

Let Earth Receive Her King

by Steve Zeisler

While visiting Sydney, Australia, earlier this year, I was talking to a 10-- year-old boy, trying to describe to him where I live. He had heard of California, but he was less familiar with the San Francisco Bay area. When I said the words, "Silicon Valley," however, his eyes lit up and he nodded. Yes, he had heard of Silicon Valley, because he is one of the millions of young people who are caught up in the computer video games craze.

This valley is famous throughout the world for the Incredible technological achievements of its computer firms. These companies are daily performing wonders in the technology of compressing, of squeezing down information and capability and placing it in the tiniest packages-- little pieces of silicon.

But this morning we will consider another kind of squeezing-- down, another kind of compressing, which is infinitely more dramatic, remarkable and important than anything these computer companies have been able to achieve. Let us consider today the spiritual squeezing-down of God himself, which occurred when God became a baby and was born in Bethlehem.

In recent weeks we have been studying the book of Philippians; and we come now to verse 27 of chapter 1. (We will actually be considering most of this morning's section next week. Today we will spend our time on the last few verses.)

Philippians 1:27-2:11:

Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ; so that whether I come and see you or remain absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel; in no way alarmed by your opponents- which is a sign of destruction for them, but of salvation for you, and that too, from God. For to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for his sake, experiencing the same conflict which you saw in me, and now hear to be in me. If therefore there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is 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 of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bondservant, and being made in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore also God exalted him highly, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those who are in heaven, and on the earth, and under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

In earlier studies we noted that the theme which runs through this book is that these Philippians and the apostle Paul together shared a commitment to be participants in the gospel. Verse 27 begins a section where Paul urges the Philippians to act as they ought to act. He says, "Let your conduct be worthy of the gospel."

In these verses Paul mentions two areas in which this conduct should be manifest. First, he says, the Philippians should act with courage even when they are called upon to suffer. Stand firm in the face of opposition, he tells them. Second, he urges them to develop a willingness to relate humbly to each other in the family of Christ. Regard others as more important than yourself, he says.

To press these points home, Paul holds before us the example of Jesus Christ. There is some reason to suppose that Paul is actually quoting a hymn in this section, verses 6--11, but he himself may have written it. What he is saying is, "Jesus acted in this way, and if he can act with this kind of humility and self-denial, then we have a great responsibility to follow in his footsteps."

We are going to look closely at what Paul says about the incarnation, about that awesome condescension, when Jesus gave up his rights as God and became a human being. It is very difficult to speak of these things. There is a sense in which we are overwhelmed by the message of the incarnation. This event is beyond our comprehension, yet it is critical to our faith.

How do we describe the incarnation? How do we consider the theme, God become man? Let us look closely at the language Paul uses, beginning in verse 6 of chapter 2.

We are told, first, that "although he existed in the form of God [he was God in essence], he did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped." Christ did not hold on to his right to act and be worshipped as God, to exercise his power and his unbounded knowledge.

In Colossians, Paul describes Christ in these words:

For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities-- all things have been created by Him and for Him. And he is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. (Col.1: 16-17)

Yet Christ did not hold on to any of this. Though he had the right, he did not insist that he retain his preeminence. He became a man, and as such he did not have any advantage over us. He faced life counting on his Heavenly Father, just as we do.

In this squeezing-down process, in this spiritual compressing that took place at the incarnation, that foregoing of his right to equality with God, Jesus "emptied himself and took the form of a bond-servant." This is the Greek word, "doulos," the common word for slave in the Greek language. Slaves were a familiar sight to people in the first century. They were human beings who were owned by other human beings; they lived out their lives in service to their masters. Paul says that God became a bond-servant, a slave, for the sake of those whom he created. He ought to have been worshipped, to have been adored by the people, the angels, by the animals and by the matter which he made, yet he willingly became a servant.

In order to get some perspective on the awesomeness of the incarnation, here are the words of John, in Revelation. John is given a vision of the end, and here is his description of how Christ is adored:

Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. In a loud voice they sang:

"Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!" Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them singing:

"To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever! "

The four living creatures said, "Amen," and the elders fell down and worshipped. (Rev. 5: 11-14)

The squeezing-down goes further. Having become a servant, God did not operate from the heights, he did not bless us from a distance. He became a man, not a rich man, not a man born to luxury, who might have been insulated from the worst aspects of the human condition. God became a man, the son of a poor, dislocated

family, in a conquered nation, born among the flies and the squalor of a cave used to house animals. God became a human being so that he could embrace us as his brothers and sisters, so that he could know what we are going through, so that he could teach us what humanity ought really to be like.

The squeezing- down process, the compressing, the condescension of God goes further. We are told that he "became obedient to the point of death," Paul says. He did not have to die. He was not born with the terminal illness of sin which all of us inherit. He was a volunteer. God loved us enough to receive in himself the death sentence that properly belongs to us.

The squeezing-- down process goes a step further: Paul says, "even death on a cross." He could have chosen to die quickly and painlessly as a warrior in battle; he could have chosen to die with his family and friends around him. But he did not. He died on a cross, suffering the pain and the humiliation of a criminal's execution. Deserted by everyone, including his Father in heaven, his life finally expired because he could not breathe.

Paul says that God became a human being by choice. No one could have expected or required it of him. Freely and for love's sake he became a servant, a mortal man who died on a cross so that the power of death over us might be broken.

But the story of the incarnation of Christ does not end with the cross, or even with the resurrection. Paul goes on to say,

Therefore also God highly exalted him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those who are in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Christmas reminds us of the birth of the Baby in the stable at Bethlehem, but it is extremely important at this time of year to go on and see the end of the story, to see that Baby as God has now exalted him above every other name.

Look carefully at what Paul is saying. God has not covered over the humiliating and embarrassing event of the incarnation and then exalted Jesus to the heights. It was precisely because Jesus loved us enough to be obedient even unto death, precisely because he acted with humility, that he has been exalted. God honors those who are willing to be humble. That is the force of Jesus' example to us. Paul is saying that we should be humble hearted, that we should be concerned for one another; and he offers Jesus as an example whom God honored.

The end of the incarnation story is the exaltation of Jesus. Christmas is incomplete without the recognition that he grew up to become a man, that he died on a cross, that he was raised from the dead, and that God has now placed him at the point where all must worship him. On the first Christmas Joseph, a man confused and shaken by the events which had overtaken him, was told to name Mary's baby Jesus. That name now identifies, not a vulnerable little baby, but the Lord of all.

My favorite musical is "Fiddler on the Roof." The basic theme of this story of the Russian jew, Tevye, is that tradition, even good, religious tradition, cannot by itself shelter us from the onslaughts of the world we live in. Tevye's three daughters continually step beyond the boundaries of accepted tradition for their family and village. The father watches as the things he believed in, the boundaries that had protected him all his life, are being violated. Finally, Russian troops march into his village and disperse the Jews. Their beautiful traditions afforded them no protection.

The Christmas season is the most traditional season of our culture. It is a season when families have a sense of themselves and what they stand for. They gather together to do things the way they have always done them. They sing the same familiar songs; they read the same familiar Scriptures. I rejoice at the traditions of Christmas. I am not convinced by the nay-- sayers who hold that Christmas is a materialistic waste of time, although clearly there are those elements

I look forward to all that goes with Christmas, but the world is too subtle and too difficult for us to be protected by "Yuletide carols being sung by a fire," family dinners, mistletoe, etc. If we try to find stability, security, wholeness and meaning in these things we are utterly lost. Christmas, however, can and must serve as a reminder of the things that Paul lays before us in these verses.

Each Christmas we have an opportunity to ask ourselves important questions about our lives, about the way we act and think and live. Have we bowed our knee before Christ? have we confessed with our tongue the Lordship of Jesus? Do we act on the premise that Jesus Christ is Lord?-- because that is the end of the Christmas story. It began in Bethlehem, but it ends with Jesus being exalted.

I hope you will rejoice at Christmas. I hope your family time is wonderful. I hope you will sing the "Messiah," eat well, give and receive presents, and play with your children. But I surely hope that your Christmas will include not only those things. If you are not a Christian but wish to become one, or if you are a Christian whose spiritual life has dried up, as you examine these things, determine that you will press on to hear the end of the story. Determine to lay down your life and bow your knee before the statement of Scripture, that Jesus Christ is Lord.

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