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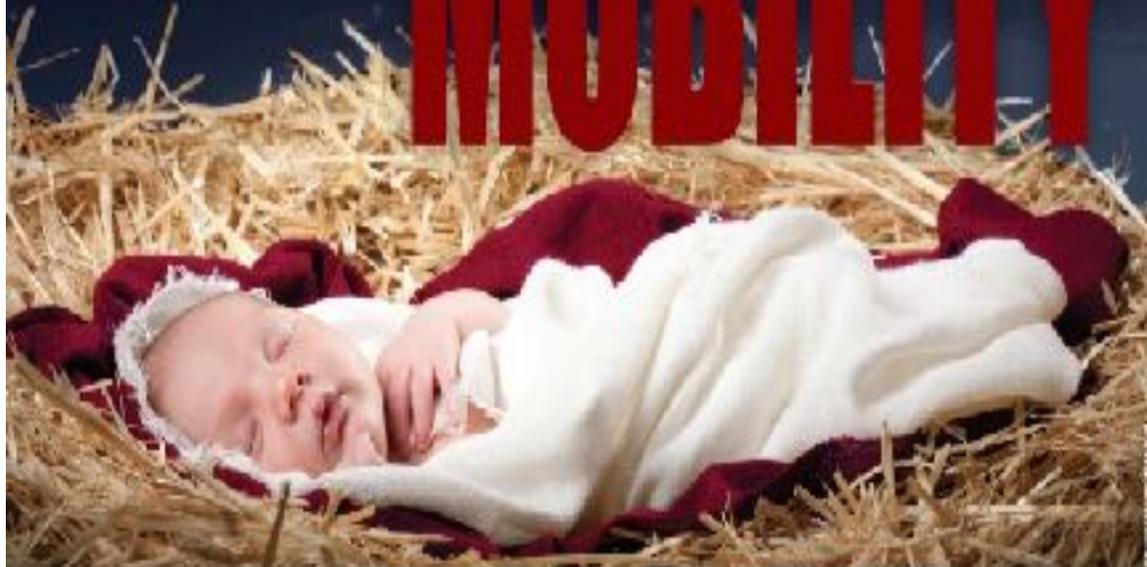
UNPRECEDENTED MOVE FOR GAIN

DOWNWARD



GARY INRIG

MOBILITY



The bitterly fought election of 2012 is over, and the consequences remain to be seen. It seemed at times that the two parties inhabited two different countries, so different were their understandings of the problems and the necessary solutions. On one thing they agreed, however: the middle class had been hammered by the Great Recession. The standard of living of millions of people is heading in the wrong direction, and downward mobility is a nightmare, not a dream. Reality has deviated from the American dream of upward mobility, of climbing the ladder of success and going from rags to riches. Life is like the old game Chutes and Ladders: no one wants to land on a chute; our goal is to find a quick way to the top. We don't want to have a downfall or to be downsized or downgraded. We'd rather be upgraded and receive the free gift of salvation and eternal life. We do not imitate Him to receive the gift of eternal life—that comes by faith alone. But, as our Lord and Savior, He becomes the perfect model of a life worthy of the gospel.

Philippians 2:5-11 is one of the great mountain peaks of Scripture, a glorious display of the glory and grace of our Lord Jesus. It is full of great, mind-stretching theology that drives us to worship. At the same time it is written to be a life-transforming model for our relationships with others, to show us what it means for a person to “look out not merely to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.” By pointing us to the Lord Jesus, Paul wants us to realize that in order to grow in Christian character and conduct, specifically in humility and mutual love, we need to grow in our understanding of our Lord and Savior.

Paul's great discourse on Christ, often described as the Christ-hymn, falls into two parts. In the first half, verses 6 to 8, the Lord Jesus is the actor, as He freely chooses the path of downward mobility and humbles Himself all the way to the cross. In the second half, verses 9 to 11, God the Father is the actor, as He responds to the self-emptying of the Son by giving Him the highest name and exalting Him to the highest place.

DOWNWARD MOBILITY

“...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 a cross” (Phil. 2:6-8).

First, Paul begins our journey by pulling back the veil and giving us insight into the eternal mystery of our triune God. As the starting point, we must realize that the Lord Jesus is eternally and fully God. So Paul tells us that He was “in the form of God.” This is a description rich in significance. The word “form” in Greek describes an outward form that is in perfect harmony with the essence or nature of something. Since God is spirit and doesn't have a physical form, this phrase is a declaration that the Lord Jesus possessed the exact nature and essence of God and eternally lived in the glory that surrounds God. All that God is, He eternally is. As John 1:1 tells us, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” To reinforce this idea, Paul makes it clear that the Lord Jesus possessed “equality with God”. He was not a second category being. All that God is, He is.

Here we glimpse the central Christian truth about God: He is triune. The mystery of the Trinity is that the one eternal God has eternally existed as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Lord Jesus did not become God, as if that were possible. He eternally is God, and all that God had, He had.

Next, in verse six, Paul points us to what the Lord chose to do with what was rightly His. “He did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped.” Here is the wonder of our God: He chose to give and not get. The key statement in this clause involves a rare idiom that has proven hard to render into English and has caused scholars to write pages. What does it mean that “He did not consider equality a thing to be grasped”? There are two main ideas. First, the expression indicates that “equality with God” was already in His possession. He did not need to grasp for equality, since He already possessed it. Second, He chose not to use what was fully and rightfully His for His own advantage, making the most of His opportunity. In other words, Jesus’ response to His equality with God was very different from that of political leaders, ancient and modern, who leverage their positions to enrich themselves or to promote their own interests, or when we see business people gain the power to get their own way and quickly move to exploit all the perks that they can.

Someone has observed that one of the most revealing tests of a person is what he does with privileges. Will he use them or abuse them?

The Lord Jesus would have been perfectly righteous in doing anything he desired. He is Lord of all, the Creator, and all things were created for his glory. Nevertheless, He rejected the idea that his position was for His advantage and well-being. He could have used what was rightfully His to do anything He wanted; He could have acted as he pleased with no one to resist or contradict. Instead, He responded in exactly the opposite way, revealing the heart of God in an unforgettable way: He gives and does not grasp; he gives and does not seek to gain.

The third step in this biography of our Lord Jesus is expressed in verse 8: He emptied himself by choosing to become a slave. We need to listen carefully to what Paul says here. When the word “empty” is used of a person, it means “to make one’s self nothing, to pour oneself out.” A human being can’t empty himself of his “humanness”, but he can “pour himself out.” Paul writes very carefully: Jesus emptied himself “by taking the form of a slave”. He emptied himself by adding!

He did not cease to be who He eternally was; He became what he was not. This statement bears careful thought. Just as certainly as He was “in the form of God”, He came to be in “the form of a slave”. The sovereign God divested Himself, not of His deity, but of His autonomy. He gave up the right to do as He pleased when He pleased. He became subject to the Father, surrendering the independent exercise of His attributes.

Paul explains this surrender further by telling us that taking this form of a slave meant that He was being born in the likeness of men. This mystery is the incarnation, the great truth we celebrate every Christmas that “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (Jn. 1:14). As Paul describes this remarkable event, however, he makes an important but subtle shift. While he said Jesus took the “form of a slave”, he uses a different word to explain Jesus’ birth and writes that He was born in the “likeness” of men, not in their “form”. Paul chooses this different Greek word to make a point: “likeness” is a word that looks at the outward appearance of something, but it may not tell you all there is to know about that thing. It describes similarity but not identity.

For example, several years ago, my wife and I were on a tour of Greece that took us to a small Greek island. As we walked we noticed two men sitting having coffee at a dockside café. They seemed strangely familiar, and Elizabeth told me who she thought one of them was, but I insisted that it couldn’t be—there were none of the trappings that would surround such a person. As we were looking, they signaled to invite us over. I politely waved back and declined the offer. After all, we had places to go and things to

see. That night, watching television, we realized that we had declined coffee with the president of Greece and the prime minister of Australia! As you can imagine, as much as possible I avoid recalling that moment in the presence of my wife. At the time, it had seemed impossible that she could have been right; both men had seemed so ordinary! They had successfully assumed the likeness of ordinary tourists.

In a far more profound way, Jesus was “in the likeness of men”. He was truly and fully human, but he was not merely human. He was always the God-man. The One born to Mary is “Immanuel”, God with us.

Still the downward journey continues as Paul describes a fourth step in Jesus’ “emptying”. It is beyond imagining that the eternal God became human, yet Paul wants us to understand that He also experienced ultimate humiliation, death on a cross. The Lord Jesus did not merely “empty” himself to become human, but being found in human form, he humbled himself. This humbling of the Lord Jesus was a personal choice, not an imposed one. He humbled Himself. The very act of becoming human was a tremendous act of self-giving, but even as a human, He humbled Himself. He didn’t come as a “king’s kid” but lived as a peasant among peasants, in an occupied, second-class country.

His humbling, however, was far from the end: he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death. It is important to observe that He chose death. For us, death is a normal part of life in a fallen world—the wages of the sin we have committed. We do not obey to the point of death; we die whether we like it or not. Jesus, however, chose death: “I lay down my life for the sheep.... No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord” (Jn. 10:15, 17). He was the sinless One, dying in place of sinful ones: “The Son of Man came ... to give his life as a ransom for the many” (Matt. 20:28).

We have not finished yet. Not only did he humble himself to a death he did not deserve, but He humbled himself to even death on a cross. We are so familiar with the fact that Jesus was crucified that we have lost the sense of horror that those words would convey to anyone living at the time. It was virtually forbidden even to speak of a cross or crucifixion in polite society. A “cross-death” was an unspeakably cruel death, full of pain and suffering, the epitome of terror and torture. Further, it was a criminal’s death, utterly shameful and degrading, as one was impaled naked before mocking, jeering spectators. Worst of all, crucifixion was considered a cursed death, as a person came under the judgment of God. And that cursed death is precisely the death Jesus died as He bore the wrath of the righteous God for our sins, not His. He is our Substitute and Savior.

At this point we can only bow in wonder and adoration, amazed at the extent of the self-giving love of the Lord Jesus in our place. As the old hymn puts it, “Hallelujah, what a Savior!” We have reached the lowest point of Jesus’ self-giving love, but this is far from the end of the story!

DIVINE EXALTATION

“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, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2:9-11).

As we have already noted, God the Father now becomes the central actor in the story. The Lord Jesus has humbled himself, but He does not exalt Himself. It is the

Father's response to affirm and vindicate the crucified One. Paul first tells us what the Father has done (verse 9) and then what he will do (verses 10, 11).

First, the Father has exalted the Lord Jesus. This exaltation involves two things. Because of Jesus' self-giving, self-emptying love, the Father has given his Son the highest place. Therefore God has highly exalted him. This exaltation doesn't mean that Jesus has been given a higher place than before—you cannot be higher than fully equal with God. It does mean, however, that He now occupies the supreme, unrivaled place of supremacy and glory. Paul does not take the time to detail the means by which this occurred—His resurrection from the dead, His ascension into heaven, His enthronement in majesty as Lord and King. He simply wants us to recognize that nothing and no one is higher than Jesus, and this fact reflects a fundamental spiritual principle: "Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted" (Matt. 23:12).

The Father has also given His Son the highest name, "the name above all names". In biblical terms, to give someone a name means to recognize someone's nature and to honor their achievements. It is far more than a label. The Father has given His Son the highest name because, as the Lord said, the Father's purpose is that all people honor Him as they honor the Father (Jn. 5:23).

What name is this "name above all names"? At first glance it appears to be Jesus. After all, the next verse says that it is "at the name of Jesus" that every knee will bow. But, wonderful as that name is in that it reminds us of the earthly life of our Lord Jesus, it is more likely that the name above all names is "Lord," the name that every tongue will confess. The word "LORD" is the way the New Testament renders the name of God in the Old Testament, Yahweh, which is God's personal name. This understanding of the "name above all names" is likely because in verse 10, Paul is referring to Isaiah 45:21-23: "Was it not I, the LORD? And there is no other god besides me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is none besides me. Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other. By myself I have sworn; from my mouth has gone out in righteousness a word that shall not return: 'To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear allegiance'" (Is. 45:21-23). Jesus is properly addressed with the name of God himself, in full recognition of his equality with the Father.

Finally, what verse 9 describes has already transpired. Verses 10 and 11, however, point forward to the fact that God the Father has purposed universal acknowledgement of Jesus as Lord. Paul shifts his focus to the future day when the Lord returns in power and glory to establish His kingdom. Then all intelligent created beings from all time and all places— those beings in heaven (presumably angels and perhaps the believing dead), on earth (living humans) and "under the earth" (apparently demons and the unbelieving dead) will find themselves in the presence of the Lord Jesus. On that day, without exception, every knee will bow and every tongue confess, "Jesus Christ is Lord". For some, this event will be a time of joyful celebration delighting in the acclamation of the One who is their Savior and Lord. For others, it will be the terrifying recognition that the One whom they had ignored, opposed, or rejected is both God and Lord. No being that has ever existed will be exempt from this moment: all will declare that Jesus is exactly who He is, and in that declaration God the Father will be glorified.

In the presence of such truth, we cannot and must not be indifferent. For those who have not confessed Jesus as Lord, there is a profound warning. One day you will see Jesus as He truly is and confess Him as Lord and God. But that declaration will condemn you, not save you. Now it is the time to "confess with your mouth and believe

in your heart that God has raised him from the dead” so that you may receive God’s salvation (Rom. 10:9).

For a Christ-follower, the only proper response to such truths about our Lord Jesus is worship, praise and thanksgiving. We have the privilege not only of anticipating that great day when all will confess Jesus as Lord, but also of bowing the knee to Him today with a grateful heart that declares with wonder: “Christ Jesus my Lord”.

Today in a very practical way we need to remember the reason the Holy Spirit led Paul to write these words. As individuals and as Christ-followers we are to imitate our Lord: “in humility, consider others more significant than yourselves” (Phil. 2:3). After all, He did not consider equality with God something to be used for His own advantage, but He emptied Himself, humbling Himself not only to become a man, but “to death on a cross” for our sakes and in our place. So we ask the Lord for His grace so that we may “Have this mind among yourselves, which was also in Christ Jesus.” † By Gary Inrig



New Location on Redlands Blvd.; Details follow in the Inkwell.