

The Letter to the Philippians

Lesson 11: The Exaltation of Christ

Philippians 2:9-11

“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.”

“Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted”, said Jesus. (Matt. 23:12) Jesus Christ is the ultimate example of humility, as we examined last year in Lesson 10. Paul has been painting a beautiful picture of the God-Man Jesus Christ, but we haven’t studied through the entirety of the picture in order to see it completed, there are some finishing touches that Paul adds in verses 9 to 11, which we will examine today. In Philippians 2:5-8, if you remember, we studied the descent of the Christ, and the lifelong humility and perfect obedience of Jesus. Here we see the ascent of Jesus Christ, as the Father exalts our Lord (the perfect God-Man), back to His rightful throne where He sat before time began.

Our text begins with that familiar word **‘Therefore’**. As always, we want to take notice of every ‘therefore’, because every ‘therefore’ is there for a reason. We ought to know by now that every ‘therefore’ is giving a reason for what was just said. And while verse 9 isn’t an exception to the rule, there is an additional question that we should ask of this ‘therefore’. In lesson 10 we spend time considering the humble and perfect obedience of Jesus Christ all the way to the cross. We saw last lesson how the second person of the Trinity, God the Son, left His throne in Heaven, and condescended to become a man who would live in perfect obedience and die the most brutal and humiliating death for the sins of His people. And now in our present text, we see God the Father exalting His name, so that every mouth will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. But there is a question that you may not have thought of, but which is important to answer. When Paul writes ‘therefore’, we must interpret that on the basis of verses 5-8 God has highly exalted Him. The question we must ask is: Is Paul speaking of God’s exalting as a result of Christ’s work, or as the Father’s reward for His work?

Let me explain this again in case you’re not understanding. Is God exalting Christ because of His obedience (as a reward), or is He exalting Him because He is God and alone worthy of exaltation (as a consequence)? There is difference between exalting Christ as a *result* of His obedience, than as a *reward* for it. This might seem like a trivial question, but I think it’s worth the work of clearing up the question and the answer. This is a question that I had never considered until having read the commentaries, and as Hansen says, “*Strong voices give a resounding NO to the view of Christ’s exaltation as a reward for His obedience.*”⁵⁷ There are a few reasons against viewing Christ’s exaltation as a reward for His humble obedience unto death. One reason is to guard against the understanding that any person could merit God’s exaltation and claim His throne. By holding to the position of rewards through to its end, we’d have to conclude that Jesus had to earn His rightful place of adoration, which is a position I don’t think we’d like to be in. Although it wasn’t possible for Christ to sin, so it wasn’t possible that God would somehow not exalt Him, we shouldn’t think of His exaltation as the reward of His obedience. God’s exaltation was reciprocal, but not earned. IOW, the exaltation of Christ took place, and was necessary, because of His person, and not His obedience. While His obedience was certainly necessary for the

⁵⁷ Hansen, G. Walter, *The Letter to the Philippians* Eerdmans, 2009 (p. 160)

completion of His work, His necessary work was only accomplished because of His person. James Montgomery Boice provides an illustration that I found helpful, he said,

“Suppose that a king was about to bestow an honor on a subject who had never previously distinguished himself. The only names he has ever received from anyone were scoundrel, bum, crook, good-for-nothing, and a dozen others like them. But then he did something that deserved the king’s recognition. What would the king say? He would not say, “Arise, Sir Thomas (or whatever his personal name might be)” or “I wish the present you with the Order of Merit.” He would say, “Well, you have certainly distinguished yourself. You are a faithful subject.” The name “faithful” would be above all of the other names that had previously been given to the man, but it would not be a very great tribute. The title “faithful” would only be one step above nothing. Suppose, however, that there was also a knight in the realm who had already distinguished himself greatly and had been decorated on many occasions. Suppose he had risen to a very high position in the kingdom. And suppose the king wished to honor him. To honor this man the king would need the highest title at his disposal. And it would be especially glorious when measured against the man’s other names and honors. Do you see the connection? This is what God did with Jesus. Jesus was abased; now He is honored. Jesus is Lord. And the glory of this title must be measured against His other honors.”⁵⁸

‘God has highly exalted Him.’ The first thing that we should note about the exaltation of Christ is that it actually happened. The exaltation of the man Christ Jesus is a historical fact. Therefore, the second thing that we should note is that it’s the manhood of Jesus that is exalted. The Christ existed from eternity past, and spoke the world into existence. **“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. All things were made through Him, and without Him was not any thing made that was made.”** (John 1:1-3) The Son of God did not require exaltation, He has been eternally exalted. But for a season there was a humiliation. The humiliation of Christ consisted in His taking on humanity, but His exaltation does not consist in His laying aside His humanity again, rather, He is forever the God-Man. The exaltation of Jesus marks the eternal union of humanity with divinity. Since this historical event, we have to think of Jesus as being presently in all the glory of His heavenly state as a man, and as truly and completely in the ‘likeness of men’ as when He walked on this Earth. Jesus is forever in the ‘form of God’ and ‘in human form.’

The descent is presented in the text as the act of Christ [**“but (He) ←implied emptied Himself”** v.7], but the text speaks plainly that the exaltation is the Father’s act, **“Therefore God has highly exalted Him.”** But we shouldn’t understand this to mean that Christ was operating of His own will at the descent. He was no less obedient to the Father’s will when He ascended up on high, than He was when He came down to earth. The Son of God was returning to the eternal throne as the God-Man, having accomplished the redemption of His bride. This is why Jesus prayed, **“And now, Father, glorify Me in Your own presence with the glory that I had with You before the world existed.”** (John 17:5) The Incarnate Lord Jesus was exalted by God the Father. By exalting Christ, the Father approved the Son’s descent, and the work which the Son had done. By exalting Him, the Father received into glory the manhood of the Word.

“And bestowed on Him the name that is above every name.” What is the name that is above every name? It’s the name Jesus. The simple name that was given with reference to His work, **“She will bear a Son, you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.”** (Matt. 1:21) But

⁵⁸ Boice, James Montgomery, *An Expository Commentary: Philippians* Zondervan, 1971 (p. 150)

yet, many Jewish children long before Him had been named Jesus, and many have been named Jesus since. The fact that it is this common name which is exalted above every name brings out with even more clarity that what is exalted is the manhood of our Lord. The name which is expressed is His true humanity, which showed His full identification with us, which was written over His Cross, which perhaps shaped the taunt **‘He saved others; He cannot save Himself.’**(Matt. 27:42) The name Jesus is what God has lifted high above all names. The Elect before the incarnation placed their faith in the coming Messiah, but ever since, the Elect have placed their perfect trust, unconditional obedience, and absolute loyalty in the name of Jesus. Acts 4:12, **“And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”**

But Paul is not content with simply asserting the sovereign glory of the name of Jesus. He goes on to set it forth as being what no other name amongst men can be, and that is the ground and object of worship, when he declares, that **‘at the name of Jesus every knee should bow.’** These words are quoted from Isaiah 45:23-24, and occur in one of the most solemn and majestic utterances of the Old Testament. And Paul takes these words and applies them to the manhood of the Lord Jesus. Let’s look at this connection by reading Isaiah 45:21-24, **“Declare and present your case; let them take counsel together! Who told this long ago? Who declared it of old? 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.”**

‘Every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth.’ While bowing the knee is a sign of submission, it’s important to remember that submission doesn’t speak of friendship, but relation. While certainly those who know Christ as Lord will bow the knee and adore Him, every knee will bow. There will be many who are outside of Christ, who will bow the knee to Him in recognition of His Deity, His presence, and intelligence, and power, and right judgment. And God the Father will receive all of the due glory from this.

Paul further dwells on the glory of the name as that of the acknowledged Lord. That **‘every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.’** Does it impress you to think that every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord? Surely you can bring to mind one person who is so hateful towards God, that the thought of them acknowledging Christ as Lord sounds impossible. But that sort of thinking has lost sight of the total depravity of man, and the gracious election of God. While the effects of sin certainly have manifested itself to different degrees in people, we have made an error if we’ve determined that some sinners are less dead than others.

Our Lord in His grace has breathed life into the believer, He is the author and originator of our faith. We ought never to lose sight that it is only those whose names have been written in the Lamb’s Book of Life who will be saved. Every elect name will be saved according to the predetermined plan of God. He is the One who reigns, who dominates all else, whose will is never thwarted. And He will, at the judgment seat, receive the due submission and acknowledgment of every sinners who died in their sin. I have heard, and read the prideful speech of many people who are anticipating their opportunity to ‘fill God in’ on all of the ways He has abandoned us to a wicked world. I’ve heard many who would ‘set God straight’ (if there was one they say), since surely an omnipresent, omnipotent, and omniscient God would never have allowed the world to become what it is. But they will never get this opportunity. On that day, their sin will be more evident than ever before. Their violation of God’s law will be perfectly known, the weight

of their debt will be felt, and His holiness will be clearly manifested. Romans 3:19-20, **“Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For by the works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.”**

Every knee will one day be bowed in reverence, and every tongue will one day vocalize confession that Christ is Lord. But that confession is incomplete. Errantly, from this passage and a handful of others (1 Corinthians 15, 1 Timothy 2, Revelation 21), some people have concluded that the Bible teaches Universalism, a view from scripture that teaches that one day every person will come to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. This passage (and no other for that matter) is teaching that all will receive a second chance after death to submit to Christ and be saved. I suppose if someone wrote Philippians 2:9-11 on a piece of paper and handed it to someone who had never read the Bible before, they might conclude that Paul is teaching Universalism, but as soon as they read the rest of Philippians they’d change their mind.

A Short Rabbit Trail

I just referenced four passages (from a list of others) where people misapply the words “all” or “every” to teach Universalism. I thought it would benefit us to examine a few of these passages, so that we might gain a better understanding of scripture and be able to confidently interpret this passage before us.

There is a saying that is popular amongst Universalists that says “All means all, and that’s all all means!” The saying sounds catchy, but how true is it? Every time the Bible uses the word ‘all’, is it always referencing the totality of the subject at hand? Let’s pick out a few examples and see if it challenges how we interpret scripture.

Matthew 10:22, **“And you will be hated by all for my name’s sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.”** Is Jesus teaching Christians that they *will* be hated by every single person on the earth? I only have close contact with a sliver of a percentage of the earth, do billions upon billions of people hate me, although they have no clue I exist? If ALL means ALL people, does that mean that every Christian hates me? A three year old has enough grey matter to figure out that Jesus was not speaking of the totality of the human race in this verse.

Acts 26:4, Paul says in his defense to King Agrippa, **“My manner of life from my youth, spent from the beginning among my own nation and in Jerusalem, is known by all the Jews.”** Is it logical for us to assume that every single Jew knew Paul’s life? Of course not. Paul is obviously speaking about the religious leaders who had close personal contact with him.

What if I asked, “Are we all here today?” Did you assume that I meant the entire world when I said ALL? That’s ridiculous. Did you assume that I meant every church member? Of course you didn’t. Did you assume that I meant every person who regularly attends this class? That seems to make sense. As a manner of speech, when I say “Are we all here today”, you automatically define ALL correctly.

1 Corinthians 15:22, **“For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.”** Here lies a key verse for Universalists. All die in Adam, all live in Christ. I suppose if we carelessly define the word all, and throw out the rules of grammar, that’s exactly what this verse is saying. But the focus of the Universalists is on the wrong word. The key word in 1 Corinthians 15:22 isn’t ALL, but IN. Paul’s

point isn't universal death and life, but the certain death of life of all who are IN. For those who are IN Adam (the totality of unredeemed humanity) there will be certain and final judgment and eternal death. While for those who are IN Christ (the totality of those who have been redeemed and adopted, the bride of Christ), there will be certain and final judgment unto eternal life. The Universalist reads 1 Corinthians 15:22 incorrectly, they read it this way, "All are in Adam, and because of Christ's death and resurrection they will all be made alive." But that's not what it says. 1 Corinthians 15:22 promises death to one total group of people identified under one federal head, and it promises life to one total group of people identified under another federal head. Each ALL therefore, does not mean ALL! There is a comparable passage in Romans 5:12-21.

1 Timothy 2:5-6, "**For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time.**" Verse 6 is another major passage cited by Universalists. Read alone, this verse seems to clearly teach that God will ransom every person from the tyranny of death and bring them to eternal life through Jesus Christ. But there's a little thing called 'context' that helps us to rightly interpret what ALL might mean (context within the chapter, and the scripture at large). Within the wider framework of scripture, if 1 Timothy 2:6 taught a universal salvation, not only would it flatly contradict the clear teaching of the rest of scripture, but Paul would even be contradicting himself in a myriad of other passages. (Rom. 8:28-30; 9:11-23; 11:6-7, 28; Eph. 1:4-5, 11; 2 Thess. 2:13; 2 Tim. 1:9) These passages, amongst many others, clearly teach God's electing purpose in the lives of some people. We cannot ignore these passages—we cannot ignore the consistent teaching of the Bible—in order to placate our own personal beliefs.

What does a Universalist do with what Jesus clearly said in Matthew 7:23? "**And then will I declare to them, "I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness."** Or how does their teaching account for what Jesus said in Matthew 25:46? "**And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."**

So, if 1 Timothy 2:6 isn't teaching that Jesus Christ ransomed every single person in human history, than what is it teaching when it says that He ransomed ALL? I think, to be consistent with the rest of scripture, we need to see a glimpse of Heaven given to us in Revelation 5:9-10, "**And they sang a new song, saying, "Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth."**" From this passage in Revelation, and a couple dozens others, we get the message that God is ransoming a people—not from the Jews only, as many errantly believed—but from ALL peoples on the earth.

So, if our passage back in Philippians 2:10-11 is clearly not teaching Universalism, that what does it mean that EVERY knee will bow, and that EVERY tongue will confess? We've interpreted the text incorrectly if we understand every person to have made the same confession with their tongue. The confession is three-fold: Jesus (1) Christ (2) is Lord (3), and the confession is not complete until all three are understood and submitted too. All Christians believe and confess Jesus is the God-Man, the Messiah, the Redeemer, our Master whom we submit our lives too. But that is not the confession of all in our text. They are not confessing Christ as their Lord and Savior, rather, they are acknowledging that Jesus Christ IS the Lord of everything. They will confess that He indeed is the great Sovereign, the great Judge, the Holy One, the Righteous One. But on that day the 'day of salvation' will have passed.

Aside from collecting a proper view of the order of events on that day, there is a great warning for believers to collect from this passage as to what a proper confession looks like. There are many who are duped in churches today to believe that being a Christian is as simple as 1-2-3 or a-b-c. *“Just accept a few facts about Jesus as truth and you’re in!”* But how is the acknowledgment of the Kingship of Christ any different than what every knee will do on that day? How is the acknowledgment of Christ as the Sovereign Lord of all, any different than what Satan and the fallen angels know in their hearts today?

The Jesus that Christians confess is not merely the man who was born in Bethlehem and known among men as ‘Jesus the carpenter’. Nor are Christians confessing One who is God living with a pseudo-human exterior. In these modern days, we have highlighted the Deity of Christ so much, we have emphasised His Messiahship so much that we have all but obliterated His humanity. A proper and complete confession understands and confesses ‘Jesus’ and ‘Christ’ and ‘Lord’, and sees them in the same person. It is dangerous to toss aside two of these three names, and hope that if we call Him Lord with sincerity, that it will not matter if we call Him Jesus or Christ.

This God that is exalted in our text is none other than, and eternally will always be, the Man Christ Jesus, the eternal Word who created all and is Lord over everything. It’s the humanity of Jesus that is exalted here, and it should take our breath away when we consider the marvelous plan of the Godhead to knit together the human and the divine in the person of Jesus for the salvation of His people. How amazing is it to think that the Christ who is Lord of all was born in a manger! The human love which Jesus had when He bent over the sick and comforted the sorrowful, is the Man whom the whole of history is centered around.

There is a sense in which the humanity of Jesus is our example even in His ascent and exaltation, just as He was in His descent and humiliation. The mind which was in Him (dependant and strengthened upon the Holy Spirit) is for us the pattern for earthly life, though the deeds of Jesus, in which His mind was expressed, and especially His ‘obedience to the death of the Cross,’ are so far beyond any self-sacrifice of ours, that we could never imitate them. IOW, the perfect obedience of Christ in one sense is our example to obedience, but His obedience is unique, as it is His obedience that was necessary to redeem. While we seek to pattern our obedience to the Father, and our reliance upon the Spirit after Christ, our efforts are not in an attempt to duplicate the obedience of Christ towards our own salvation. His obedience does not require repetition. As Christians (little-Christ) we can imitate His sacrificial life by giving up our own, and by doing so we may share in the ridicule and scorn and oppression that He faced, but our sacrificial life is only an imitation of the Saviour, it will never be a saving life. The redeemed will also follow the Ascension of Jesus, and share in the glory that He is given. We are assured that where He is there we shall be also, and that the manhood which is exalted in Him is the prophecy that all who love Him will share His glory.