

THE MIGHT OF THE INCARNATION

Ben Janssen | **Philippians 2:8a** | December 15, 2019

⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself.

The weekend of Thanksgiving is the usual time for our family to get out the Christmas decorations. That Saturday is when we typically hang the lights on the house. This year was no different, and I was thankful again for the nice weather: sunny skies, no wind. I was especially thankful since that morning, surprisingly, we had a power outage in our neighborhood. I was inside at the time, paying bills online when the power went out. It is so inconvenient to lose power, but at least it was a nice day and I had plenty of work to do outside.

Still, the power outage lingered for most of the day. And the inconvenience became more difficult. I couldn't even test the lights to make sure they were working. My neighbor has a generator, and as I heard it firing up, I began to think about how much I need a generator, another source of power. I don't think about this much since the power doesn't go out often. But how nice would it be to not be dependent on OG&E for my electricity? Even better of course would be to have solar power and be dependent only on the sun!

We're studying the incarnation this Advent season from this text in Philippians 2:1-11. And this morning we're going to concentrate on the first part of verse 8, and what it tells us about another source of power for our lives, a source of power we do not naturally live by. The verse says about Jesus, "being found in human form, he humbled himself." As the perfect human being, Jesus modeled for us the power of living in humble dependence on the power of God's Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is the alternate power source for life, and Jesus lived by this power. You and I can as well. We see this power from the moment of Jesus's conception, throughout his humble life, and in the mighty endowment he leaves for us.

A MIGHTY CONCEPTION

When we talk about the Christmas story, we can't begin, of course, in Bethlehem. We have to begin in "a city of Galilee named Nazareth" and with "a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph" (Lk 1:26-27). The first glimpse we get at the might of the incarnation of the Son of God is not at his birth but at his conception.

Conceived by the Holy Spirit

Remember what Mary was told by the angel, how it was that he said she would become pregnant? "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you" (Lk 1:35). Joseph was assured by the angel that Mary had not been unfaithful to him, but rather "that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit," the angel said (Matt 1:20). The Apostles' Creed says it succinctly; Jesus "was conceived by the Holy Spirit."

This kind of language has appeared before in the Bible. In Genesis 1, at the creation of the world, we are told that “the earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And *the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters*” (Gen 1:2). So now, as the Spirit hovers over the womb of the virgin, we are to see that a new creation is starting, one which is “equally due to the creative energies of God.”¹

A Real Human Person

The incarnation began, then, in the womb of the Virgin Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit. Now when God created Adam and Eve, he made them as fully mature human adults. Jesus could have arrived in this way, but he didn't. When God became incarnate, he started out in the womb. In other words, his life as a human being began just like ours began. Life as a human person did not begin for him on Christmas morning. It began some nine months earlier.

So while there can be no doubt, as we discussed last week, that in becoming human Jesus in no way ceded any of his divine nature, any of his deity, we also want to stress this point, that he was, at the same time, no less of a human than you and me. He really did become a human being. He was “found in human form” (Phil 2:8). That is, he was known and seen and heard and perceived as an otherwise ordinary human being. He didn't have a divine aura surrounding him, a halo around his head, light emanating from his snow-white robe that never got soiled. No way! He was a human being, a human being just like you. You were conceived; he was conceived. You were born; he was born.

It seems this ancient Christian hymn is stressing the point so that we do not miss it. Notice the repeated references to the humanity of Jesus in verses 7-8. Jesus *took the form of a servant*. He was *born in the likeness of men*. He was *found in human form*. There is no clear distinction intended by these expressions. They mean the same thing, that the one who was already God, equal to God in every way, did not cling to his privilege but used it entirely to benefit us. He poured himself out, holding nothing back. He did not merely send us a gift from heaven. He gave us himself. He entered into our life. He became one of us.

Incarnation and Imitation

It is not easy for us to think of Jesus as both fully God and fully human. I think it is easier for us Christians to think of him as God than to think of him as human. At the very least, it seems that when we do think of Jesus as a human, we think of him as a superhuman, making the mistake of mixing up his two distinct natures. But that is the heresy corrected at Chalcedon, which clarified that “the characteristics of each nature” are preserved in Jesus, even as they exist together in one person.

Yes, this is a miracle. Only God can become incarnate. We cannot imitate the incarnation of Christ. We can't be incarnate. But the point is that God *can*. The point of Christmas is that God *is*. And God is incarnate *for us*. But the might of the incarnation begins here, hidden in a mother's womb.

A MIGHTY HUMILITY

Next, notice how the mighty conception of Jesus points us to another fascinating aspect of the incarnation, the humility of Christ. There's a real power in his humility; it is a mighty humility.

A Summary of Jesus's Life

If we could summarize the life of Jesus from conception to cross, the word *humility* might be the best word. Jesus lived his life as a human in humility. But oh, the power of his humility!

Take a look again at verses 7-8. There are two main verbs in these verses, telling us that Jesus "emptied himself" and that he "humbled himself." First, Jesus "emptied himself" by submitting to the incarnation, accepting the form of a servant by being born as a real human being. It is a remarkable act of humility for the one who is equal with God and Lord of all creation to submit himself to the care of his own creation by being born into it.

Now notice what verse 8 says. The opening words, "and being found in human form," summarizes everything from verse 7 and its statement about the incarnation and introduces us to the next verb, "he humbled himself."² So verse 8 wants us to see what Jesus does next, now that he has already humbled himself in conception and birth. How does he now live? And the answer is astonishing. The Son of God who humbled himself by coming in the first place *now humbles himself even more*.

We'll look next week at what this further act of humility entailed from what we're told in the rest of verse 8, but let's just park here for a moment and let it sink in. The Son of God gave us everything by giving us himself. It was an amazing act of humility. But then he humbled himself even more. He keeps on pouring himself out. It is humility on his part, but this is the kind of humility that demands an explanation. It is a mighty humility.

A Sign of Jesus's Greatness

Perhaps we should consider a few examples of this mighty humility in the life of Jesus. In Luke 8:56, after bringing Jairus's dead daughter back to life, Jesus told her amazed parents, "tell no one what had happened." Are you kidding me! Who would bring someone back from the dead and not want the media to hear about it? Only Jesus.

Or how about after Jesus fed five thousand people with five loaves of bread and two fish? When the crowd saw it they said, "This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!" and they were about to make him king. What did Jesus do? He went and hid himself in the mountains to prevent it all from happening (Jn 6:14-15). Now who would draw a following like that and turn down the nomination for the highest office in the land? Only Jesus.

And then, when Jesus was betrayed and arrested, he stopped his disciples from defending him with their swords, reminding them that he could appeal to the Father, "and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels" (Matt 26:53). Who would refuse to defend themselves when they were being treated so unfairly? Only Jesus.

So as astonishing as his life was, as powerful and convicting his teaching, as comforting and assuring his grace, what really stands out in the life of Jesus is his humility. Jesus lived his very human life with the greatest humility the world has ever seen.

In fact, no one could show as great a humility as Jesus, for only the one who truly *is* the greatest can be the humblest. As the incarnate Son of God, Jesus was the greatest human to ever live. And what makes him greater still is the lowly place he staked out in his life.

The Secret to Jesus's Power

As I said, this mighty humility demands an explanation. No human being would show such humility. How did he do it? If he was a true human, then the temptation for pride for him must have been greater than you or I or anyone else has ever felt. Indeed he was “tempted as we are,” but he never gave in. How did he do it? What was the secret to his power, to his mighty humility?

Don't resort now to his divine nature to explain it all away. New Testament scholar Gerald Hawthorne wrote a book to argue that the way in which “Jesus overcame his human limitations, rose above his human weakness, and won out over his human mortality” was by his dependence, not on his own divine power, but on the divine power of the Holy Spirit.³ The Holy Spirit produced this mighty humility in his life.

Bruce Ware reminds us that the promise of the Old Testament prophet Isaiah was that the Messiah would come with “the Spirit of the Lord” resting upon him” (Isa 11:1-3). It would be the power of the Spirit that would account for the Messiah's wisdom, understanding, insight, strength, and determination to do all that God told him to do.⁴ It would also be because he had the Spirit of the Lord upon him that the Messiah would be empowered to bring good news to the poor, bind up the brokenhearted, proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who were bound” (Isa 61:1). Ware writes, “Both inward character and outward conduct, then, are tied to the empowering work that the Spirit will perform on this coming anointed one of God.”⁵

So there's the secret to Jesus's power. Jesus was human. He lived as a human. But he lived as a human *ought to live*, not as we humans do live. This is why, when we speak of Jesus being like us in every way (Heb 2:17), we have to add, “yet without sin” (Heb 4:15). His sinlessness does not make him less human. It is sin which makes *us* sub-human.

Jesus shows us how we were meant to live. And if Jesus lived this way *as a human*, then he modeled this way for us to live our own lives. But you know you can't do it. You know all too well the pride that swells up in your heart. But just take a glance through the first four verses of Philippians 2 and you'll see that we must do it. We are commanded to live with the same mighty humility with which Christ lived.

You see, Christ not only modeled this for us. He also made it possible for us to live this way.

A MIGHTY ENDOWMENT

That's because the mighty life of Christ, from the moment of his conception and all throughout his humble life, is more than a model for us. His life has been *given* to us. Think of the life of Christ as a mighty endowment from which we are continuously supplied with an abundance of resources. And if you draw on these resources, you can begin to imitate the might of the incarnate life of Christ.

The Power Lost

But first, you're going to have to see your need for this alternate power. You're going to have to feel the sting of powerlessness without it. You can't add this power as a supplement. You have to be entirely dependent on it.

In Acts 8 we read about a man named Simon, a sorcerer who "amazed the people of Samaria" (v. 9). The people there said that he was "the power of God that is called Great" (v. 10). But then along came the apostles preaching the gospel and when the people there believed they were endowed with the power of the Holy Spirit (vv. 12, 17). It was an alternate power than what Simon had, but it was also a greater power.

Simon wanted that power, so he offered the apostles some cash saying, "Give me this power also, so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit" (vv. 18-19). But Peter rebuked him and called him to repentance. You see, Simon had the same problem we so often have. We want to add the power of God without giving up our own power. But this kind of power is an alternate power, and until we are powerless, until we've come to the end of ourselves and lost all hope in ourselves, we can't access it. You can't have the mighty humility of Christ until you've been humiliated. The only way up is down.

The Power Restored

The only way to have this power is to lose your own. Until your power is lost you can't have your power restored.

But once you've lost your power, once you are desperate for another power, then you can see the power of Christ's humility for you. You see, Jesus did not *get* his power from his humility. He was humble because he had the power. He was already God. He was one with God.

And the only way we can have our power restored is to also be united to God. And that's what the incarnation is all about. Christ, who is one with God, came to be one with us. By uniting himself to us, we've been united to God. But only if we abide in Christ. "Whoever abides in me and I in him," Jesus said, "he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing" (Jn 15:5).

How do we abide in Christ? The same way Christ abided in the Spirit. As a human like us, he shows us how to do it. Through his reliance on the scripture and prayer and the community of faith, Jesus lived in dependence on the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.⁶ When we neglect these graces,

what else are we doing but demonstrating our dependence on our own power? So what power are you living by? How do you know?

Power for Mission

Let me close this morning by putting two texts together which ought to encourage every disciple of Jesus to know how to live with the power that is ours because of the incarnation of Christ.

First, in Acts 10:38 we have this summary of how Jesus lived his life: “God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.” The explanation for Jesus’s life, for everything he did, was the power of the Holy Spirit.

Now see Acts 1:8. “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” The same power by which Jesus lived his life has been given to you, brothers and sisters; but it has been given to you *for the same purpose* for which it was given to Jesus.

You will know that you are living *by* the power of Christ, by the might of the incarnation, when you are living *for* the same mission. The Holy Spirit is given to us, not to empower our own mission in life, but to empower God’s mission. He doesn’t empower us to get promotions I our jobs so we can find our significance in our work. He doesn’t empower us to make money so we can live more comfortably, take an early retirement and then “live the dream life” until we die. He doesn’t empower us to find a spouse or to make friends so we can feel “completed” by anyone other than himself for whose glory we’ve been made. He doesn’t empower us with gifts to edify ourselves but to build up others in the faith.

You see, he empowers us with an alternate power for an alternate mission. And when we give ourselves to his mission and to his kingdom purposes in our vocations and with our finances and relationships and gifts, then the same power that was at work in the character and conduct of Christ can be evident in yours as well.

¹ Robert Letham, *The Work of Christ*, Contours of Christian Theology, ed. Gerald Bray (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), [78–79](#).

² Moisés Silva, *Philippians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, ed. Robert Yarbrough and Robert H. Stein (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), [106](#).

³ Gerald F. Hawthorne, *The Presence and the Power: The Significance of the Holy Spirit in the Life and Ministry of Jesus* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1991), 35.

⁴ Bruce A. Ware, *The Man Christ Jesus: Theological Reflections on the Humanity of Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), [35](#).

⁵ *Ibid.*, [36](#).

⁶ *Ibid.*, [45](#).