

THE MIRACLE OF THE INCARNATION

Ben Janssen | **Philippians 2:7** | December 8, 2019

⁷ but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.

Many of us would say that what makes Christmas a difficult holiday is the stress of finding just the right gift to give to others. Searching for the perfect gift, or at least the perfect gift we can afford, is all the more challenging in wealthier society like ours. Now the greatest gift you could possibly give is at once the most expensive as well as the most accessible. The greatest gift you could give is yourself, and yet I doubt your wife is going to be impressed, husband, if you wrap yourself in paper and put a bow on your head. But if we really did give ourselves to those we love, not holding anything back? What if we made ourselves and all that we had fully at the service of others? Anything else would be much less of a gift than that. And that, of course, is one of the great truths of Christmas. God gave himself to us when he gave us his Son, Jesus Christ.

Last week we began our study this Advent on the famous words of the incarnation of Christ found in Philippians 2. We began with verse 6 and what it tells us about the mystery of the incarnation, that in the eternal counsel of God a plan was conceived for the Son of God out of love for the Father to redeem a chosen people through a phenomenal act of self-giving. And it all starts to take shape here in verse 7, which brings us right into the miracle of the incarnation. The mysterious plan goes in to action when the Son of God “emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.” The miracle of the incarnation is that what we have been given at Christmas is a Savior who always has enough to give everything away. It’s a real miracle, a miracle that is supernatural, humiliating, and infinitely beneficial.

THE INCARNATION IS SUPERNATURAL

First, if the incarnation of Christ is a miracle, then it is also supernatural. It cannot be explained in any natural way to our satisfaction. Just as there is no natural way for man to become God, so the very idea that God would become man is beyond our imagination. It really is. This is why so many have denied this core doctrine of Christianity, that in the one person Jesus Christ, we find the perfect union of God and man with no threat to the nature of either.

Early Errors

Now many if not most of us are familiar with this truth of the Bible; it is what we celebrate every year at Christmas. But we should appreciate how much effort has been made by the first Christians to put into terms the miracle of the incarnation.

The question before us is this: Who is this Jesus, this baby “born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king” (Matt 2:1)? When Jesus himself asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?”, he received various answers just as we would receive today if we were polling our neighbors. So who, exactly is he? It’s a question that we have settled in our creeds, but it took a lot of thinking to get us there. In the early church, there were plenty of errors that had to be corrected in order to get right who this Jesus is. Here are three of them.¹

Apollinaris, a fourth century bishop in Laodicea, taught that the mind and spirit of Jesus was the divine nature of the Son of God and only his body was human. Nestorius, an early fifth century bishop of Constantinople, taught that the human and divine nature in Jesus were distinct, essentially meaning that Jesus was two separate persons.² Another church leader in Constantinople, Eutyches, went in the opposite direction, arguing that Jesus had only one nature, a mixture of the human and divine into a unique, third kind of nature.

The problem with these teachings is that each, in some way, compromises the miracle of the incarnation. In Apollinarianism, Jesus could not be fully human since his mind and spirit were said to be divine. Nestorianism leads us to seeing Jesus as possessing a split personality, his “human” side distinguishable from his “divine” side. For the Eutychians, Jesus is neither truly God nor truly human since his two natures are in some way mingled together into a third kind of nature.

The Council of Chalcedon

What, then, is the right way of thinking of the incarnation? The consensus of the early Christians, led by the teaching of the scriptures, affirmed the full humanity and deity of the one person, Jesus of Nazareth.

Today we can speak of Jesus as one person who was yet fully God and fully man in large part because of a church council that convened in the ancient city of Chalcedon (modern Istanbul) in 451. They made it clear that Jesus is “perfect in Godhead and also perfect in manhood,” that he is “in all things like unto us, without sin” but that he is also “one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten.” Though he possesses two natures, these are not to be confused, changed, divided, or separated, although the distinction between the two natures is not annulled by the union. “Rather, the property of each nature being preserved and concurring in one Person and one Subsistence, not parted or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son and only begotten, God, the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ...”³

In short, the words “nature” and “person” are used to clarify that there is a union of the human and divine in the person of Jesus, but in such a way that there is no compromise of the human nature or the divine nature in him. Jesus possessed two distinguishable natures, but they are united in his one person.

The Greatest Miracle

Now this is really important. I know it sounds so philosophical, and maybe for that reason, too impractical, to really care about. But fewer things could be more important for us Christians than knowing who our Jesus is and getting his identity right.

For one thing, once we understand who Jesus is, fully God and fully man in one person, then we can begin to see how miraculous the incarnation truly is. Again, it is one thing to speculate about how a human might ascend to become God. This would be an amazing feat. But it would be nowhere near as amazing as what we are told about who Jesus is, the true Son of God who descended to become man.

Yes, this is truly the most amazing miracle in the entire Bible. As Wayne Grudem says,

The fact that the infinite, omnipotent, eternal Son of God could become man and join himself to a human nature forever, so that infinite God became one person with finite man, will remain for eternity the most profound miracle and the most profound mystery in all the universe.⁴

So of course it will be perplexing. Of course it will be mind-blowing. It is something only God can do. It is supernatural. It is a miracle. But it's also true. Amazingly true. Gloriously true. As John Piper says, "Why would we give [our children] Santa Claus when they can have the incarnation of the Son of God? . . . Santa Claus is make-believe. Jesus is more real than the roof on your house."⁵

THE INCARNATION IS HUMILIATING

Now for a God who can do anything, just consider what took for him to do *this*. Miracles are something that would usually garner for the executor great fame and celebration. But when the Son of God descended from heaven, it was humiliating. The greatest miracle ever was carried out without much fanfare. Just a few lowly shepherds showing up, and then only after they were told about what had happened by a multitude of angels. Now just think of it: for man to ascend to become God would be a great privilege; but for God to descend to become man would be a humiliation to the greatest degree imaginable.

He Emptied Himself

We see this humiliation described in verse 7. What did the Son of God have to do in order to become human like us? He had to empty himself, we are told.

Now let's be clear about what this does *not* mean. It does not mean that in becoming a human being, the Son of God had to give up being God. Our definition from Chalcedon affirms what is plainly taught in scripture, that in Jesus "the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily" (Col 2:9) and that those who saw Jesus were seeing "the Word" who "became flesh" and witnessed a "glory as of the only Son from the Father" (Jn 1:14).

So we must not think that Jesus in any way forfeited or laid aside any aspect of his deity in the incarnation. The fully divine nature was present in Jesus so that everything that is true about God was true about Jesus. There was no compromise of his divinity in his incarnation. It is miraculous of course, as Athanasius observed, that while Jesus was living the ordinary, daily life of a human being, he was also as the Word of God upholding the universe.⁶ But imagine also the humiliation, as Augustine observed, that the child who lay there in a manger, having been his own mother's Creator, now would be nourished from her own body.⁷

This is what it means that Jesus "emptied himself." It is another way to speak of his humiliation mentioned in verse 8, the humiliation he endured in the incarnation. There is no need for us to look for an answer to the question, "of what did he empty himself?" The point is simply to show that in becoming a human like us required Jesus had to "make himself nothing" (NIV). He did not give up his divinity; indeed, it is not possible for God to cease being God. "God is eternal, self-existent, immortal, and immutable, and thus he cannot cease to exist as God, nor can he fail to be

fully God.”⁸ But that is just the point. There is no greater act of humiliation possible than for God to take up a human mode of being. As one commentator says, “the phrase is intended to encapsulate for the readers the whole descent of Christ from highest glory to lowest depths.”⁹

So let this miracle of Advent sink in. It is quite a feat for someone to go from a lowly place to an exalted place. And it is quite humiliating to see one fall from a high place to a lowly place. But for one who *is* exalted to humble himself in this way, to still be the exalted King of the universe and yet to take on a form of existence that would subject him to all the miseries of this life—now who would do that? Who *could* do that? Only God, and that is precisely what he did.

The Humiliation of Taking on Humanity

And the way he did it was by “taking the form of a servant.” The King of the Universe became a lowly servant. He did not give up any aspect of his deity to do this. Notice how he did it. He humbled himself not by giving up his deity but by adding on humanity. He humbled himself by adding rather than subtracting.

Bruce Ware offers an illustration to explain this point.¹⁰ Suppose you are shopping for a new car and become interested in a brand new, beautiful, shiny car. You take it out on a test drive and end up on an unpaved road, just a day after several days of torrential rain. As you drive along the road, the car becomes caked in mud. When you return, the salesman complains, “What have you done to my car?” To which you reply, “I’ve taken nothing away from your car; I’ve only added to it!” You would, of course, be correct. The luster and beauty of the car is still there, but it has been prevented from shining through by the addition of the mud.

Ware says this illustration shows how the incarnate Christ could still possess his full deity while on the other hand not be able to fully express that deity due to the addition of the human nature.¹¹ So the miracle of the incarnation is a striking act of self-humiliation.

The Humiliating Life of Christ

We continue to see and be amazed by such a display of humiliation when we think of how Jesus, the Lord of Glory, lived his life. Remember what we were told in Hebrews, how he was made like us in every respect, including enduring the suffering of temptation, but without ever giving in to it (Heb 2:17-18; 4:15). Christ did not exalt himself (Heb 5:5); “he learned obedience through what he suffered” (Heb 5:8). And so we were exhorted to “consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself” (Heb 12:3).

He did not have it easy because he retained the fullness of his deity. On the contrary, the addition of his human nature to his divine nature made his life more humiliating than you or I could ever live. He descended from the highest height imaginable, a descent that only God could do. He experienced a humiliation far greater than you or I ever have or ever could experience.

THE INCARNATION IS BENEFICIAL

And that leads us to ponder the question, “Why?” *Why* would he do this? Why would he humiliate himself like this? There must be a reason, a purpose behind it all. There must be a benefit. Indeed, there is.

For Our Sake

Last week I mentioned the classic book on the incarnation by the fourth-century church father, Athanasius, who begins by discussing the creation of the universe and especially the creation of humanity. “You are probably wondering,” he writes in chapter four, “why we, having proposed to speak of the Incarnation of the Word, are now discussing the origin of mankind.” Here’s why:

For it is necessary for us, in speaking of the manifestation of the Saviour to us, to speak also of the origin of mankind, that you may know that our case was the reason of His coming down, and our transgression called out the loving-kindness of the Word, so that He both hastened to us, and the Lord appeared among men.

For we were the occasion of His becoming flesh, and for our salvation He showed such loving-kindness as both to be born and appear in a human body.¹²

His descent was for our sake. The Son of God descended from heaven, in the humiliation of incarnation, to benefit you and me. Don’t turn this around thinking it will sound better to say that we benefit God. We exist for God’s glory, yes, but not for God’s benefit. God reminded Job that no mortal has ever given to God anything he doesn’t already have, for “whatever is under the whole heaven is mine” (Job 41:11).

He Became Poor

Ok, so the reason for the miracle of the incarnation is to benefit us. But why would God want to benefit us? If we can not benefit him in some way, why would he want to benefit us? What’s “in it” for God to benefit us?

Many commentators point out that the best commentary on Philippians 2:7 and the miracle of the incarnation is what we find in 2 Corinthians 8:9. “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.” So the miracle of the incarnation begins with the Son of God who was “rich.” That is, he possessed all the privilege, all the glory of his full equality with God, just as Philippians 2:6 says (see also John 17:5). You can’t get any richer than that.

But what did he do with his privileged status? He “became poor.” Rather than seeing his riches as an advantage best kept to himself, “he relinquished that status to serve others.”¹³ And he didn’t hold back. He *became poor*. He emptied himself (Phil 2:7). He gave it all because he gave himself.

To Make Us Rich

But why? Here's why: "so that you by his poverty might become rich." How have we been enriched by the poverty of Christ? The answer is the meaning of the *evangel*, the good news of the Christian gospel. Because of the incarnation we get the cross in which the eternal riches of Christ are now ours by faith. And we get it all as a gift. We get it all by grace. You can't earn it, and you can't pay God back for it.

But here we see what Kelly Kopic calls "the genius of God's generosity" as well as "the crucifixion of our common sense." You see, what marked Jesus's impoverishment is not simply the resources he gave up, but more importantly, his rights. Kopic reminds us that over 2.3 trillion dollars has been given away by western governments in the last five decades with very little to show for it. So while resources may be given away with good intentions, the only way for real change to come is when we also with them give away our rights.¹⁴ And that's exactly what the Son of God did.

It is risky. Oh, is it risky! How much do you and I take for granted this great grace? How greedy are we to drink up all that God pours out to us and do with his riches precisely the opposite of what he did with them?

But don't you see that the riches of Christ and of his gospel stand in the starkest contrast to the temporal riches of this life? These are the kinds of riches that can be acquired without impoverishing anyone else. In fact, one commentator writes that the more we have of these riches, the more available they are to be widely shared and the more plentiful they become.¹⁵

This is what God is after in the incarnation. This is what he wants. The miracle of the incarnation is when this grace of God begins to take root in our own lives. For if we have become rich by the poverty of Christ, then does this not mean we possess now the power to enrich others in the same way?

I do not mean that any of us can do for others what Christ did for us. For Christ to enrich us he had to lay aside more, far more than you or I ever can. But we are called to imitate his humility, his laying aside of certain rights and privileges for the benefit of others. But the only way you can do this, the only way you can pour out your time or your money—indeed your whole self—for the benefit of others, is when you possess an inexhaustible wealth yourself.

That's what we have been given in Christ. That's the miracle of the incarnation. In Christ we have been given the true riches that can be given away in a true act of impoverishment yet without ever losing a cent of what we are given to enjoy forever.

¹ See Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), [554-ff.](#)

² It is questionable whether Nestorius actually believed this, but this is the teaching that goes by his name.

³ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, [557.](#)

⁴ Ibid., [563](#).

⁵ John Piper, “Santa Claus: Harmless Fun or Christmastime Diversion?” available online at www.desiringgod.org/interviews/santa-claus-harmless-fun-or-christmastime-diversion.

⁶ Athanasius of Alexandria and T. Herbert Bindley, *On the Incarnation of the Word of God: An English Translation, with an Introduction, Synopsis, and Notes*, 2d ed. rev. (London: The Religious Tract Society, 1903), [73](#).

⁷ Augustine of Hippo, “Lectures or Tractates on the Gospel according to St. John,” in *St. Augustin: Homilies on the Gospel of John, Homilies on the First Epistle of John, Soliloquies*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. John Gibb and James Innes, vol. 7, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, First Series (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1888), [95](#).

⁸ Bruce A. Ware, *The Man Christ Jesus: Theological Reflections on the Humanity of Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), [19](#).

⁹ Moisés Silva, *Philippians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, ed. Robert Yarbrough and Robert H. Stein (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), [105](#).

¹⁰ Bruce A. Ware, *The Man Christ Jesus: Theological Reflections on the Humanity of Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), [20-21](#).

¹¹ Ibid., [21](#).

¹² Athanasius and Bindley, *On the Incarnation of the Word of God*, [47-48](#).

¹³ David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, The New American Commentary, vol. 29, ed. E. Ray Clendenen (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1999), [376-77](#).

¹⁴ Kelly M. Kapic, *God So Loved, He Gave: Entering the Movement of Divine Generosity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 158-60.

¹⁵ C. E. B. Cranfield, “The Grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ: 2 Corinthians 8:1-9,” *Communio viatorum* 32 (1989), 108.