

GOD THE SON

Philippians 2:3–11 • Char Brodersen

Introduction: Good morning, Church! On January 1, we began a journey as a church community to read through the whole Bible in one year. And we are dedicating this year to reading, studying, applying, and discussing the story of Scripture. Within this journey through the Bible, we are taking time here on Sunday mornings to dig deep into various themes and topics of the Scripture together so that as we read through, study, dive in, and struggle with the Bible this year, it will help us to grow in our understanding of the full narrative and grand story of salvation and confidence of the goodness and unfailing love of our God. And by God's grace, to find our story being continually caught up, shaped, and transformed by the biblical story.

Last week, we looked at the person of the Father and focused in on the deep, deep love he has for the Son and the world and the confidence that we can have about how God feels and relates to us. This morning, we continue our series on our Trinitarian God—looking at God the Son.

Christians uniquely believe that there is one supreme God who is over all things. He is the creator of all things in both heaven and earth, visible and invisible; and that this God is not singular and static in his person but is actuality dynamic and communal. God himself is a community—Father, Son, and Spirit—what we call the Trinity. Though the Scriptures do not use the word Trinity (it was first coined by Tertullian around 170 AD), we believe that the idea of what this word seeks to capture is clearly revealed in Scripture over and over again.

Now there are all sorts of ideas we have about God and what we think he is like and what he really wants from us humans.

As I mentioned last week, our mistake is that we often begin with our own ideas about God, whether from Christian culture, our upbringing, or the surrounding culture, and then we try to fit the biblical God into that idea. And even though the biblical picture might be radically contrary to our own ideas, they tend to work as a default setting of our brain.

And because of this, we need our minds renewed and rewired by the testimony of Scripture to know and understand the truth about who God is and what he is like.

This is so often the case when it comes to the divinity of Jesus. We can't understand or makes sense of how the Father is equally God, Jesus the Son is equally God, and that the Spirit is equally God. We tend to think that God must be one, but manifests himself in three different ways—Father, Son, and Spirit (Modalist Heresy), or that the Son and the Spirit must be created by the Father, and though divine, they are lesser than the Father (Subordinationism Heresy). And we can find verses that we think support this idea—*Well, Jesus did say that the Father was greater than he was (John 14:28); Jesus also said that there were certain things that only the Father knew (Matthew 24:36). Maybe we got it wrong.*

On top of that, the Christian cults, along with skeptics of the Christian faith, require proof text for Jesus' divinity. Jesus must say the exact words in English: "I am God." You can't find that anywhere in the New Testament. But instead, what you find is that over and over again, Jesus takes upon himself the divine Name and Identity of YHWH as revealed in the Scripture and works the works that YHWH worked. Those who have eyes will see, and those who have ears will hear that Jesus is one and the same with the God revealed in Scripture.

The truth is that if you believe that your sins are forgiven for Jesus' sake, because of his atoning work on the cross, if you believe in Jesus Christ for your salvation and admittance into the family and kingdom of God, you are Trinitarian, whether you would claim that or even realize it, whether we think you understand it or not. I want to say, by the way, that I don't believe that I understand the Trinity. I don't believe I have it all figured out. But I accept and trust that he is who Scripture has revealed him to be.

I also don't believe that the point of the study of God—Father, Son, and Spirit—is to fully understand and truly grasp the fullness of who God is. I believe that all theology should be an exercise in humility, faith, surrender, and worship—accepting that this is who God is—Father, Son, and Spirit—and that even the concept that the word Trinity seeks to capture cannot fully describe or contain the vastness and greatness of who God is. The purpose is to know this God who is revealed in and through Jesus, to experience his love, his presence, his forgiveness, his grace, and his life!

You may recall the passage from the Book of Job where Job speaks of the majesty of God in his power and wisdom as he rules over his creation. As Job goes on, stanza after stanza, describing God's wisdom and power, he says,

"These are but the outer fringe of his works; how faint the whisper we hear of him! Who then can understand the thunder of his power?"

—Job 26:14

I think that often in our thoughts and study of God, we don't want to discover, wonder, or even understand God. We want to master him, we want to figure him out completely, we want to dispel all mystery and faith, relegate and fit him nicely into our categories and corners rather than be caught up in wonder, in mystery, and worship of the God who is. As C. S. Lewis's character, Mr. Beaver, put it in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, "He is not safe, but he is good."

As one songwriter put it: *"But to know the greatness of who You are, to do my best to understand is like trying to empty the ocean into the palm of my hand"* (Brett Williams).

How many times are we told how high God's ways, how vast his wisdom is beyond ours—that he is unsearchable in his wisdom, unfathomable in his person? And then the Scripture reveals that this God has done the unthinkable and become human in order to rescue and redeem us. And we think—*No, I cannot comprehend or accept that*. Maybe that's part of the point?? It blows all categories and borders—it leads us into deep, uncharted waters of mystery, of surrender, and of worship.

I really appreciated the way theologian and professor Beth Felker Jones put this. She says,

"How could God, who is not us, become one of us? How could God, who is perfect, eternal, and immutable, be identified with a human being, with human limits, and subject to change and suffering? To some, it seemed laughable or, worse, blasphemous to suggest that the Holy God had become a baby boy or that nails might be driven through God's hands to secure him to a cross. It is not for nothing that Paul preaches, 'We proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles' (1 Cor. 1:23). The mercy of the incarnation does not undo the paradox or clear away the mystery. It is not a purely rational solution to the seeming impossibility of the holy and eternal God becoming a vulnerable infant or bleeding sacrifice, but it is a recognition of what God has done in Jesus, of its beauty and its graciousness, which has the power to move us to praise."

—Beth Felker Jones, *Practicing Christian Doctrine*.

I think that Philippians 2:3–11 might be the most comprehensive passages in all of the New Testament concerning the identity and career or ministry of Jesus. It's a fascinating passage when we consider that Paul is talking very practically to the church about how to live their lives now as the new creation people of God. He is calling this church community to live a lifestyle that is in line with and worthy of the Gospel—a life that puts the life of Jesus on display. We pick up in verse 3 where he writes,

"Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset 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.”

—Philippians 2:3–11

I. The Son’s Preexistence

- A. Paul talks about the ministry or career of Jesus—not beginning in Bethlehem or even the baptismal waters of the Jordan—but like the apostle John, he speaks of Jesus as the preincarnate Son of God, who is in very nature God and equal with God.
- B. Last week, we explored what John believed and understood about Jesus of Nazareth’s preexistence as the divine Word of God—who is God, and who is with God—the One who created all things, who lived from all eternity in deepest relationship with God the Father. Here we have Paul echoing the same truths concerning Jesus. Paul says that though Jesus (before his incarnation) was in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used for his own advantage; rather, he emptied himself, or made himself nothing, by taking the form of a servant, being made in human likeness.
- C. Or, if you like, John puts it this way: **“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us** [a reference to God’s tabernacle in the wilderness with the children of Israel]. **We have seen his glory, the glory of the** (Only Begotten) **one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”**

- 1. But doesn’t Son imply a birth and a beginning? And, therefore, doesn’t that mean that even at some point in time, in eternity past, the Son was born or created?

- a. Luke Timothy Jones, in his unpacking of the Nicene Creed, is extremely helpful in his explanation of what it means that Jesus is the “only begotten Son.” He says,

“This language is both revealing and inhibiting. On one side, when the Son is said to be ‘begotten out of the Father before all the ages,’ we can grasp the metaphor in its positive dimension: we understand that the Son is not something made by the Father as part of creation, but is rather an extension or expansion of the Father’s own existence. We recognize that our human offspring are not things we ‘make.’ They are not our possessions. They are bone of our bone, flesh of our flesh. They are ‘out of us’ and share our substance, and are often, as the saying has it, our ‘spitting image.’”

- b. He goes on ...

“But the metaphor also inhibits us, because our understanding of the relation of a father to a son is so bound up with biological parenthood. Our children are born helpless and dependent. They are less than we are. They are subordinate. They need to grow in order to become independent. Then we will die and they will replace us, only to have children of their own. It is difficult for us to think about an eternally begotten Son without treating the begetting as something that happened in time and in the manner of a human birth.”

—Luke Timothy Jones, *The Creed*

- c. You see, when we refer to Jesus as the only begotten Son of the Father, we mean that he came from and returned to God in a way that no other human has or will or could, because when he came from God, he remained what he had been (the eternal Son), and when he returned to God, he returned to his own rightful place. The Man, Jesus of Nazareth, is also the eternal only Son of the Father.

II. Incarnation—Life, Death, and Resurrection

- A. A word that we associate so closely with the person of Jesus, the Son of God, is the word GRACE. Paul writes to the church in Corinth: **“May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.”** Grace means unearned or undeserved kindness or favor. And this is the word used most by the New Testament writers to describe what God has done for humanity and the creation in and through Jesus. It’s all grace! And that is clearly what we see in the person of Jesus Christ, who left his preexistent glory to rescue and redeem a lost humanity.
- B. After Paul has described this preexistent state of glory that Jesus the Son existed in with the Father, Paul describes these progressive steps downward in deep humility that Jesus underwent to rescue and redeem us.
- C. It’s interesting to note that in the Gospel of John, Jesus is identified as the Son of God who has been sent by the Father into the world to reveal his love and salvation. Here in Philippians, there is no reference to the Son being sent but instead his own willingness and desire to come to humanity’s aid. Paul notes that Jesus did not use his position and place as God and with God for his own benefit, but laid it aside, emptied himself, and became one of us! But what did he empty himself of?
 - a. *“The preexistent divine son, of his own volition, ‘emptied himself’ (the Greek word meaning strip, empty, deprive, render to no effect) and took to himself the form of a servant. His divinity was not lost but it was also not exercised. Jesus took upon himself the form of fallen human nature—mortal and corruptible (Romans 8:3) and lived directed and dependent on the Spirit. The word became flesh and exercised power through the Spirit, not on his own. The Son’s self-emptying meant that Jesus was compelled to rely on the Spirit; the Son decided not to make use of divine attributes independently but experienced what it would mean to be truly human.”*—Simon Ponsonby, *God Inside Out*
 - b. But what about all the amazing miracles that Jesus performed? Isn’t that him showing that he is God/divine? I’m not sure it is. Certainly, it is Jesus showing that he is One and the same God revealed to Israel in the Old Testament in the sense of that all his works line up with YHWH’s works and character seen in the biblical witness. But I believe Scripture supports that the power behind the miracles come from Jesus being the true and perfect Spirit-filled human, rather than deriving simply from his divine nature.
 - c. Please don’t misunderstand what I’m saying. I absolutely affirm Jesus’ full divinity. I just think sometimes the church forgets that Jesus was fully human as well. I think we often overemphasize the divinity of Jesus to the point that he isn’t human at all—but that’s the opposite of what the Gospels tell us. Jesus experienced every aspect of what it means to be human, yet without sin. He was tired, thirsty, hungry, sad, and tempted, to mention a few aspects of the limitations and experiences of being human. He was subject to it all in order to be our perfect substitute and representative to God the Father, but also in order to be our example of what it looks like to live a life in the Spirit and by the Spirit. Jesus is the truest human.
 - d. It is Jesus, as the Spirit-filled human, that works signs and wonders, that speaks with an authority like no other living person. It is by and through the power of the Spirit that Jesus overcomes the Devil and the temptations in the wilderness; fulfills the prophetic vision of Isaiah 61. It is through the power of the Holy Spirit that Jesus establishes the kingdom of God through his life, death, and resurrection.

- e. Instead of using his position for his own advantage, he emptied himself, or made himself of no reputation, or “of his own free will, he gave up all he had.” God becomes human. **But not just human, a servant, and not just any old servant, a servant to meet humanity’s deepest need of healing and redemption!**
- f. Think about the words that Paul uses. He wants us to understand the weight of this contrast. Immortal, invisible, only wise God, dwelling in unapproachable light. God, at whose sight the mountains melt like wax, the mighty sea recoils in fear. That God becomes mortal, physical, limited, vulnerable, killable. That the Everything becomes nothing. We have no measuring stick for this. The God in whom all things exist and have their being, the God of life from whom all life flows, becomes human. He empties himself. Now sometimes, as hard as it is for us to wrap our minds around Jesus preexistence, we have equal difficulty when we consider his humanness. But the Scriptures affirm over and over again—Jesus, even in his incarnation, is fully God, and he is fully human.
 - (i) The Son of God becomes one of us—dignifying our humanity—against dualism, Platonism, and Gnosticism. God takes upon himself human flesh, his own creation, and the story and plight of humanity.
- g. In Jesus’ life, God suffers with us and he suffers for us. He is the servant of the Lord, a servant to humanity, come to remove and heal all effects of the curse of sin—he ministers to the broken, the needy, poor, and sick. He has come to call sinners to repentance. He takes upon himself all our sickness and our sorrow, and it’s almost as if he lays each one on his own back as he carries them to Calvary’s tree so that he can put all sin, sickness, suffering, and death to death in his death for us.
- h. Paul’s language here, **“becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross,”** shows that he considers Christ’s death on the cross the climax of the work in him humbling himself. The way Paul writes it, it’s almost as though he still hasn’t gotten over the wonder. You see, for Paul and the Roman culture of the day, there was nothing more humiliating, appalling, and shameful than death by crucifixion.

III. But Why the Cross?

- A. That fact that God died is so mind-blowing, that God the Son freely gave up his life for us in such a horrific way. But it’s even more astounding when we think that God devised in eternity past the death on the cross. David, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, describes the crucifixion of Christ 1,000 years in advance. Isaiah likewise describes the shame and suffering of Christ 700 years in advance. Scripture calls Jesus the lamb slain before the foundation of the world (Revelation 13:8). Think about it, the Son of God could have given his life in any way. Jesus could have chosen any way to die, a different way, a less painful, a less shameful way to die. So why the cross?

1. The Holiness and Goodness of God

- a. Jesus’ death on the cross displayed most clearly God’s abhorrence of sin and the punishment that sin merits. The death of Jesus Christ on the cross was the most vivid display in all of history of God’s justice and judgment of sin. The cross testifies to the exceeding sinfulness of sin and the absolute holiness and goodness of God. Jesus was truly receiving the judgment that every single one of us deserves as sinners before a Holy God—humans are responsible for the evil, sin, and brokenness of the world. And yet, God himself takes the debt, the burden on himself.
- b. All the evil, sin, and rebellion—beginning with Adam and Eve, stretching all the way into today—must be dealt with. Jesus, the Son, comes to remove the barrier that blocks us from the kingdom and the purposes of God. It is at the cross that Jesus is both made a sacrifice

for sin—the sacrificial lamb, the Passover lamb, shedding his precious, sinless blood for our sin, and at the same time bringing all the evil, darkness, and demonic power of the world into one place, it was killed—crushed, put to death in his own body. He is like the fox and fleas.

- (i) Jesus is the ball of wool. The spotless lamb allows the evil of the whole world to be concentrated on himself. HE doesn't repay evil for evil; he doesn't overthrow the powers that be through war and bloodshed. Instead, he takes the weight of the world's evil upon himself, and the judgment for that evil, so that the world can emerge clean

2. The Love, Compassion, and Empathy of God

- a. In the cross, Jesus was identifying to the fullest extent with a suffering humanity. Humans have suffered immensely throughout history: disease, disaster, injustice, cruelty, torture, murder, heartbreak, death—history is a long tale of suffering and woe. Jesus, in his love, chose to experience the full impact of what sin had done to the human race. The cross testifies to the immeasurable compassion of the Son of God for suffering humanity!
 - (i) *"I have entered many Buddhist temples in different Asian countries and stood respectfully before the statue of Buddha, his legs crossed, arms folded, eyes closed, the ghost of a smile playing round his mouth, a remote look on his face, detached from the agonies of the world. But each time after a while I have had to turn away. And in my imagination, I have turned instead to that lonely, twisted, tortured figure on the cross, nails through hands and feet, back lacerated, limbs wrenched, brow bleeding from thorn pricks, mouth dry and intolerably thirsty, plunged in God-forsaken darkness. That is the God for me! He laid aside his immunity to pain. He entered our world of flesh and blood, tears and death. He suffered for us. The cross of Christ is God's only self-justification in such a world as ours."* —John Stott, *The Cross of Christ*
 - (ii) The cross is God's message that there is no one so wicked, so sinful, or so low, no suffering so great, that it is beyond his redemption—that they are beyond God's love and grace. Christ took upon himself the sins of the world, every evil thought, every evil deed, he took the payment for all sin, even the most heinous sins, therefore there is no one the Father will not receive, if they will believe on his Son, Jesus Christ. This is all grace!
 - (iii) *"He is with us and for us right down to the very marrow, his and ours, in a way that is only possible because he is truly God and truly human. Jesus saves us by making our situation his own."* —Beth Felker Jones, *Practicing Christian Doctrine*

IV. The Son's Return to Glory

- A. Because of this Paul says, God (the Father) has highly exalted him (God is so proud and pleased with his beloved son!) The beloved son has taken up the family business and cause, he has accomplished the work of redemption bringing God's lost children home and his good creation to new creation, through his incarnation life, death and resurrection. Because of this God the Father has highly exalted him! And has given him THE NAME (Ha-Shem) that is above every name—that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.
 - a. We might not realize the full weight of what Paul is claiming here. Most of us, when we first read this verse or maybe even now we think—I wonder what name that is? And we think that maybe God the Father has given Jesus some special name that we don't know about. This name is a reference to the very name of God revealed to Moses. YHWH! The ancient Jews would not write the name of God, removing the vowels and leaving the consonants—this is referred to as the tetragrammaton—meaning the four letters. The Jews referred to God simply as "Ha Shem"—THE NAME.

- b. This is what Paul is saying here! That Jesus, the Son of God, shares in the NAME! The very name, person, and identity of the eternal God! And one day, every knee will bow, every tongue will confess and recognize that this lowly Jewish Rabbi, from the back hills of Judea, is the King of all creation, the eternal Son of God, who will rule and reign over the kingdom of God forever and ever.
- c. When I think of the incredible humility and grace that Jesus, the Son of God, displayed for us—it brings me to worship and deep adoration. I'm reminded of Charles Wesley's words,

*And can it be that I should gain
An int'rest in the Savior's blood?
Died He for me, who caused His pain?
For me, who Him to death pursued?
Amazing love! how can it be
That Thou, my God, should die for me?*

*Amazing love! how can it be
That Thou, my God, should die for me!*

*'Tis mystery all! Th' Immortal dies!
Who can explore His strange design?
In vain the firstborn seraph tries
To sound the depths of love divine!
'Tis mercy all! let earth adore,
Let angel minds inquire no more.*

*He left His Father's throne above,
So free, so infinite His grace;
Emptied Himself of all but love,
And bled for Adam's helpless race;
'Tis mercy all, immense and free;
For, O my God, it found out me.*

Conclusion

I think for many years I've been reading and interpreting some of these passages in the wrong way. I would read them and hear Paul in passages like this saying—*don't you realize what Jesus has done for you? You really should do this for others*. Which is absolutely true. Our whole lives now should be one great celebration through worship and imitation of what God has done for us in and through Jesus Christ, his Son. But I think it's even more than that. I've come to believe that what Paul and the New Testament writers are actually saying is that we have been caught up into a new story, a story of love—the unfailing, unrelenting love of the Father. That we have been arrested and apprehended by the grace of Jesus, the Son of God. This is our story, our identity now.

So just as Jesus humbled himself—went low and served the need of humanity, suffered greatly, even to death and was finally vindicated and glorified—this is our story as well. This is what God is doing in all of those who believe in the Son of God and have life in his name. He is telling the story of Jesus through our story.

Church, let us live this story of grace together.