

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of systematic theology today by continuing to examine the biblical case for the deity of Jesus Christ and we ended last time by starting to look at the passage in Philippians 2:5-11, which says this, “Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, 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, to the glory of God the Father.”<sup>1</sup>

We pointed out last session that the first part of the passage tells us plainly that Jesus Christ is God. Dr. Spencer, the next line has caused trouble for some; it begins by saying that Jesus “made himself nothing”. What does that mean?

Dr. Spencer: The question of what it means for Jesus to have “made himself nothing”, or as the ESV and some other translations put it, to have “emptied himself”, has caused trouble for some since the mid 1800’s. But it should not be a problem since the sentence itself goes on to tell us what is meant by the phrase; it tells us that Jesus took “the very nature of a servant” and was “made in human likeness.” In other words, it means that he humbled himself and took on human nature. He did not somehow stop being God, nor did he give up any of the attributes that are essential to God’s being.

Marc Roby: I like what the Westminster Shorter Catechism says on this point. Question 27 asks, “Wherein did Christ’s humiliation consist?” And the answer is this; “Christ’s humiliation consisted in his being born, and that in a low condition, made under the law, undergoing the miseries of this life, the wrath of God, and the cursed death of the cross; in being buried, and continuing under the power of death for a time.”

Dr. Spencer: That is a very succinct and yet complete description of what is meant by Christ’s humiliation. But getting back specifically to what it meant for Christ to have “made himself nothing”, the right meaning is stated by Wayne Grudem in his *Systematic Theology* book. He says that “The emptying includes change of role and status, not essential attributes or nature.”<sup>2</sup> But let’s not lose sight of the main point we were making; the verse states in unequivocal language that Jesus Christ already existed prior to his incarnation and that he is fully God. But, it also says more. Before we go on though, I want to point out again that James Boice uses this

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<sup>2</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1994, pg. 550

passage from Philippians 2 in his book *Foundations of the Christian Faith* to argue for the divinity of Christ and I am summarizing his arguments here.<sup>3</sup>

**Marc Roby: What else does Boice say about that passage?**

Dr. Spencer: He wrote that “having described how Jesus laid aside his former glory in order to become a man and die for us, Paul goes on to show how he received that glory back, noting that he is now to be confessed as Lord”.

**Marc Roby: Before you go on I want to discuss that statement. You said a moment ago that God did not give up any of the attributes that are essential to God’s being when he became incarnate, but Boice says here that he laid aside his former glory. Now, isn’t God’s glory one of his attributes? Can you explain why it is not one that is essential to God’s being?**

Dr. Spencer: Whether glory is or is not an attribute depends on how you define it.<sup>4</sup> The word glory has a wide range of meanings. Grudem points out that it often means simply honor or excellent reputation and that “In this sense, the glory of God is not exactly an attribute of his being but rather describes the superlative honor that should be given to God by everything in the universe”.<sup>5</sup>

And what Boice said is perfectly biblical. In John 17:5 Jesus is praying and requests of the Father, “glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began.” When Jesus said that he “had” this glory, which is past tense, it is clear that he didn’t possess it at the time he made this statement. So, this verse makes it clear that Jesus laid aside his glory, meaning the honor due to him as God, when he became incarnate. That honor is something that is due to him as God, but is not an essential attribute of his being. So, what I said is accurate, Jesus Christ did not cease to be God when he became incarnate, nor did he surrender any of the attributes that are essential to God’s being.

**Marc Roby: Alright, I think that explains it well enough, so let’s get back to Boice’s argument. He says that Jesus received his glory back, meaning when he ascended into heaven after his resurrection, and that he is to be confessed as Lord.**

Dr. Spencer: That’s right. And here is the really important point. When Paul wrote that God “gave him the name that is above every name, 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” he is obviously alluding to Isaiah 45:23 where we read that Jehovah God declared, “By myself I have sworn, my mouth has uttered in all integrity a word that will not be revoked: Before me every knee will bow; by me every tongue will swear.”

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<sup>3</sup> James Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, Revised in One Volume, InterVarsity Press, 1986, pp 268-270

<sup>4</sup> E.g., see John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, P&R Publishing Company, 2002, pg. 593 and Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1994, pg. 220

<sup>5</sup> Grudem, op. cit., pg. 220

**Marc Roby: Paul's allusion to that verse is indeed obvious.**

Dr. Spencer: It certainly is. And Boice points out what is perhaps the most amazing fact about this passage.

**Marc Roby: What's that?**

Dr. Spencer: It is that Paul was *not* to making an argument for the deity of Christ! Paul's major point in the passage is that we should be humble and he uses Jesus Christ as the supreme example of that humility. In the course of making that argument, he simply assumes, as it were, the deity of Christ. Now you have to think about that fact for a moment for it to have its full impact.

If I want to make an argument to prove some point, I am not going to introduce something else that needs to be proven first if I can possibly avoid doing so. I'm going to make my argument using information that is already known and agreed to by my listeners.

**Marc Roby: Therefore the implication is that Paul assumed the recipients of his letter already believed that Jesus Christ is fully God.**

Dr. Spencer: That is exactly the point. Paul himself had founded the church in Philippi. In fact, one of its early members was the famous Philippian jailer who had cried out, "What must I do to be saved?" In any event, Paul had stayed in contact with this church and undoubtedly had made sure that they had good teaching. Therefore, he knew that they were fully aware of this fundamental Christian doctrine; that Jesus Christ is the second person of the Holy Trinity.

**Marc Roby: You're right; once you think that through it is a very impressive bit of evidence.**

Dr. Spencer: Boice quotes an English commentator, Bishop Handley Moule on this point, and I think he does an excellent job of driving home the implication of the argument. He wrote, "We have here a chain of assertions about our Lord Jesus Christ, made within some thirty years of his death at Jerusalem; made in the open day of public Christian intercourse, and made (every reader must feel this) not in the least manner of controversy, of assertion against difficulties and denials, but in the tone of a settled, common, and most living certainty. These assertions give us on the one hand the fullest possible assurance that he is man, man in nature, in circumstances and experience, and particularly in the sphere of relation to God the Father. But they also assure us, in precisely the same tone, and in a way which is equally vital to the arguments in hand, that he is as genuinely divine as he is genuinely human."<sup>6</sup>

**Marc Roby: What a great summary of the importance of this passage. And this passage also reminds me of another one that speaks about the humiliation and exaltation of Christ. The writer of Hebrews quotes from Psalm 8 and then applies it to Christ and says, in Verse 9 of Chapter 2, "we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone."**

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<sup>6</sup> Boice, op. cit., pp 269-270

Dr. Spencer: That does make the same point clearly. Theologians talk about the humiliation of Christ. And by that they are referring not just to his being tried, mocked, spit upon, flogged and crucified, but they are referring to the fact that he became man.

**Marc Roby: That doesn't exactly flatter us human beings.**

Dr. Spencer: It isn't meant to flatter us. But it is accurate. It would be infinitely *less* of a humiliation for me to become an ant than it was for the Creator and Lord of the universe to become man.

**Marc Roby: We again see the need for us to properly grasp the Creator/creature distinction.**

Dr. Spencer: Yes, we do. But let's get back to the point of proving that Jesus Christ is God.

**Marc Roby: Very well, what do you want to look at next?**

Dr. Spencer: Let's look at Chapter 12 of John's gospel. We read there about the unbelief of the Jewish people with regard to Christ. John tells us that in spite of all the miracles he performed among them, they would not believe and he says, in Verses 39 and 40, "they could not believe, because, as Isaiah says elsewhere: 'He has blinded their eyes and deadened their hearts, so they can neither see with their eyes, nor understand with their hearts, nor turn—and I would heal them.'" Now, this is a quote from Chapter 6 of Isaiah, which is where we read of Isaiah's amazing vision of God on his throne in heaven.

**Marc Roby: Which I might add is, perhaps, the greatest vision of God given to anyone in all of history.**

Dr. Spencer: That's right, it is. And let me quote a lengthy passage from Boice because he summarizes what this means very well. He wrote, "To people living today, particularly Christians, the reference may seem natural, for we are used to theological statements giving full deity to Christ. But that was hardly natural for John, a monotheistic Jew, or for his contemporaries. For a Jew of John's time God was almost inaccessible in his transcendence. He was the holy One of Israel. He dwelt in glory unapproachable. None actually saw him. And when on some unusual occasion some remarkably privileged person, such as Moses or Isaiah, had received a vision of God in his glory, it was not believed even then to be an actual vision of God as he is in himself but rather only an image or reflection of him. Yet such a vision filled one with awe and wonder.

"What Isaiah saw was the closest thing in all Jewish writings or tradition to an actual 'portrait' of the living and holy God. Yet that vision with all its breathtaking splendor John applies to Jesus. Without questioning, it would seem, John takes the most exalted vision of God in the Old Testament and says that it was a portrait of a carpenter from Nazareth who was about to be crucified – so great is John's opinion of him."<sup>7</sup>

**Marc Roby: It is hard for us to grasp just how radical that view was at that time.**

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, pp 272-273

Dr. Spencer: It certainly is, but Boice does a good job of explaining the importance. John was clearly convinced by all that he had seen, heard and experienced that Jesus Christ was God. So, anyone who believes the Bible to be true must join with John in recognizing this fact. To do otherwise is to deny the veracity of the New Testament and the apostle whom Jesus loved.

**Marc Roby: I agree. What other evidence do you want to adduce in support of this view?**

Dr. Spencer: Another important point that often goes unnoticed by modern readers is the way Jesus referred to God the Father. As we have noted, the Jews considered God's name to be so holy that it should not even be spoken. And they considered, as Boice pointed out in the passage I just read, God to be so transcendent that he was inaccessible to human beings. No first century Jew would ever have thought of referring to God as his personal father, and yet, that is the way Jesus most commonly referred to him.

**Marc Roby: That is a fascinating observation, and I agree that most modern readers gloss right over that point because we are used to people referring to God as their Father.**

Dr. Spencer: Yes, and Jesus even went further. In John 10 we read about a very interesting exchange between Jesus and some Jews in an area near the temple in Jerusalem. They asked him to tell them plainly if he was the Christ, the promised Savior of the Jews. Jesus responded by saying that he *had* already told them because his miracles spoke for him. And he then said to them, in John 10:26, "you do not believe because you are not my sheep."

**Marc Roby: That was not a very politically correct response.**

Dr. Spencer: Thankfully, they didn't have our modern idea of political correctness. And it wouldn't have mattered anyway, because Jesus simply spoke the truth. We need to remember that the Jews at this time were expecting a political Messiah who would deliver the Jewish people from Roman rule and establish a new Jewish state. They were not thinking about eternal salvation. For Jesus to say that he is the promised Messiah, but they, as Jews, were not his sheep, was a shocking a statement. They thought that all Jews were God's chosen people and would be saved – again in the political sense – by the Messiah.

**Marc Roby: Jesus often had to contend with this false understanding of what the Messiah would do.**

Dr. Spencer: Yes he did, that wrong understanding frequently caused problems. And Jesus went on in what he said to them. We read in John 10:27-30 that he said, "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. I and the Father are one."

**Marc Roby: And we read in Verses 31-33 that the people picked up stones to try and stone Jesus for blasphemy, so they certainly understood that he was claiming to be God.**

Dr. Spencer: They certainly did understand. How can you not understand what he meant? He calls God his Father, not in some abstract sense, but in a very personal sense, implying the closest of all relationships. And then he makes a completely explicit claim; "I and the Father are

one.” The only way someone can fail to understand what he is saying is if they refuse to accept that the one true and living God might exist in more than one person.

**Marc Roby: We discussed way back in Session 2 that this word “person” can be a problem for people in this regard.**

Dr. Spencer: It certainly can be, but we shouldn’t get hung up on that. We are made in God’s image, but he is the original, the archetype, we are made in his image and therefore share some of his qualities, but we are not exactly like him. He is tri-personal, we are not.

**Marc Roby: And it shouldn’t be at all surprising, as we have pointed out before, that God is greater and more complex in a sense than we are.**

Dr. Spencer: Not only should that not be surprising, it is what we should expect. No matter how great and beautiful a human creation is, say a statue, or a painting, or a piece of music, or whatever, it is certainly not as complex, deep and beautiful as the person who created it. In the same way, we as creatures are not as complex and deep as our Creator.

**Marc Roby: We are out of time today and this looks like a good place to stop. I would like to once again remind our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to [info@whatdoesthewordsay.org](mailto:info@whatdoesthewordsay.org). We look forward to hearing from you.**