

Philippians 2v1-11

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: 09 June 2024

Preacher: Jonny Gibson

[0 : 00] Please turn in your Bibles to Philippians chapter 2, and we're going to look at the passage! that was read earlier for us, focusing in on verses 5 to 8. So Philippians chapter 2 and verses 5 to 8.

! And I'm going to read those verses again just to refresh them in our minds. Amen.

The grass withers, the flowers fade, but the Word of our God endures forever.

My boys and girls, I want to speak to you to begin with this morning. I'm going to give you three symbols, three pictures, and I want you to think what they all have in common. Okay, you're going to have to listen carefully. Ready? Three symbols. What do they have in common? A manger, a towel, or towel, as you say in this part of the United Kingdom. A towel and a tree. A manger, a towel, and a tree. Let me make it a bit more simple for you. Let me put those three pictures into three words beginning with the letter C. A cradle, a cloth, and a cross. A cradle, a cloth, and a cross. What do they all have in common? What do they all have in common? Here's the answer.

They all symbolize the humility of Jesus. They all symbolize the humility of Jesus. And they're also tied to three days in the church calendar. Three days in the church calendar. I wonder if you can help me. The cradle links to

Christmas. The cloth, this one's a bit harder. I wonder if maybe some of the adults can help with this one. The cloth links to what day in the church calendar? No, Maundy Thursday, the night of Passover Passover, when Jesus knelt down and washed his disciples' feet with a cloth, with a towel. And the cross, Good Friday. The cradle links to Christmas. The cloth to Maundy Thursday, the night before Good Friday. And the cross links to Good Friday. A cradle, a cloth, and a cross. What do they all have in common? They all point to the humility of Jesus. And that's what I want us to consider this ordinary Lord's Day in the Presbyterian church calendar. Because Presbyterians honor the Lord's Day each week as our key date in the church calendar. That's what I want us to think about, the humility of Jesus. Martin Luther, the German reformer once said, the manger and the cross are never far apart. The manger and the cross are never far apart. Perhaps we could tweak it. The cradle and the cross are never far apart. We might even say, the cradle, the cloth, and the cross are never far apart. Because they're all intricately connected.

[4 : 04] The one leads to the other. The cradle leads to the cloth. The cloth leads to the cross. And together, they all point to the humility of Jesus. This passage in Philippians gives us these three symbols. It gives us first the cloth, then the cradle, and then the cross. And in each of them, we see the humility of Jesus. Let's begin with the humility of Jesus with the cloth, verses 6 and 7.

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.

The picture of the cloth here is seen in this language of a servant. Servants, in Jesus' day, washed the feet of their masters and their guests before they ate their meal. And they did so with a towel, with a cloth around their waist. The host would sit, the servant would kneel. And on the Thursday night of his betrayal, Jesus, the master, the host, knelt like a servant and washed his disciples' feet with a cloth. That's what these two verses communicate. The divine Son of God became a human servant of men. Though he was in the form of God, he did not consider equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself by taking the form of a servant. Now, these two verses are packed with rich theology, but they're also connected with dodgy theology. Okay, there's been a lot of dodgy theology has come out of these verses. So, we need to tread carefully. What I want to do is take a line at a time. You can see in your Bible as you glance down, each verse has different lines in it. I'm going to take a line at a time as we see the humility of Jesus as a servant with a cloth. So, let's take the first line, though he was in the form of God. The word form here does not mean that he appeared to look like God, like some sort of hologram, but he wasn't actually God. He sort of appeared in the form of God. No, it means that he was of the very essence of God, the very

substance of God. He had the same form of God. But though he was of the very form of God, he did not consider that something to be grasped. What does that line refer to? Something he did not consider it something to be grasped.

Well, there's two possible ways of understanding this part of the verse. Here's the first one, and the King James Version presents this interpretation. The King James reads, who thought it not robbery to be equal with God. Who thought it not robbery to be equal with God.

That actually helps to convey their interpretation through an illustration. Just think what a robber does, boys and girls. What does a robber do? A robber comes into your home, and he takes something that does not belong to him. That's what robbers do. They take property that does not belong to them.

[8 : 01] Well, Paul says Jesus was not like a robber with respect to the form of God. He did not take a property of God that was not already his. That is, he did not take the form of equality with God as if it was something that did not belong to him. As if he took some property that was someone else's, God's, and he stole it from him.

No, Jesus being in the form of God, that was not something that he stole. He did not borrow it. He did not rent it for a time. His equality with God. His equality with God was something that belonged to him essentially eternally.

In substance, power, glory, eternity, Jesus was equal with God. That's one way you can read verse 6.

That's the way the King James translates it. Jesus was equal with God. He knew he was equal with God. He thought it not robbery to be equal with God. A second way to read the verse is by reading the phrase, a thing to be grasped. He did not consider equality with God a thing to be grasped. To read that as an idiom, as a way of meaning, he did not consider it a way of taking advantage for himself, of using his equality with God for his own self-interest, for his own selfish ends, for his own self-gain. In other words, though Jesus was equal with God, he did not use his equality with God for his own advantage, for his own self-interest. Although, as the Son of God, in the very nature of God, he did not consider his equality with God an opportunity for exploitation, for self-advancement, for self-interest, for self-gain. Instead, verse 7, he humbled himself, sorry, he emptied himself.

So, those are your two options. Because he was in the form of God, he did not think it robbery to be equal with God, but instead emptied himself. Or, though he was in the form of God, he did not use his equality with God for his own self-interest. Instead, he emptied himself. Now, the two interpretations are similar in many ways. They're also a wee bit different. I think the second one is perhaps the better reading in connection with verse 7. Though he was in the very form of God, he didn't consider that an opportunity for self-gain. Instead, verse 7, he emptied himself.

[11 : 09] Instead of self-gaining, Jesus was self-giving. But what does this mean? Verse 7, he emptied himself.

Okay, this is where some dodgy theology has arisen. So, there are a few heretical landmines that we need to avoid. What does Paul mean when he says Jesus emptied himself? Well, notice, first of all, he does not say Jesus emptied himself of, and then X. It doesn't actually state what it is that he emptied himself of. It doesn't mean he didn't empty himself of anything, but Paul doesn't state it, so we need to be careful. There was an early church heresy known as the kenotic heresy, kenosis, meaning emptying.

And this spread in the early church as a false teaching, and it taught that when Jesus, when the divine son became the son of man, Jesus emptied himself of his divinity, of his deity. In order for him to become a human, he had to empty himself of his deity, of his godness. But that's obviously wrong.

As you read the gospels, you can see that Jesus was God in human flesh in his teaching, in his miracles, in his resurrection from the dead. So, the emptying here cannot mean a draining or a diminishing of his deity. In becoming a man, the Son of God did not cease to be what he was. Here's one theologian from the past, Gregory the Great. He said, In the mystery of Jesus' incarnation, the only begotten of the Father increased what was ours, but diminished not what was his. In other words, in the incarnation, Jesus, the Son of God, became what he was not. He became a man. But he did not cease to be what he was. He remained God.

[13 : 33] He was first God before he was man, but when he became man, he did not cease to be God. This is why one of the best descriptions of Jesus in his incarnation is that title, the God-man.

In the incarnation, the eternal Son of God remained God whilst also taking upon himself a human nature and becoming man. So, in Jesus, we have one person in two natures, the divine nature and the human nature.

And when he took on the human nature, he did not drain or diminish his deity in any way. So, whatever the emptying means, let's be clear what it does not mean. It does not mean that he emptied himself of his godness in any way. But what does it mean? With that qualification in mind, what does it mean? What does it mean that Jesus emptied himself? Well, look again at verse 7, and we come to the next line. But emptied himself by taking the form of a servant. This line qualifies the meaning of emptied himself. The taking or the assuming the form of a servant was the emptying.

Christ emptied himself by assuming, taking upon himself the form of a servant. B.B. Warfield, the Princeton theologian, said that the emptying meant a subtraction by addition.

A subtraction by addition. He took upon himself a human nature, and in so doing, he subtracted. Perhaps it would be better to say a subtraction by assumption, because the Son of God can't add anything to himself. But he assumed a human nature, and in so doing, he emptied himself by becoming a servant. The one who was in the form of God took upon himself the form of a servant. The one who was in essence God became in essence a servant. Now, the word servant here, if you have an ESV, you look down in your footnote there, you see it also says literally slave. Literally slave. The thing about slaves and servants in the first century was they had no reputation. They had no riches. They had no rights. They had no privileges. They had no prerogatives. The King James translates verse 7 as, he made himself of no reputation.

[16:31] The NIV. He made himself nothing. In other words, by becoming a servant of men, the Son of God emptied himself of those things that belong to ordinary men or significant men, but do not belong to servants.

Servants were emptied of reputation, riches, rights. They were emptied of privileges and prerogatives. Now, again, we need to be careful here, because you can end up in dodgy theology. It is not that in the incarnation the divine Son, according to his divine nature, Jesus had the recognition of the worship of angels. That never changed, even in the incarnation.

According to his divine nature, Jesus had the recognition of the worship of angels. That never changed. According to his divine nature, Jesus had all the riches of heaven.

That never changed. According to his divine nature, Jesus had the right and the prerogative to call 12,000 angels from heaven and save him at any moment. That never changed. So, what did change?

[18:09] In the incarnation. Well, in taking upon himself a human nature, in becoming a man, he emptied himself of those things according to his human nature. According to his human nature, Jesus had no reputation.

According to his human nature, he abdicated his recognition. According to his human nature, he gave up the right to call 12,000 angels down from heaven to destroy those who were trying to destroy him.

In other words, in his human nature, his divine nature was veiled. It was hidden. This is how theologians have tried to explain this word emptied. John Calvin put it like this.

Jesus laid aside his glory in the view of man, not by lessening his glory, but by concealing his glory. His emptying belongs only to his humanity. His emptying belongs only to his humanity. That is, the emptying involved a veiling, a concealing of his divine nature. And we see this in the Gospels, don't we? Of course, sometimes we see glimpses of his divine nature, like when he calms the storm.

[19:43] Do you remember that, boys and girls? When he calms the storm, he says, be quiet, be still. And this storm immediately just calms. And the disciples see his glory. They see this is no ordinary man. This is God.

Or at the transfiguration, when Peter and John go up the mountain, and what do they see? They see his face transformed, him shining in all his future glory. They see who he is. But most of the time, as he was walking around first century Palestine, what did he look like? Just an ordinary man. If you passed him in the street, you wouldn't have taken a second look. He had no halo over his head. No angels attended him 24-7, singing his praises. When he slept at night, there was no star in the night sky shining down on the house, saying, God's in this house tonight. There were moments like that at his birth. There were moments like that at the transfiguration. But most of the time, his glory was veiled. It was hidden. That's how theologians have tried to explain this. They've

also used the word restrained. Do you remember the time when he was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, and Peter takes out his sword and cuts off the high priest's ear? What does Jesus say to him? Do you not think that I could appeal to my Father, and he would at once send me twelve legions of angels, twelve thousand angels? He had the right, the prerogative to do that according to his divine nature, but he veiled he restrained his divine nature under the veil of his human nature. There was no draining in his deity, but there was a restraining of his deity under his humanity. So this is what the text means when it says he emptied himself by taking the form of a servant, by making himself of no reputation, by making himself nothing, by giving up according to his human nature, his reputation, his rights, his riches, his privileges, and prerogatives. He did not use his equality with God for self-gain, but for self-giving. Not for self-gaining, but for self-giving. Here's how the Apostle Paul puts it in 2 Corinthians 8 verse 9. Though he was rich, yet for our sakes he became poor, so that we through his poverty might become rich. Rich according to his divine nature, poor according to his human nature, the richest of the sons of God in heaven. For angels are called sons of God in heaven. He was the richest of the sons of God in heaven, and he became the poorest of the servants of men on earth.

Foxes have holes, the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head. Just think about that. The richest of the sons of heaven. When he became a man, he had nowhere to lay his head. And one of the symbols of this service of men was the cloth. Remember boys and girls, the three C's, the cloth, the cradle, the cross. Here's the cloth. He took upon himself the form of a servant. On the night he was betrayed, Jesus the Master, the host of the dinner with his disciples, he knelt down like a slave, and he washed his disciples' feet. He washed the feet of the man who was about to betray him and send him to his crucifixion.

The Son who was seated on the throne of heaven, knelt down on earth to wash the feet of his disciples.

Here is the humility of Jesus with a cloth, from sonship to servanthood, from the very form of God to the very form of a servant. Now, in order for the divine Son to become a human servant, there was a middle step, a bridge that had to be crossed to make it possible. Boys and girls, what do bridges do?

[24 : 53] Well, they take us from here to there, from A to B. You have to cross the bridge if you want to get somewhere. Well, in order for God the Son to become man the servant, he had to cross a bridge. That bridge was his humanity. He had to become a human before he could become a servant, and that's what the next line of verse 7 says. But emptied himself by taking the form of a servant, by being born in the likeness of men. The path from sonship to servanthood was via manhood, or we might even say via babyhood.

Because this line in verse 7, being born in the likeness of men, it speaks about the cradle. Here's the second C. We've seen the humility of Jesus with a cloth. Here is the humility of Jesus in a cradle. The humility of Jesus in a cradle. In order for him to come in the form of a servant, he had to first be born in the likeness of men. The divine Son, by emptying himself, by taking the form of a servant, had to take on the form of a human. This is what the emptying ultimately entailed.

First, it entailed assuming the form of a servant with a cloth, but in order to do that, he had to assume the likeness of men in a human nature. He had to become a babbling baby in a cradle. In other words, before there could be the cloth, there first had to be the cradle. Now, again, we need to be careful here. There's some dodgy theology can arise from trying to articulate the fact that God the Son became a baby, became a human being. Again, we can perhaps explain it first by saying what it does not mean. When we speak of God the Son becoming a man, we do not mean that his divine nature morphed into a human nature. We do not mean that the divine nature was mingled with his human nature. No, in his becoming, there was no blending. In his becoming a man, there was no blending of the divine and human nature. The two were integrally connected, but they were never confused.

They were never conflated. They were never mixed or mingled or blended. In the becoming of the Son of God to become a man, the two natures were kept distinct.

[27 : 53] And herein we see the humility of Jesus, because remember who it is who's become a man. Verse 6, though he was in the very form of God, though he was equal with God, he became a human being.

Which means that this was a great descent on his part, a great condescension. As the Nicene Creed puts it, he came down from heaven. Now, we need to qualify that. He never left heaven,

because he is God, fills everywhere, omnipresent. But the Nicene Creed, speaking of the incarnation, he came down from heaven.

The king of heaven on a throne was born a babe on earth in a trough. Someone has put it really well, thousands of times babies have been born kings, but only once was a king born a baby. Thousands of times babies have been born kings, but only once was a king born a baby. Christ in a cradle, the eternal Son of God in a humble stable of hay. This is the epitome of humility. The cradle is the bridge for the Son to become a servant. But it did not end there. Jesus did not become a servant for the sake of being a servant, so he could be held up as a great example of what it means to serve people, like some sort of first century version of Mother Teresa. That's not why he became a servant. Verse 8 tells us why he became a servant, why he became a human being.

[29 : 52] And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. In other words, his incarnation led to his humiliation, to his crucifixion. And this brings us to the third point this morning, the humility of Jesus with a cloth, the humility of Jesus in a cradle, and finally, the humility of Jesus on a cross.

The humility of Jesus on a cross. And there's some irony here because the word humble in verse 8, he humbled himself. It literally means he lowered himself. But think about it. When you're put up on a cross, you're lifted up. And so there's a paradox here. His lowering entailed being lifted up, not on a throne, but on a cross. Even death on a cross. Now those words, even death on a cross. They're emphatic in the original Greek. Paul is trying to emphasize he didn't just humble himself through his life, though he did. He was a servant. He washed people's feet with a cloth. He didn't just die. He died on a cross. That's what Paul's saying. He died on a bloody cross.

Now, for us, we've become so familiar with the cross, haven't we, that those words don't really shock us anymore. Today, crosses adorn our necklaces, our bracelets, our earrings. They are decorated in gold in our churches. Maybe you have a fancy cross logo on your Bible. The cross in our modern world has no longer offensive. But in the ancient world, the cross was a vile symbol. It was equivalent to wearing a necklace with the image of a gas chamber from Auschwitz, or the image of a Hamas terrorist paragliding into Israel to commit their massacre. For the Roman citizen, the word cross was actually a swear word. You weren't allowed to use it even in public. The cross was associated with torture, with flogging the criminal in unspeakable ways for hours at a time. Origen referred to the cross as the utterly vile death of the cross. That was the depth of Jesus's humility.

I remember speaking to Don Carson one time, and he had just been to see, this was many years ago, he'd just been to see the movie by Mel Gibson, The Passion of the Christ. And Mel Gibson actually did no advertising for the movie. He just gave a free viewing to everyone involved in religion. If you were a minister of religion, you could go and see the movie for free, and then you just tell everyone about the movie. And so everyone wanted to go see the movie. And so Carson got to see it. But it was on the condition that after you saw it, you would be interviewed by a reporter. And so he went to see the movie. And afterwards, this reporter says to him, what did you think of the movie? I mean, it's a bit brutal, isn't it? It's not the sort of movie you can eat your popcorn to. And Carson said, well, that's a good point. But then maybe what Mel Gibson's trying to say is, shut up and put your popcorn down.

This happened. This really happened. It was that brutal. Now, I'd love to have seen the reporter's face to that response. But that's how brutal it was. If we had seen it with our own eyes, we would probably have wretched at the sight and the smell of it. And that is how far Christ humbled himself. That is how far he lowered himself onto death, even, even death on a cross.

[34 : 20] Now, notice the word obedient. He humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death. Those crucified were not really thought of as obedient. They were crucified for being disobedient.

And in their crucifixion, it was hardly like they complied with it or obeyed as they were being nailed to the cross. I'm sure they kicked and struggled and spat and shrieked and screamed as they were being nailed to the cross. But Jesus' obedience was all the way through his life, up to the moment of his crucifixion, and even in his crucifixion, he was obedient.

There was no spitting at those who kneeled. There was no screaming at them. There was no struggle.

There was no pulling away his hand as they tried to kneel it to the cross. No, there was just serene silence as he accepted his father's will. Pure surrender reflecting perfect obedience. In humility, he was obedient unto death. Yes, even death on a cross. Like a lamb led to the slaughter, he was silent. His obedience in spirit was seen in his passivity in body, his silence in body, his silence in voice, perhaps praying in his heart, not my will be done, but yours. This lowering in humility, it entailed a lifting in humiliation, the being lifted up on a cruel cross. There is more mystery here, because recall who it is we're talking about, verse 6, who being in the very form of God. How can God die? He can't. But yet, isn't that what verse 8 says? Obedient to the point of death, who being in the very form of God died. How is that possible?

[36 : 48] God cannot die. He's immortal. So again, we need to parse this carefully. This is speaking about Christ according to his human nature. He died. Remember, at no point was the divine nature drained or diminished. And we can add, at no point did the divine nature die.

A person acts according to their nature. And Christ acted in death according to his human nature. He gave up his spirit. So perhaps the mystery can be articulated, I think, best by John Lightfoot, who said, on the cross, God did not die, but he who died, the incarnate Son, he who died was God. Now, for what purpose? For what purpose did he die? What was the purpose of this self-emptying, this self-humiliation? Well, it was for service and ransom. Jesus did these things not for status, but for service. He did them not for reputation, but for ransom. Do you remember his words? The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. In other words, the purpose of his birth was for his death. The cradle was for the cross. It's what Martin Luther said, the manger and the cross are never far apart. The cradle and the cross are never far apart. They're intricately connected. We've seen that today, haven't we? The cradle, the cloth, the cross. In order to hang upon a cross, he had to first kneel with a cloth. In order to kneel with a cloth, he had to lie in a cradle. In order to be a savior, the Son had to become a servant. The incarnation was for salvation.

Liberal theologians say, the incarnation alone could have saved us. No, the incarnation was for salvation.

That was the purpose of it. And this is what this passage recalls for us this ordinary Lord's Day in the church calendar, the humility of Jesus. The humility of Jesus with the cloth, though being in the form of God, he took on the form of a servant. The humility of Jesus in a cradle, though being equal with God, he was born in the likeness of men. The humility of Jesus on a cross, though being equal with God, he was obedient to death, even death on a cross. Well, what's the application for us this morning? Well, if you look back at verse 5, have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus. Paul is writing to a church here where there were people who were proud, who had their little tiffs with each other, who had their fallouts, who rubbed each other the wrong way. Look what he says in verse 3. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.

[40 : 46] And then he gives the example of Christ, who looked not to his own interest, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped for his own self-interest, but for serving others.

And so, the challenge for us this morning is to have the same attitude, the same mindset as our Lord Jesus Christ. So, next time you're in a difficult situation in church, in your family, think about these words of the Apostle Paul and think about the cloth, the cradle, and the cross, and whether you're putting your interests above the other person. Let me close with a quote by Amy Carmichael, which I think captures verse 5. If I myself dominate myself, if my thoughts revolve around myself, if I am obsessed with myself, then I know nothing of Calvary love. Let's pray.

Let's pray.