

Every Knee Should Bow

Isaiah 52:13–53:12; Philippians 1:27–2:16

August 22, 1999

“Christ Jesus... though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which 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 confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

Have you ever been caught in a downward spiral? Round and round everything goes, faster and faster, until you hit the bottom. This might be true of an airplane, or of your finances, of your relationships, your feelings, or of life itself. There is a helplessness about this from which we would prefer to escape, and sometimes we can escape, but often we cannot. Life is hard. We know that all too well. And this reality makes today’s reading all the more remarkable.

These few verses provide a summary of the gospel of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And it starts with Jesus Christ willingly stepping into the downward spiral that is human life, or which at least characterizes so much of human life. It starts with Jesus Christ willingly stepping into that downward spiral, setting aside all the prerogatives of heaven, relinquishing all the privileges of divinity, disdaining any special treatment, declining to exploit his position as the Son of God, and refusing the ease of the life of glory. Though he was in the form of God, he emptied himself of all power, strength, eternity, dignity, and honor. He deigned to take on instead all the weakness, finitude, and humility of a slave. He became one of us, sharing the vulnerabilities and vicissitudes of human life.

And as if that were not enough, as if it were not grace beyond all imagining that Christ should be with us, he humbled himself even further, being obedient to God unto death. How is it that obedience requires death? Because death is the final test. It is easy to be obedient on the good days. The question is, What happens when the pressure is on? What happens when all the world is against us? Whom shall we obey then? It is not that God required death but that Christ proved his obedience under the most extreme, the most severe, indeed, the ultimate circumstances. He refused to quit believing, even when it seemed that God had forsaken him. He refused to quit loving, even when all those about him hated him and executed him. He refused to curse God or his persecutors.

You see, even at the bottom of the downward spiral, Jesus did not fail us, or fail God. If he had hated those who hated him, it all would have been over. Hatred would have won. If he had cursed those who cursed him, it all would have been over. Evil would have won. If he had quit believing in and obeying God, it all would have been over. Sin would have won. If he had grasped hungrily after this life, calling for the angels to take him down from the cross, it all would have been over. Death would have won. But he refused to exploit his position. He suffered all that we suffer and more, allowing it to pour over him and do its worst, even killing him, but it did not break him. He was obedient unto death. And he did that for you and me.

Interestingly enough, no mention is made here of burial, though that is clearly implied by his death. For that matter, no mention is made of the resurrection, though that is clearly implied by the universal acknowledgment of his lordship. What happens instead is the immediate and jarring juxtaposition of his execution and his exaltation, his gory death and his glory in heaven.

And that, in the greatest challenge to the way we think, to what we value, and to all that we hold dear, is what Paul is doing here. At the end of this downward spiral, from heaven to earth, from divinity to humanity, from master to slave, from life to death, at the end of this downward spiral and at the beginning of exaltation, at the beginning of the return from earth to heaven, at the beginning of the restoration from death to life, at the beginning of the rescue from ignominy to glory, right there in the middle of the whole thing, the center of all time, the hinge upon which the ages turn, there stands the cross. Oh, the horror and the shame! There stands the cross. There stands the most awful, gruesome, shameful, low-down means of execution and death. Everything in the work and ministry of Jesus Christ, everything in the life of the universe, comes together at this point.

There is some thought that verses six through eleven are poetic in their rhythm and structure. If this is the case, they may form all or part of an ancient Christian hymn. Even in this first generation Christian letter, he may be quoting what was already an old favorite hymn of the Philippians to make his point. There is only one problem with this, one piece that does not fit into the poem, right here in the middle, the phrase “even death on a cross.” It appears that Paul may have added this for emphasis, daring to name the terrible name of the hated and dreaded Roman instrument of death, the very cross which he and the Philippians were likely facing themselves. And his naming it does two things.

First of all, Paul takes the old juxtaposition of the death and exaltation of Jesus Christ and holds it even closer together into the one and single moment and reality of the cross. Jesus did not die in bed of old age. He died as a young man on the cross. Jesus did not die a noble death. He was executed on a garbage heap

outside Jerusalem. And yet, because he was obedient to the end, because they did not break him, because he chose to believe in God rather than not to believe in God, his death on the cross was a moment of glory. As Paul holds this together for us to see, his humility and humiliation was his glory, his obedience was his victory, his weakness was his strength, his suffering was his greatest gift, and by his dying he conquered death. His whole ministry is concentrated into this single moment of weakness, shame, horror, and death. And yet, in a way just the opposite of the way we would normally think of things, Paul holds this together for us so that we may see that the cross of Jesus Christ has become his throne from which he rules the universe.

Second, for Paul to hold this all together so tightly also helps make him and the Philippians brave for what lies ahead. “For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake, engaged in the same conflict which you saw and now hear to be mine.” Can you imagine that? It is likely that Paul was crucified like Jesus. It is likely that some of the Philippians were crucified, too. They had to know what was coming to them. Others may have been fed to the lions in the coliseum, for the amusement of the drunken and blood-thirsty masses. So it is not only the case that Jesus came to share our life and death, but also that we can share his life and death. Let me say that again: it is not only the case that Jesus came to share our life and death, but also that we can share his life and death. If the meaninglessness of his crucifixion can make sense, and it does, then the meaninglessness of our own lives and our own deaths can make sense.

This is not a problem limited to the first century. The struggle for meaning in life just as intense and maybe even more so today. Can the words of Paul about the cross of Jesus Christ still speak to us today? Can they still give us faith and courage today? Can they still make us brave to face the terrors of attack, the cruel sting of hatred, and the massed onslaught of sin, death, and evil? I think they can. In fact, I think the gospel of Jesus Christ alone can give us the faith, hope, and courage we need for the living of our lives and the dying of our deaths.

Now, once we hear the word of the cross, once that hinge swings, once that center is revealed, everything changes. Instead of a downward spiral, everything is going up. Yes, Jesus was exalted in his faithful death on the cross, but that was not all of his exaltation. Yes, Jesus willingly stepped into the downward spiral of human life to be with us, but now God has raised him up so that we might be with him. The Lord God Almighty, who revealed himself to Moses as “I Am Who I Am,” and of whom the single most important verse of the Old Testament says, “The LORD our God, the LORD is one,” God bestows on Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the highest name of all, his own name of “Lord,” so that at the simple name of Jesus of

Nazareth “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.”

This is our future. This is our goal. This is the purpose of our lives. One day, everyone will know that Jesus Christ is Lord. One day, everyone will admit that Jesus Christ is Lord. One day, every knee shall bow in recognition and worship of Jesus Christ as Lord. One day, every tongue in the universe will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. And what a glorious day that will be! But why wait? We know the truth now. We have heard the good news already. We have named the name here today. So why wait? We can align our lives and our worship and our being with the direction, the movement, and the ultimate destination of the universe right now. Why swim against the stream? Why waste another moment on anything else, anything less, anything other than the true Lord and Savior?

In a few moments, a young lady who has traveled around the world to get here is going to make a reaffirmation of her faith. This acknowledges that she has made an initial profession of faith before, in Korea, where her father is a Presbyterian minister. But it also brings to us the gift of hearing someone say out loud again that Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior. As she does this, I invite all of us here and all who are listening to the radio to join her in reaffirming our own faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

“Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that...you stand firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel....If there is any encouragement in Christ, any incentive of love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus....Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now...work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure. Do all things without grumbling or questioning, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain.”

To God be the glory, forever and ever! Amen.

Every Knee Should Bow

5

1627 Monument Avenue
Richmond, VA 23220
Telephone 804-359-2463
Facsimile 804-278-6298