

Jesus Willingly Humbled Himself

SCOTT HOEZEE

Sometimes when we encounter something powerful, we sense that normal language will not suffice to describe it. Romantic love, acts of great heroism and valor, and certainly almighty miracles of God; describing such things defies ordinary speech, and so we reach for poetry and for music. We write songs about such things. Well, when the early Church pondered the miracle of God's Son being made human, they realized this was not just something to talk about, you had to sing about it. Today on *Groundwork*, we will look at a very old hymn that talks about God becoming human. Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

Welcome to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Dave, this is now the second program in a four-part series we are recording to broadcast during Advent and the run-up to Christmas this year; and we decided to do something we have not done on *Groundwork* before. We have done a lot of different Advent and Christmas programs, and have gone to all the usual go-to passages, but this time we are going to go to the Apostle Paul. What did Paul have to say about the miracle of the incarnation? The first program, we went to Galatians, where Paul pointed out that God sent his Son into the world born of a woman, and born under the law, so that he could take the penalty of our failures and also keep the law perfectly for us, as the perfect human being. In this program, we are going to go to Philippians, and then in the next two programs, we will go to 1 Timothy and then Colossians.

DAVE BAST

Right; and all of these are pretty familiar passages if you are a Bible reader or a Bible student, or even just a longtime Christian; in fact, even if you are just a longtime *Groundwork* fan. We have done programs on all these chapters before, but we want to dig them out again and kind of rotate them slightly and think about them through the lens of the doctrine of the incarnation...the idea that God himself...all of God...poured himself into a human being, Jesus of Nazareth, who was really God and really human at the same...completely and fully in every way, which is a big mystery...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

And unfolds other mysteries to us about the nature of God's being—the Trinity; but he did this for a specific purpose, and as we saw in Galatians, and as you just mentioned, it was to keep the law for us and pay the law's penalty on those who broke it, and so redeem us and turn us into God's beloved children...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly.

DAVE BAST

That is wonderful gospel news.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we are going to see some similar themes now in Philippians. Specifically, we are going to look at the great hymn...a song that Paul quotes in Philippians 2, but let's remind ourselves, just briefly, about the nature of this particular epistle. We did that with Galatians as well. This is generally considered one of the friendliest and warmest letters that Paul wrote, though as we will see, that doesn't mean he was not aware that there were some problems in Philippi, too; and we will get to that in just a minute, but this is also one of the prison epistles, as they are called...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Paul wrote this from prison, and we know that from the opening chapter, Chapter 1:12; he says: Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel. ¹³As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. ¹⁴And because of my chains, most of the brothers and sisters have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear. So, Paul is in prison...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But he sees even this otherwise bad circumstance as maybe helping the gospel get out more and more.

DAVE BAST

Yes; as you mentioned, this letter just gushes warmth and friendliness, and gratitude, actually. I preached on Chapter 4 recently of Philippians, and I said this is really an extended thank-you note, this whole little letter, because the Philippian church had helped Paul before, and they had helped him more recently with financial support so that he could actually live while he was imprisoned; probably under house arrest, as we see at the end of Acts, where he had to pay rent on an apartment and have food and whatnot, but he was still under guard. So, it is positive; but as you said, Scott, there are problems that he also addresses. He wants to say thanks, he wants to encourage them, he wants to tell them he is okay...he has learned to be content with whatever is happening to him; but he also wants to straighten out some little problems that have arisen. So, he mentions, actually, two ladies—Euodia and Syntyche—who have had a conflict, and apparently there was, as is so often the case with human beings, including in the Church, there were tension arising from maybe pride and self-seeking, and so Paul addresses that, too.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Sometimes Paul wrote to churches that he didn't know; in fact, we will see that in Colossians. It looks like he had never been to the church in Colossae, even though he wrote to them. It didn't look like he ever made it to Rome, even though he wrote probably his most famous letter to the Romans; but he knew some of the congregations quite well. Now, as we saw in the last program in this series, he knew the Galatians well, and he was pretty angry with them, and he came out pretty hot toward them because they had traded the true gospel for a false message; but Paul knew the Philippians well, too. In fact, again in Chapter 1, except for Galatians, Paul always had a thanksgiving section. It was always warm. The one to the Philippians was super warm:

³I thank my God every time I remember you. ⁴In all my prayers for all of you, I pray with joy ⁵because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. He just kind of goes on and on...

DAVE BAST

There is that reference to financial support for him, actually.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, that is right.

DAVE BAST

Partnership in the gospel means that.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus, he says. So, he knew them well, but probably because he knew them well, he also...as you just said, Dave...he knew there were some cracks in the congregation; and it looks like from the looks of quite a few places in this letter, that the deadly...what we now call the deadly sin of pride was tempting them, and some of them were falling prey to the temptation to take on superior airs with each other...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And Paul, much though he loved these people, he couldn't let it go, because he knows that pride is almost the anti-Jesus way to live.

DAVE BAST

Yes, absolutely; in our last program, at the end, we talked about this wonderful equality that we have as part of the family of God. Neither male nor female, slave nor poor, Jew nor Gentile...these differences don't really matter as far as our status is concerned; and they shouldn't matter as far as we are concerned. Nevertheless, there is always a temptation for some people to look down on other people...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

And it happens in the Church; and when it does, it is absolutely deadly...it is divisive...it creates cliques and party spirit and all the rest; especially in a contentious time like ours, we have to really guard against that, sort of demonizing our fellow Christians for whatever reason, and being estranged from them. And so, Paul is going to use the example of Jesus to argue against this very attitude, and we will look at that in just a moment.

Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, and this second program in a four-part Advent series, where we are going to passages in Paul where he touches on the centrality of the Son of God, the one we now know as Jesus, becoming human; and in the context of Philippians that we are looking at in this program, Dave, Paul knows, as we just said, that pride and taking on airs and looking down our noses at other Christians is toxic to the gospel...it is antithetical to the gospel...it is antithetical to Jesus, who is the epitome of humility and service and sacrifice; and so, in what we now call the second chapter, Dave, Paul goes at that.

DAVE BAST

Right; and he begins this chapter by piling reason upon reason for them to listen to what he has to say, and he writes this: Therefore, if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, (I read about four or five

reasons there) ²then (his conclusion) make my joy complete (there is another reason) by being likeminded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. ³Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, ⁴not looking to your own interests, but each of you to the interests of others.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, as you said, Dave, Paul lays it on pretty thick here. He mounts up reason after reason after reason to do this: If, if, if, if; you know, maybe some of us can remember at times our parents kind of doing this: Well, if you care for me at all...if your father's feelings mean anything to you...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

If you love Jesus, then you are going to...

DAVE BAST

If you want your allowance this week...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes...so, but, he is laying it on thick because that is how important this is. They have to be humble as Jesus is humble. Everybody needs to look out for, not their needs, but the needs of others; and if you worry that that means nobody is going to tend to your needs, don't. If we all look to the needs of others, somebody else will take care of you, but you need to worry more about others than yourself. Don't do anything out of vain conceit, don't be proud; and then, in a very famous passage, Paul gives us the reason why this is so important, and as we said earlier, most scholars believe that what Paul does here is he quotes a song that the Philippians already knew. Picking up right where you left off a minute ago, Dave, there in Philippians 2, now we are in verse 5:

In your relationships with one another, having the same mindset as Christ Jesus: ⁶Who... (now begins the song lyrics): Who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; ⁷rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. ⁸And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!

DAVE BAST

And then the hymn takes a turn upward. It has gone down, down, down from heaven to humility, to servant, to the cross—the lowest point—and then it swings upward: ⁹Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

It really does sing, doesn't it?

SCOTT HOEZEE

It does.

DAVE BAST

That language...you want to put it to music, and there are echoes there, actually, of a wonderful verse in Isaiah where Isaiah says that every knee will bow before the Lord—Yahweh—the God of Israel, and here it is Jesus who is Lord, the God of Israel in the flesh.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; and of course, for an Advent series like this one, the key is verse 7, where he makes himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. So, that is the key. As we said in the prior

program from Galatians, Dave, he needed to be a real human being so that he could do what real human beings do, which is die; and in his case, it was a sacrificial death on a cross, which bought our salvation and our reconciliation with God; but we could wonder a little bit, Dave, about the first part of verse 7. Many translations render it what we just read, that he made himself nothing...hmmm....that could sound vaguely insulting. What? Becoming human means being nothing? Are we humans nothing to God? What is going on there?

DAVE BAST

Yes; are we just floor mats to be walked all over? No, that is probably not the best way to translate it, and the Greek verb actually means he emptied himself. Of what? Not of his deity...not of his divinity...but of his privilege as God, his position as God, perhaps some of his power as God, perhaps even some of his knowledge as God. He himself said when he was a man that he didn't know everything. He didn't know the time of his own return. He depended on the Father for what he was and did. He relied upon the Spirit for the working of his miracles. So, this idea...and let's remember now the use to which Paul is putting here the doctrine of the incarnation. He is calling for us to be humbled in the same way; perhaps to give up some of our rights and privileges, as Jesus did. You know, there is an old military acronym: RHIP—Rank Hath It's Privileges—and if you are an officer...if you are a general...you boss everybody around and you are served; but Jesus said: I didn't come to be served, but to serve*; and so, he gave that all up in becoming human.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we would have to say that what this does is it qualifies a little bit for us our definition of divinity. Normally a divine being would be omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent; all of those things would live in the glory of heaven. Those are ordinarily what goes along with being a divine being; but apparently you can stay fully divine and empty yourself of those things—lay them down for a while—because we confess Jesus was fully divine, even though, for a time, he was in one place at a time, like all human beings. Not omnipresent in the galaxies; and as you just said, he didn't always seem to know everything. When he went to school as a child to learn math, I assume he wasn't faking it; his human nature was genuinely being educated, even though, as the Son of God, he could have had knowledge that spanned all history and the galaxies. So, he tossed that aside to become a real human being; and again, as we pointed out so often on *Groundwork*, and as the Church points out all the time, his humanity wasn't a costume...it wasn't fake humanity...he didn't just look like a human being, like Superman only *looks* like mild-mannered reporter Clark Kent. No, he was a genuine human being, and he did that for us...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So that he could save us.

DAVE BAST

So, here is the point of all this that Paul makes...most of us are familiar, probably, with the phrase: What would Jesus do, as we are facing a...what would Jesus do? You know, the New Testament doesn't really make that point. The point the New Testament makes is what *did* Jesus do? And maybe you should do the same thing if you are a follower of Jesus; and actually, there are two specific things that Jesus did that we are called to imitate him in doing ourselves. One has to do with his death, where Peter says in 1 Peter 2, that he did not revile those who were persecuting him; he was patient; he trusted God; and we are called to be the same kind of gentle, non-retaliatory; and the other is here. We are told in no uncertain terms by Paul, we should be imitating his birth. What he did in his birth...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

He gave up privilege. He didn't insist on his own way. He didn't insist on all his rights. He didn't kind of put other people down because he disagreed with them, blah, blah, blah, like we do. Think of the problems with social media today. No, Jesus was humble and he took the form of a servant.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Sometimes people say wouldn't it be nice to make Christmas last all year long? And sometimes they mean kind of this Hallmark sentimentality thing. Well, there is a way to make Christmas last all year long: It is being humble as Jesus is humble, as you just said, Dave; but how do we do that? How might we think about that? We will figure that out as we close out the program in just a moment.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, and we are closing out this program, the second program in a four-part Advent series, looking at passages in Paul; and we have been looking at particularly a hymn written in the early Church, known to the Philippians, that Paul quotes back approvingly to them; and we said that is because when we encounter something majestic in our lives, we sing about it. Sometimes you need Handel's *Hallelujah Chorus*. You cannot just say hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah; sometimes you have to sing it and it kind of brings you to a new level of celebration; and that is what Paul is doing here with this hymn, a hymn that was probably as familiar to the Philippians as *O, Come All Ye Faithful* is to us...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Paul is saying that is not just a good hymn, that is how you have to live, like Jesus.

DAVE BAST

Absolutely; it is often called by scholars the Christ hymn in the New Testament, as it describes this mind-boggling, mind-blowing career of Jesus, who was in very nature equal to God in every respect. You think of the beloved opening words of John's gospel. We will look at those again in a future program, too: In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was God in every respect, but he didn't just grab that and hang onto it, he freely gave it up...that status, that divine glory...and he lowered himself to be one of us, and such a one as he was, living in poverty and dying in pain and shame in order to save us; but if there is any incentive in belonging to him, Paul says, in having his Spirit, you and I need to do the same thing. We need to be willing to surrender our privilege, our opinions, whatever it is that we are clinging to that makes us sort of proud or cantankerous or in rivalry with our fellow...not just Christians, but human beings...and be humble.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And let's admit that this is a countercultural thing to do. The goal of so many people is to amass as much power and prestige and privilege as you can, and once you get it, you never let it go. In fact, you want more. Everybody wants to be a leader, right? So, go to Amazon.com and just punch in leadership. You are going to see thousands and thousands of books on how to become a leader and respected and have power. Punch in discipleship or followership and you probably won't see very many books, and if there are any, they don't sell very well because everybody wants to be a leader. Nobody aspires to be a servant...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You want to be a leader, and yet, that is what we have to aspire to. So, this is very countercultural.

DAVE BAST

Yes; and what does it mean to be a leader? To most people, it means to impose your will on others...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

Make them do what you want...make them think what you think...you tell them what you believe and they better respectfully say: Ooh, yes; okay, you're the boss. Few things are more revolutionary than this, and yet, this is what Jesus was his whole life long; not weak, downtrodden; not a pushover, certainly; if you know the Jesus of the gospels, you know he was far from that; but yet, you think of his action in the upper room, which we looked at not long in a *Groundwork* program, where he gets up and he takes off his robe and he puts a towel around his waist and he assumes the posture of a slave to wash his disciples' feet. I have given you an example, he said, and that is exactly what Paul is getting at here. If he could do that, what about us?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; it is countercultural, and therefore it is going to take, I think, for all of us great intentionality. We are going to have to think about this. How do we model this for our children? Our children who are also swept up in a culture of massive acquisitiveness, where, you know, people on social media...on Instagram or Facebook or Twitter...they are always comparing vacations, they are comparing their swimming pools or whether they even have a swimming pool. Everybody's life looks better than yours when you look on Facebook. I think we really need to, as parents...if we are privileged to be parents or grandparents or uncles and aunts and have an influence on children...how do we teach this to them?

But Dave, maybe there is one other thing. You know, what we went through in 2020 with the pandemic, but also with all the racial reckoning; and we did a whole special series on COVID-19 and its effect on the world, and we talked about justice; and there has been a lot of racial reckoning, and we have heard a lot of talk about white privilege, and those of us who are white, particularly in North America, but maybe throughout the world, there is a certain privilege that goes with that. The police are going to be less suspicious of you than of a black person doing the same thing as you; and so, some people have talked about how do we lay aside our white privilege? How do we lay that down? I have been challenged to do that by my friends who are African American or Asian from other cultures. It is not easy to know what that means, and we are not going to be able, in the few moments remaining in this program, to spell it out; but could it be, Dave, that laying down white privilege is the same thing as Jesus laying aside the perks of divinity? He laid aside his power so that he could be a servant. There may be something very Christlike also in racial matters that we can imitate Jesus.

DAVE BAST

Absolutely, I think so; I mean, just ask yourself this: If you are a white person, how do you react when you hear those words *white privilege*? Do you bristle immediately? Do you get angry and defensive and go, oh, you liberal...etc, etc... Or do you say: Wait a minute; let me stop and think about this. Let me try to empathize with people who are different from me...who have different experiences...and there are multiple levels of privilege, too; not just race...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

But economic status, educational background, family connections...do you come from a strong family? Just that gives privilege. So, I said earlier rank has its privileges, that old military acronym. We have privileges, most of us, and the question is, are we willing to set those to one side and feel along with those who don't have such privilege and seek ways where we may serve them as Jesus served us. That is the point, Paul says. That is what the incarnation is all about. Think about what he gave up in order to do that, and maybe we can do the same.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Scott Hoezee and Dave Bast. Join us again next time as we continue our study of the incarnation of Jesus in 1 Timothy 1:13-17.

We have a website: groundworkonline.com. Please go there and share what *Groundwork* means to you, and make suggestions for future *Groundwork* programs.

*Correction: In the audio of this episode, host Dave Bast is referencing Matthew 20:28 and Mark 10:45 when he misspeaks and says "I didn't come to serve, but to be served," when he meant to say "I didn't come to be served, but to serve."

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/jesus-willingly-humbled-himself>

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