

Introduction: As we reflect on our celebration of Christ's birth, let's open up the great hymn about that birth which we find in the book of Philippians, chapter 2. May the Lord remember each of us, scattered, separated and even lonely during this COVID pandemic, and may the Spirit of the Christ-child be born in us anew. May the Lord give us great encouragement and refreshing grace through this portion of Scripture. My prayer for each of you at this difficult time can be summed up in the words of this Christmas carol:

*O little town of Bethlehem,
How still we see thee lie!
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep
The silent stars go by.
Yet in thy dark streets shineth
The everlasting Light;
The hopes and fears of all the years
Are met in thee tonight.*

*How silently, how silently,
The wondrous Gift is giv'n;
So God imparts to human hearts
The blessings of His Heav'n.
No ear may hear His coming,
But in this world of sin,
Where meek souls will receive Him still,
The dear Christ enters in.*

*For Christ is born of Mary,
And gathered all above,
While mortals sleep, the angels keep
Their watch of wondering love.
O morning stars together,
Proclaim the holy birth,
And praises sing to God the King,
And peace to men on earth!*

*O holy Child of Bethlehem,
Descend to us, we pray;
Cast out our sin, and enter in,
Be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels
The great glad tidings tell;
O come to us, abide with us,
Our Lord Emmanuel!*

Monday: read Philippians 2:1-8. Wait a minute, Pastor! I thought our focus was to be on Christmas! Why are we starting with Philippians 2? Well, *first* we focus on Philippians 2 because it the earliest account of the birth of Christ. As Marianne Radius puts it, in the December 2016 issue of New Horizons, (which quotes an article by her entitled *The Heart of Christmas*): “The first written account of what Christmas means is found not in the Gospels, but, surprisingly, in Paul’s letter to the Philippians. This letter was written about twenty years after the death of Jesus, and at least fifteen years before the first of our Gospels was written down.”

What is so important is that Paul writes to address the Philippians about conflicts in their church. He uses as his example Christ’s willingness *to humble Himself by taking the form of a servant*, and from this example argues that they should in like manner adopt a servant attitude towards each other in the church at Philippi. See how Paul makes this all-important point about humble regard for others before ourselves in Philippians 2:1-4:

Therefore if there is any encouragement in Christ, if any consolation of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility consider one another as more important than yourselves; do not *merely* look out for your own personal *interests*, but also for the *interests* of others.

Meditate and Pray: What a sermon illustration! We are to humble ourselves in our relationships in church because of Christ’s example of humbling Himself even to the point of death! But alas, how hard this is for us!

Let us flee to God in prayer right now, since we in our own strength cannot take one step in imitating Christ as we ought. Let us pray:

“Great God in Heaven, we thank you that you humbled yourself in order to give up your Son for our salvation! What a lowering of yourself as our Father: You came down from your Throne, rolled up your sleeves and created by your Spirit a body for your Son in the womb of the Virgin!

Thank you, Lord Jesus, that you learned from your Father how to exercise your high station as God’s Son – you became obedient to death to show us both your submission to your Father’s will and your great love for sinners!

Thank you, Holy Spirit, that you can bring into our very lives as born-again Christians, that very same humble servanthood which the Son crafted in His life! Please cause Christ’s graces, especially His humble obedience, to grow within us as a church family, that we truly might learn how to put the interests of others in the body of Christ before our own! Amen.”

Tuesday: read Philippians 2:5-11. What challenging words Paul writes beginning in Philippians 2:5. In fact, Paul was so concerned that the Philippians learn the key role of humility in their church’s life that he actually recites what scholars think is a hymn in Philippians 2:5-11. By this hymn, Paul knew he could move the Philippians to recall the extent of Christ’s humble obedience! Think of Philippians 2:5-11, again, and read it as a hymn this time:

Your attitude should be the same as Christ Jesus:

*Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;
rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming 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 acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.*

Meditate and Pray: What is your experience when you hear the words of one of your favorite hymns? Should we not sing with all our hearts when the deepest truths about God are expressed for us in words familiar to us? James White, in his book, *The Forgotten Trinity*, describes what he thinks happened to the Philippians when they heard this well-known hymn in their day:

In our day, it is common for a minister to incorporate a reference to a well-known and well-loved hymn so as to make a strong point. Many close a sermon on the grace of God, for example, by saying, “Amazing grace, how

sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me!” The minister doesn’t need to tell us what hymn number he is referring to. He doesn’t need to give us the name. Just a line or two is enough. “I once was blind, but now I see” is sufficient to bring our minds the entire message contained in the song. I believe that is exactly what Paul is doing ... In these words Paul takes us to the highest points of scriptural revelation, speaking of great eternal truths. Yet he does so through the words of a familiar song.

Let us give thanks that our hearts can well up with joy like the Philippians did when they heard this first Christmas carol! By the Spirit of God in each of us, these words ring true: Our Savior becomes our “Rock of Refuge” by taking on our human nature! By being “found in that nature as a servant,” Christ becomes our Elder Brother, ensuring us access to the throne of Heaven – where that nature is now, exalted to the Father’s right hand!

Wednesday: read Philippians 2:1-4 and 2:9-11. The Bible’s teaching on the Trinity is clearly something that the Apostles experienced and then wrote about. In other words, as eyewitnesses, the Apostles first saw the Trinity at work in their own lives, and in the lives of believers in the church. They found the Trinity to be the only explanation for the work of grace that saved them. They became Trinitarian by *experiencing* Christ’s saving power, and then naturally wrote about it in their inspired writings.

For example, the Apostle Paul brackets His words about Christ’s birth in Phil 2:5-8 with allusions to “participation in the Spirit” (Phil 2:1), and with words about the Father exalting Jesus in Phil 2:9-11. In other words, we begin to understand what Jesus did for us in verses 5-8 by first understanding the Holy Spirit’s and the Father’s role in Christ’s birth! It is through “fellowship with the Spirit of God” that the Philippians have experienced comfort from God’s love, and encouragement from Christ (Philippians 2:1). It is likewise because the Father has exalted Christ Jesus that He receives glory as the exalted Lord (Philippians 2:9-11). We worship Christ because God the Father has exalted Him. And we personally experience the bond of our union with Christ because the Spirit has poured Jesus’ love into our hearts (Romans 5:5).

Let us give thanks that we can *experience* the reality of the Trinity by sharing the blessings of Philippians 2:1! Even more, let us thankfully recognize that Christ came down at Christmastime in order to reveal the full and rich work of the Triune God in our midst. Christ’s birth means that we can be re-born by the Spirit and adopted into the Father’s family!

Thursday: read Philippians 2:9-11 and Hebrews 10:5-7. Why did God the Father so exalt Jesus, giving Him the “name above every name” in verses 9-11? Well, Paul tells us: It is because of Jesus’ obedience to His Father’s will, in fulfilling the role of the suffering servant, obedient to death in Philippians 2:8! The exaltation, then, which Paul describes here, is the exaltation of Jesus *as the crucified and risen* Savior. As Jesus Himself declares to His Father in Hebrews 10:7: “Here I am – it is written about me in the scroll – I have come to do your will, O God”.

But let us be careful here. Christ Jesus is eternally exalted, as One “in the very form of God,” *before He comes to earth to be our Savior*. In the mists of eternity, He already had the “name above every name” as the fully Divine Son of God. From eternity He is the “Lord,” just like the Father and the Spirit. But when Christ voluntarily took up our nature to die for us on the Cross, He brought new glory to God the Father and was exalted as the God-Man, because He fulfilled His duty to His Father as our Redeemer!

The key point to see is that the Son of God revealed His eternal love for His Father through His act of becoming a servant. *He did not become less Divine to save us*. Rather, He *added* to His eternally Divine nature as God’s Son by taking on Himself the form of a servant. In this way, He chose to reveal the sacrificial love at the heart of the Trinity - by *adding* the true form of a servant who would die on the Cross! As B.B. Warfield put it:

He who fully possessed all the qualities which make God all that God is ... also took to Himself "the form of a servant" ...all those essential qualities which belong to being "a servant."

Meditate and Pray: What a strong foundation we have for our salvation! Jesus Christ, the very fullness of God (Colossians 2:9), who has always possessed the full glory and Divine nature of God, takes the lowest place in order to "make His life a ransom for many!" No wonder the Father exalts Christ Jesus above "every name" in Philippians 2:9-11! Let us as a church, therefore, learn with the Philippians what it means to magnify Christ's servanthood in our worship at Christmastime, as we are led by the Holy Spirit to "glorify the Son" in all He did for us, and in all that He is as God (John 14:26 & 16:14)!

Friday: read Philippians 2:5-9 and John 10:17-18. Paul's great Christmas hymn in Philippians 2 honors Christ's *obedience*: obedient in taking our nature in Mary's womb; obedient in submitting to the Law's requirements and curse - both in His sinless life and death in our place; obedient in His earning eternal life for us as fallen children of Adam - a comprehensive obedience resulting in our salvation as those justified by His righteousness and born again by His Spirit. We have now received the full rights as sons!

But notice that Christ's obedience did not stop with His death on the Cross! A close reading of John 10:17-18 shows that *even His rising from the dead* was an act of mighty obedience to His Father's will. Look at verse 18 again: "No man taketh it (my life) from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This **commandment** have I received of my Father."

Meditate and Pray: Give thanks for Christ's total obedience! As God's Son, He was mighty enough to walk the path of obedience to His Father - even right through the valley of the shadow of death and the crucifixion! What a determined Savior we have! And praise His Name, He still stands at His post as our Prophet, Priest and King! He is still beloved of His Father because He will never relinquish His duty of redeeming and interceding for sinners! Behold Him standing there to pray for us and one day to come and take us to be with Himself (Acts 7:55-56)!

Sat/Sun: read Philippians 2:5-7 and Matthew 27:39-44. The most offensive claim which Jesus made was to be the eternal Son of God. For this statement, His own people sought to stone Him for blasphemy in John 10:33. Then, as He hung on the Cross, they mocked Him as forsaken by God and therefore unable to save Himself (Matthew 27:39-44).

But in His death, Christ shouted with almighty power, "**Father into your hands I commit my spirit!**" (Luke 23:46). That mighty cry of victory not only silenced all His foes but caused the very creation itself to bear its testimony that Christ's work on the Cross was indeed accepted by the Father. The earthquake proves this, as does the torn curtain in the temple. Through this cry, the Man of Sorrows, rejected by men because of His claim to Divinity, becomes our refuge and unchanging Savior. He is the same, "yesterday, today and forever" because He is God in our flesh! See Hebrews 13:8.