's miraculous. But Paul says that is not the case for the person known as Jesus. The person always was.

And so he's no ordinary man, is he? Do you see what Paul is saying? This man, Jesus, before his birth was. And he says he was in the form of God, verse 6.

There is a time when the person we know is the man, Jesus Christ, the man who walks through the pages of the gospel, the one who has domesticated himself, his only existence was on the side of divinity.

[ 6 : 00 ] His existence was sheer divinity in the form of God, Paul says. Jesus, what is your name and where did you come from? In eternity past, he was not like us.

His background, his origin, was from another realm altogether. He was foreign to us as created human beings. He was transcendent.

God and the Bible talks about only two things in existence. Things that are created and things that are not created. In other words, God and everything else.

And Jesus was entirely on one side of that divide. He was separate from creatures and created things. He was in the form of God, as Paul might say.

Now, some people throughout history have tried to weaken what that means to be in the form of God. They say the word form, it simply means that he was like God or he was a part of God or he was a thought in the mind of God but he wasn't actually God.

[ 7 : 19 ] And that's a bit like what the word form could sound like, isn't it? You could make a ring out of plastic and give it the form of a diamond ring.

You could make it look like a diamond ring but it wouldn't actually be one. But is that what Paul means when he says that he was in the form of God? Was he just like God?

Why does Paul express it like that? He could have just said he was God but it would make it a lot easier. Why in the form of God? Well, I think what he's trying to do is make it less abstract but less theoretical.

It's less about him having a sort of general divine essence. The word form is equivalent to us saying that he had the specific characteristics of God.

Paul is being really specific. This person that we know is Jesus Christ possessed the whole body of qualities which distinguish God from anything else.

[ 8 : 26 ] Even from other spiritual beings. He had the form, he had the fullest possession of all the qualities which make God God. That if you took any of them away he would no longer be God.

God. All the qualities, do you remember of Psalm 139 that we looked at over the last few weeks, the omnipresence, the omnipotence, the power, the omniscience, the holiness of God.

As the creed goes, he was God of God, light of light, very God of very God. It's more than just being like God. And we ask, don't we, is this real?

Is Paul just sort of overdoing it? Is this fundamental extremist Paul overflowing who Jesus really is, the person who he was, making more of him than he should be?

Is that it? Well, no, it isn't, because when we come to the Gospels, it is the same in the self-consciousness of the man himself, of Jesus.

[ 9 : 35 ] Jesus, the man, is conscious of who he was and who he has always been before we met him and before the world met him.

Do you remember in John's Gospel, Jesus, there's a moment where Jesus is in a conversation with the Pharisees, and he's rebuking them for their pride in outward, ethnic connection with Abraham, and they say, well, we've got our father Abraham, we're okay, Jesus.

Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? And Jesus, with divine patience and a holy irritation, rebukes them and he says, well, truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.

Jesus, in his own self-consciousness as a man, he takes on the unique name of God, revealed to Moses thousands of years ago, the I am, the one who was there with Abraham, all the way back then, he says, your father, Abraham, rejoiced that he would see my day, and he saw it and was glad.

You see, in his own mind, as a man, Jesus himself says, he is the God who met Moses and Abraham, the God who spoke in the burning bush, who led the Israelites in the wilderness.

[ 11 : 09 ] He prays later in John 17, Father, glorify me in your presence, with the glory that I had with you before the world began.

He says, I know where I came from, the father who sent me bears witness about me, I am the father, I am the one. It's quite remarkable, isn't it?

The man Jesus Christ, in his own self-consciousness, he understands who he was and where he's come from. Before he became a man, he was in the form of God, and he was God with all the distinguishing qualities that make God God.

His place, his origin, was in the glorious communion of the Trinity as uncreated, begotten, not made. And he wasn't bored out of his brain waiting for the first Christmas, as if he would kind of snap into existence, like we do when we're born.

That's what happens, isn't it? When we're conceived, before he became a man, his humanity was created, but he is a person already existed.

[12:23] It's not what the Bible says, no, before he became a man, he was. And he was working in his place in the communion of the Trinity, at the heart of the divine monarchy.

And so John says the I am in whom Abraham rejoiced was Jesus. John ain't. Hebrews, the book of Hebrews tells us that the Lord who motivated Moses was Christ.

Jude 5 says that the Saviour who brought the Israelites out of Egypt was Jesus. Paul says in Corinthians 10, the rock in the wilderness was Christ.

You read these passages and they all tell us, don't they, that this person, who we know as Jesus, was in the form of God from the beginning all through the Old Testament.

He wasn't just patterned there and shadowed and given types. We kind of look forward to him. He is that, of course. But he was there, working fully as the Father was working and as the Spirit was working.

[13:41] Jesus, where did you come from? Where are you from? This all makes the man Jesus Christ unique. It makes him exceptional, doesn't it, as a human being.

It makes him unique as a founder of religion. It makes Christianity the only religion that has been founded by God himself.

It makes him an exceptional human being. One who was. And he knows it in his own self-consciousness.

I was in the form of God, very God, a very God, with no beginning, fully acting as and fully in being God, through who all things were made, I am.

So that's who he was. But secondly, at his birth, that first Christmas, what did he become? Look at verses 6 and 7 again. He didn't 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 man.

[14:52] I think this passage in Paul is a bit like a perfectly formed flower dipped in dry ice. And it feels quite fragile as we come to it.

It is so beautifully nuanced and so delicately expressed that it's a bit liable to being misunderstood, certainly when I come with my heavy fingers on it.

It's liable to be misinterpreted and misunderstood. Paul traces the beginnings of a movement for God the Son, who always was. And it's utterly sublime, isn't it, where we reach the outskirts of the ability of language itself.

And we've got to walk so closely with the inspired word here, not to fall into error. And I want you to notice the careful language of taking the form of a servant.

And the word taking on there, that's a really important word. It's not just a filler in the English to make the Greek make sense. It means that as God the Son was born in the likeness of men, he took on something upon himself.

[16:07] And that is really odd when you look at what else Paul says, because he says, doesn't he, that he didn't count equality with God something to be grasped, but he emptied himself.

So you've got two opposite ideas in tension there. The idea of emptying and of taking on, of becoming lesser by adding something, of losing something, by gaining something, isn't it?

It's strange. And the subtlety of what Paul is saying is that at the first Christmas, the one who was eternally in the form of God, didn't lose his deity when he became a man, when he emptied himself. He didn't lose his divine nature, but he took on something. He added something to himself. himself. He took on humanity.

He added his human nature to himself. He took on the likeness of men. So without loss of anything that he already was and always was, the person of the Son of God takes on the form of a servant.

[17:31] He emptied himself by adding to himself a human nature. So it's not that Jesus stopped being God to become a man, or that Jesus changes from being what he was, God, to become a man instead.

It's that Jesus became a man whilst also being God. He doesn't lose the qualities that make God God, but he adds something to himself which obscures his deity, doesn't it? it covers it, it veils his deity. Let me try and give you a bit of a picture, and it will be a really insufficient one. We kind of say this sort of thing when we take stuff on, if there's a job that needs to do it, maybe around church, and it's one of those really grim jobs that the deacons really don't want to ask people for help with.

Can somebody please clean out the fox poo from the garden, or can somebody please help us clean out the drains, or something like that. And I say, well I can't really take that on at the moment. I'm actually really busy that particular week, I can't take that on my plate. We use that kind of language, don't we? We take on a role which might mean that we humble ourselves, and our normal kind of dignity, if you like, is veiled, and it's covered over, as we put on the necessary equipment to do the job, as we put on the rubber gloves, and the overalls, or the face mask, if it's really smelly.

[ 19 : 12 ] In that moment, we don't cease to be who we are, do we? But we add on to ourselves the form that that service takes, we add on to ourselves the equipment, or the clothing, if you like, that it takes.

with the necessary humility and obedience towards the unpleasantness of the service. And so he takes on the equipment to serve, he takes on the form needed to serve humanity, he adds humanity to himself.

And so the crown is still on his head, but it's veiled with a hairnet. The royal signet ring, it is still on his finger, but it's obscured by rubber gloves.

The royal robes still belong to him, but we see the overalls, don't we? Veiled in flesh, the Godhead see, hail the incumbent deity.

Now, the illustration is really poor, because the glory of any service is always proportional to what is given up in the service, isn't it?

[ 20 : 27 ] And none of us, however much we serve, have had to forego the riches that Jesus possessed. None of us have had to obscure what he obscured in serving others.

To forego the full prerogatives and the privileges of his glorious divinity of what he always was. Christopher Idol in that hit him, he says, my Lord, you wore no royal crown, you did not wield the powers of state, nor did you need a scholar's gown or a priestly robe to make you great. Although he was in the form of God and without ceasing to be who he always was, he who was of ultimate reputation in the universe made himself nothing in the eyes of man.

He who was at the centre of the divine monarchy, who was served and adored by the holy angels for all eternity came to serve men.

And notice how Paul chose what he became by book ending the verses with this word form. You see, Christ starts off in the form of God and he ends in the form of a servant.

[ 21 : 43 ] And just as that word, it means doesn't he that he enjoyed the fullest qualities of divinity. he actually took on the fullest qualities of service.

The incarnation is not some kind of publicity stunt by God, where God appears to serve people so that he can say, I'm a great servant.

You get that sometimes, don't you, with kings and rulers. They go out to meet the poor people of their country, those who are in need, in front of the cameras, you see them holding babies and giving things to poor people.

But moments after they disappear back into their limos and go back to their palaces, it's not really service, is it? It's just self-serving at a show. But that's not what God the Son came to do.

Just like that word form doesn't mean he was only like God, neither was he only like a servant. When he became a man, he really was considering and caring and loving others.

[ 22 : 54 ] It was purely our own love for them, not just to bring glory to himself. It was really for others, for us. And that is what is so glorious about it, isn't it?

Christ genuinely, God genuinely cared less for his own status as God than he did for us.

He genuinely cared less for his own things than he did for us. He didn't grasp the things that he deserved in his Godhead, but he cared for us.

And the value of the souls that he was to save pressed upon him so much that he was willing to forego the value of his privileges.

And so he is heroic, isn't he? And he is a true servant precisely because he gives up the hero's acclaim and the hero's welcome. He doesn't serve with self-service in mind.

[ 23 : 58 ] And he deserves praise precisely because he gives up praise. And this speaks to us, doesn't it? Most clearly of a God who genuinely cares.

I loved that a couple of weeks ago when we thought about God loving, hating sinners, but loving sinners. But it shows us that this love is genuine, a serving love.

Perhaps we think God is unmoved, that we think he's untouched by anything that goes on on earth. He sits in heaven, doesn't he, in the calm of it all, in the transcendence.

He's unmoved. No, it's not that, he cares. And he feels, and he does love. And God is capable of that, and he's capable of performing real service.

So that the one who was before Abraham, who basked in divine glory with the Father, before the world began, got tired, and he was thirsty.

[ 25 : 01 ] And the one who knows all things as to his divinity, had to learn. He had to learn obedience. He had to learn his own Bible in his own temple.

As to his humanity, he became dependent on parents, and developed physically and spiritually, veiled in flesh, the servant God had seen, the pale near carnal, serving deity, though he was in the form of God, took on the form of the servant, who he was, what he became, and lastly then, who we ought to be.

Who he was, what he became, and thirdly, who we ought to be. Phoebe Warfield, the Princeton seminary professor of the early 1900s, said, we are not to be content to gaze upon him and to admire him.

We must be imitators of him until we're changed into the same image. And that is the main application that Paul brings out of all of this, isn't it?

In verse five, have this mind amongst yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus. Let each of you look not only to your own interests, but to the interests of others, and do that genuinely.

[ 26 : 26 ] Maybe this is something that we don't think about so much. Jesus Christ is first our Redeemer, isn't he, and our Saviour, but he is also our pattern. He is the example, he is the only person that we all want to be more like.

That's all the serving people that we've seen this year, heroes, and caring for us in our need this year. They are to be imitated, but he, of all people, is exceptional.

An exceptional example of service. And to be quite honest with you this morning, we are lost, aren't we, before his example?

We're not called to do exactly as he's done. None of us will be called or are even capable of doing what he has done. None of us are God. None of us will take on the sins of God's people.

But the more you look at him, and I hope you feel like this Christmas, the more you look at him, the more you want to be like him, don't you?

[ 27 : 39 ] To have his mind from the position that he was in to think of others as he thought of us. And as you look at it, it makes it really, really difficult to set a limit on the self-sacrifice that we're called to for the good of others, isn't it?

That famous quote by C.T. Studd, if Jesus Christ be God and he died for me, then no sacrifice can be too great for me to make for him. And to be honest, whenever I hear that quote, it makes me feel really uncomfortable.

It will be in proportion to what we can do, what we can give, isn't it? What we're able to do. But as we think about the Lord Jesus, when we think about the wrongs that we might have to endure, or the rights that we want to hold on to when we want to be right, and other people must be seen that they are wrong, or when we think about the unpleasant things that we might have to do when we serve others, when we take things on, when we feel that they are unnatural to us, as jobs of service, or as things to say, or as things to do, then we're to consider him, aren't we?

Because what is more unnatural than the God of the universe, who always was becoming your servant, what is more unnatural than that?

What is more unnatural than the one who always was in the form of God, who wrapped the canopy of the stars over the globe, coming down and wrapping a towel around his waist, and washing his disciples' feet?

[ 29 : 31 ] What could be more inappropriate than that? And so are you wronged? Are you humbled by serving somebody else?

Are you maybe tempted to retreat from service? We've got to ask ourselves, haven't we, what wrongs did he not bear? What humility has he not understood himself self-consciously and embraced?

What service has he not performed for us? Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself so that he may not grow weary in the entitles.

It's really challenging, isn't it? When you've glimpsed his humility, the one who was in the form of God, who took on the form of a servant, the example is overwhelming and we feel powerless to do this even a little bit, but you find actually that as you gaze at him more and more and more, as we admire him this Christmas, as we do that, we will grow as imitators of him.

It is funny, isn't it, how Paul puts it, have this mind amongst yourself which is yours in Christ. We find that as we belong to him and that he is ours, and as we gaze at him as our servant, the one who serves us, we find ourselves growing to be more like him than we want him to be more like him, seeing who he was, what he became, we long to be more like him, what we ought to be, and what we will do by his help.

[ 31 : 31 ] Let's pray. Amen.