

## Jesus Christ's Humbling of Himself

What does it mean that Jesus Christ “emptied Himself” (Phil. 2:7) and “humbled Himself” (Phil. 2:9)? Many commentators on St Paul get this wrong, and should not have done so. They assume that Paul was writing about the Son of God in eternity, and understand him to say merely that the divine Son in eternity condescended to become a human being. Obviously, it was a great condescension for God the Son to become a human being. However, that was not Paul’s meaning. The New Testament in fact used the name “Jesus Christ” for the Son of God after He has become man. Paul wrote, “Have the same attitude as Christ Jesus had” (Phil 2:5). Further on, he linked Jesus Christ’s humiliation to His existence on earth as a human being. “When He was found in the appearance of a human being, He humbled Himself” (Phil. 2:7-8).

Some people often have a similar naïve understanding of 2 Cor 8: “Though He was rich, yet because of you He became poor, in order that you through His poverty might become rich” (2 Cor 8:9). Paul did not mean that the Son of God in eternity gave up the wealth of His divine nature, His unlimited power, knowledge, and His heavenly bliss to live as a man on earth. His exaltation also did not mean that Jesus ceased to live as a human being, and once again took on the divine nature. When He emptied Himself and humbled Himself, He did not cease to be God. In His exaltation He is still a human being.

Many English translations also misunderstand Paul in Philippians 2. They translate in such a way that they make Paul contradict what he has just written, “He was in the form of God.” The GNB translated, “He did not think that by force he should try to become equal with God” (Phil 2:6). It is wrong to suggest that to have equality with God would not have been “robbery” (KJV). Paul’s meaning was that Jesus did not consider His equality with God as a prize for Him, as a human being, to exploit (Phil 2:6).

The Greek word for “empty” was *kenos*. We have the word in English in “cenotaph”: an empty tomb. The misunderstanding of Jesus Christ’s emptying Himself and humbling Himself referred to above was apparent in a number of theological writers in the nineteenth century. We call their wrong understanding of the two natures in Jesus Christ “Kenoticism.” It was the view that the Divine Son abandoned His divine attributes, such as His possession of all power, His knowledge of all things, and His rule over the world in order to become man. They held that “receptivity” had been part of the make-up of God the Son in eternity before His incarnation. This implied that His nature had not been not fully divine. Another similar view was that, even when Jesus Christ was a human being, God the Son restrained His activity in order to allow a genuine consciousness in Jesus the human being.

In Philippians 2 Paul was speaking about Jesus Christ after He had become man. A man who was “in the form of God” could have been the greatest ruler of all time. As an athlete he would have won every event. No one could have outwitted him. No one could hurt him in any way. He could have single-handedly defeated any army, even with sophisticated modern weapons. There is a tendency for power to corrupt sinful human beings. They succumb to the temptation to use power selfishly. Since Jesus was at the same time God, how should we understand His emptying Himself and His humiliation?

We know what it means for human beings to humble themselves. Hagar was told to humble herself under Sarah’s hands. When Israelites fasted on the Day of Atonement, they “humbled their souls” (Lv 16:29). When the Assyrians led Manasseh, the king of Israel, into captivity, he “humbled himself before the God of his fathers” (2 Chr 33:12-13). To put it simply, Jesus was like a very rich man who made very little use of His riches. When He used them, He used them only for the benefit of others.

The best way to express this is to say that, although, as man, He had the full nature of God and all power and knowledge, for our sakes did not often use them. He used them when He performed miracles. When Jesus told those who had come to arrest Him, “I am He”, they went backwards, and fell to the ground (Jn 18:6). If he had kept using His majesty in the Garden of Gethsemane, they could not have arrested Him. Even on the cross, His life was not taken from Him by the scourging and the crucifixion. He had said, “The reason why the Father loves Me is that I lay down My life, in order that I may take it back again. No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of My own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it back again (Jn 10:17-18).

We see the non-use of the divine majesty that He still possessed as man when He underwent temptation, and when He said “No one knows about that day or hour, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father (Mk 13:32). We see it in His genuine human development as a child. He not only grew taller, but also developed in knowledge, and went through a process of learning to know God better and underwent social development. “Jesus grew wiser and taller and increased in the approval of God and of people” (Lk 2:52). We see the non-use of the powers available to Him when He resisted the taunts that He should come down from the cross, and when He cried out, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” If He had constantly used the divine majesty that He had, He would not have suffered and died for us. During His life on earth He never used His divine power and knowledge to benefit Himself. He refused to turn stones into bread, although He could have. During His ministry He regularly spoke of powers as what had been given to Him by the Father.

Our salvation is bound up in the relationship of the two natures in Jesus Christ, both God and man. His human blood has the power to cleanse from sin, because it is the very own blood of God the Son. His flesh is live-giving because it is the very own flesh of God the Son. His human words were God’s words, full of the Spirit and life.

Paul expressed the low point of Jesus’ humbling Himself as “He humbled Himself, becoming obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross” (Phil 2:7-8). What is crucial for us is that we maintain a proper “theology of the cross.” It was not only the lowest stage of Jesus’ emptying Himself, but the completion of His obedience. His cross was the means of our atonement.

Jesus’ most common way of referring to Himself was using the title “the Son of Man.” It came from Daniel 7. He is both a man and a heavenly figure. It is said there that He is given an eternal kingdom. As His emptying Himself, His humiliation, was the non-use the divine powers available to Him as man, His exaltation was the full use of divine powers also as man.

Although the New Testament usually says that in His resurrection the Father raised Him, He also said, “I lay down My life, in order that I may take it back again” (Jn 10:17-18). His ascension into heaven is also described as “being lifted up” (Ac 1:9).

In Athanasius’ *Oration against the Arians* we observe that theologian moving towards a fuller understanding of the Scriptures when things are said to be given to Jesus, and when He is said to become something or made something. They refer to Him as a human being. He had always had all authority in heaven and on earth, authority to forgive sins, the authority to raise the dead and judge the world. These powers were given to Him as a human being. He said, “For as the Father has life in Himself, so He has also granted the Son to have life in Himself. He has also given Him authority to carry out judgment, because He is the Son of Man” (Jn 5:26-27). Although God did not allow anyone else to use His special name, “LORD”, Paul said about Jesus Christ, “All the people of Israel should know for certain that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, Lord and Christ” (Ac 2:36). When Paul wrote about Jesus’ exaltation he also used the word, “given.” “God also has very highly exalted Him, and given Him the name that is above every other name” (Phil. 2:9).

The pattern in Jesus Christ is one that Christian people should emulate. Paul used Jesus Christ’s example to encourage the Philippians to do nothing out of selfish ambition or empty conceit. He exhorted them in humility to regard others as being better than they were (Phil 2:3). As an ambassador for Christ, Paul himself refrained from using the techniques of oratory and the wisdom of men in his preaching. He refused to use words of human wisdom, because these could not explain the saving significance of the cross of Christ. The word of the cross is not the wisdom of this world. Although those who are lost regard Christ’s cross as folly, it is the power of God that saves people. If Jesus Christ stooped to such depths, we should not look for displays of power and glory as proofs. The persecutions that Paul suffered for Christ’s sake belonged to the same fabric as His message about the crucified Christ. If he had proclaimed circumcision rather than Christ’s cross as the basis of salvation, he could have been made his peace with Judaism. Jesus’ cross is the decisive revelation of God in human history and leads to salvation. It does away with all attempts of human beings to magnify themselves.