

THE MISSION OF THE INCARNATION

Ben Janssen | **Philippians 2:8b** | December 22, 2019

⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

If the Christmas story tells us anything it is that God is on a mission. God sent his Son on purpose, for a cause, for a mission. He is after something. He *wants* something. He gives his Son to us, freely, but with a motive. What is it? What does he want?

There's this one podcast I enjoy listening to, and I've figured out that I think I would like to have that podcast. A couple of times a week, the host interviews somebody who has written a book. It's clear that the host has read the book quite thoroughly, based on the questions he asks. That's what makes the podcast so good. I've figured out that this guy's job is to pretty much read books. That sounds pretty great, especially since I'm guessing he gets a lot of those books for free from the publisher.

And then there are advertisements, and the host is a great promoter of the products that are being advertised on his show. He's got custom designed shirts and suits; he's tried all the newest technologies. And if you'd like to try what he's got, he's got a deal for you! I'll confess, a few of these items are on my Amazon wish list. I've even thought about getting the omigo, "a revolutionary toilet seat that will let you finally say goodbye to toilet paper again."

All those books, all those products, much of which I'm sure he gets for free. And that's because many of these publishers and product designers give them to him. But they do so on a mission. They have a motive. They don't want those items to stop with him. They want them to end up in our homes, for a little bit more than free, of course.

This morning, as we consider the last part of verse 8, we see the mission of the incarnation. Jesus came and "humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." The mission of the incarnation, the whole purpose for why he came, is summarized for us here as obedience, complete obedience, and redemptive obedience. And as we look at his mission, we can discern something of his motive for that mission, too. He wants nothing less than complete obedience from us as well. But the way God will complete his mission in our lives is only through the completion of his mission in Jesus's life.

THE OBEDIENCE OF JESUS

So let's begin by considering the obedience of the incarnate Christ. Last week, I suggested that the word *humility* summarizes the life of Christ. But the way that Jesus continued to show that humility was by his obedience. "He humbled himself *by* becoming obedient." This is what his humility looked like. So when we think about how Jesus lived his life, we can think of these two words together. Jesus lived his life in humble obedience.

Obedient to the Father

Of course, this means that he rendered his obedience not to everyone in general but to God the Father specifically. He did not come to do what everyone wanted him to do; he came to do what the Father wanted him to do. At the same time, by being obedient to his Father, he was serving everyone. Since the Father sent Jesus for our sake, Jesus's obedience to the Father is precisely the way he serves us best. Jesus does not serve your best interests by doing what you want him to do but by doing what the Father wants him to do.

As we enter now into the week of Christmas, the last of the Advent candles encourages us to consider the love of God in sending his Son. The love of God *for you*. If you feel like the season is passing you by once again and that you are not celebrating well, not taking it in the way you ought to take it in, perhaps it's because in all of your efforts you are missing God's effort for you. Perhaps we're too busy doing things and not busy enough contemplating the great love of God for us evident by the simple fact that God sent his Son into the world for our sake, out of love for us his people.

Obedience of the Incarnation

The love of God for us is evident in the simple fact that he sent his Son into the world for us. And the Son shows his love for us by obeying the Father. This display of love through obedience was not a new act for Jesus. He said that he always does that which pleases his Father (Jn 8:29). So when our text says that the incarnate Christ humbled himself "by becoming obedient," we should not take this to mean that only at the incarnation did Jesus become submissive to his Father. The eternal Son of God has always obeyed his Father.

This eternal obedience of the Son to his Father is what explains the incarnation itself. The Father sent the Son into the world, but the Son also said, "Yes," to this commission. Jesus said that he had "come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me" (Jn 6:38). He could even say that his "food" was "to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work" (Jn 4:34). In the obedience of Jesus to his Father, we see his determination to complete everything the Father wanted him to do. This was his mission. It is what he lived for. It was his life's passion, because nothing could be more satisfying to him than to see his Father's plans achieved. This was true before the incarnation; it was true after the incarnation. And again, this obedience of the Son to his Father is for our benefit.

The Struggle of Obedience

But there is something unique about the obedience of Jesus to God the Father in his incarnate life. For the first time, this obedience would become a real struggle for the Son. It would not come easily.

Since Jesus is God, since he shared even in his incarnation the same nature as his Father, his own will was completely in sync with the will of the Father. And that means that obedience for him was nothing than doing what he wanted to do himself. "That's easy!" you might say.

But being in sync with his Father like this also does not mean that his obedience would be easy. Sometimes doing even what you want to do is a real challenge. Your boss might give you an assignment that you find interesting. You might even volunteer for the task that she needs done. You *want* to do it. But that doesn't mean it is going to be easy.

Suppose I say to my wife, "Is there anything you would like me to do for you today? Just name it and it will be done." And she replies, "Let's see, I really want you to clean up the garage. It's a mess." Now I kind of enjoy cleaning the garage. It's something I might choose to spend my time doing if no one asked me to do it. But does this make obedience to my wife's desires easy?

It does make it easier than if my desires were out of sync with hers. But obedience is hard enough in other ways. That job your boss has given you to do may take a whole lot of time and effort. You may have to solve some difficult problems in order to do it right. And cleaning up the garage might mean I've got to organize the kids' toys and not just my tools. There are parts of the job that might not be particularly enjoyable. I might even accidentally cut my hand or get hurt in some other way.

In other words, the fact that I am a human being and live within the limitations of my humanity might make an otherwise desirable task a very difficult one. And so it was with Christ. Obeying his Father in the incarnation required him to do everything as a human being. He didn't just "speak the word" and it was all done. He had to be born after a nine-month pregnancy. He had to grow up. He had to learn to talk and to walk. He had to learn the scriptures that his own Holy Spirit had inspired. Elyse Fitzpatrick observes, "The obedience of Jesus Christ was not light or a sham obedience. It was agonizingly real as he bore our flesh ... and struggled with our weakness. ... 'His obedience was a battle.'"¹

The obedience of Jesus, as our text says, required a great deal of humility. But he was not forced into it. He volunteered for it. And it cost him greatly.

THE COMPLETENESS OF HIS OBEDIENCE

How much it cost him is what we turn to next, for in the incarnation Jesus not only humbled himself by being obedient to the Father, but by being obedient to his Father all the way "to the point of death."

The Extent of His Obedience

What is being highlighted here is the extent of Jesus's humble obedience to the Father. How far will he go in his obedience? And the answer is this: he would obey the Father all the way to his death. At no point whatsoever did he disobey. Not even in the smallest way. He paid careful attention to every detail, every command. And he never said "no" to God. Not even once.

But I think there is something else to be seen in the obedience of Jesus to his Father "to the point of death." That means his obedience included the moment of his death. When we read the various accounts of Jesus's death in the Bible, what we find is that none of the four Gospel writers describe the moment in the ordinary ways. There was something different about Jesus's death, something unique. For example, Matthew says, "Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up his

spirit” (Matt 27:50). In John 10:18 we hear Jesus saying, “No one takes [my life] from me, but I lay it down of my own accord.” What is unique about Jesus’s death is that it was a voluntary act.²

Jesus’s death was the consummate display of his humble obedience to the Father. But the moment of his death was also the last act of his mission. This was what the Father had ultimately sent him to do, and Jesus was determined to see the mission through. Indeed, this is a mission that only one who is God *could* do. As one commentator points out, “only a divine being can offer obedience to death; for mortals it is their destiny from which there is no escape.”³

Preparing to Die

So humbly did Jesus obey his Father, so thoroughly, that he would do as his Father commanded even if that obedience cost him his life. There is no self-promotion or self-preservation. There is only humble obedience, whatever the cost.

In eternity past, the Son never had to obey the Father in this way, at this cost. This kind of obedience required him to accept “suffering, rejection, ridicule, and agony” and, ultimately, death.⁴ But the Son obeyed even here, at the moment of his death, because this is the mission he had come to do. The immortal Son of God took on mortal flesh so he could die. He had to become incarnate. He had to become like us in our humanity. There could be no cross without Christmas.

But just think now of what Christmas tells us about the cross. How did this man, the incarnate Son of God, obey his Father to this extent, up to and including his own death? An obedience like this needs an explanation. How did he do it? Hebrews 5:8 tells us, “Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered.” Throughout his entire life, Jesus obeyed the Father and suffered for it. But it was in this way that Jesus gained the strength he would need to fulfill his mission by his sacrificial death. He learned this kind of obedience.

In order, then, for Jesus to complete his mission, he had to learn to trust his Father even in the most painful circumstances. He had to learn that obedience to the Father was always worth it, no matter what the initial cost would be.

The Final Command

You and I must learn this as well. God wants us to obey him. But he wants us to obey him because we trust him. He wants us to obey him because we love him. Obeying God from a motivation of love and trust—this is something that must grow in our hearts. This is what it means to be a mature Christian. It takes time. And a lot of effort. The Apostle Paul’s aim was to “present everyone mature in Christ,” and it was “for this” that he said he toiled, “struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me” (Col 1:28-29).

Christian maturity does not come easily, without struggle, effort, pain. Jesus himself went through the process. He was a human like you. He had to learn obedience. In one sense, the life of Christ became easier and easier, as Jesus experienced “the most profound and radical growth in his spiritual life—a growth of faith greater than anyone has ever experienced.”⁵ And yet, at the same

time, the challenges that Jesus would encounter would grow increasingly more difficult throughout his life, all the way until the moment of his death.

You see, the final command of God that Jesus had to obey was the most difficult one of all. He could never have done it had he not prepared for it. At the moment of his greatest humiliation and shame, with the sins of the world heaped upon him who was entirely innocent of them all, the Father commanded the Son, “Die!” And the Son’s loud cry was this: “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!” (Lk 23:46). It was “a stunning cry of trust after his sense of divine abandonment.”⁶ The Author of Life, in humble obedience to his Father, leaped into the darkness of death.

And because he did this, because he fully obeyed the Father “to the point of death,” he not only is able to redeem us from our own disobedience but also give us the power to obey the Father as well.

THE REDEMPTION OF HIS OBEDIENCE

Because remember, the mission of Jesus was *for us*. We were his mission, and this is before us now as we consider that Jesus not only obeyed the Father to the point of death, but that this death he died in obedience to the Father was “death on a cross.” What is being highlighted here is not so much the method of his death but the meaning of it. By dying on a cross, Jesus’s obedience became redemptive.

The Victory of the Cross

Death by crucifixion was considered by the Romans to be the most shameful form of capital punishment there was. They crucified criminals as a way of saying, “This is what happens to anyone who dares to stand against Caesar. Whoever attempts anything like that is cursed.”

But Jesus’s death was not purely an act of the Roman government. The Jews wanted him crucified, probably because they knew that, according to Deuteronomy 21:23, a criminal hanged on a tree is cursed by God. What better way to show that this man who claimed to be God was a fraud than to put him under the divine curse of the cross?

But, as we’ve seen, Jesus did not die exclusively because of the actions of the Romans or the Jews. It was God the Father who commanded him to be there, and it was the Son’s obedience to the Father that fulfilled the command. But both the Gentiles and the Jews were right about this: Jesus’s death on a cross was indeed a sure sign that he was now under the divine curse. But it was a redemptive curse he endured. Paul tells us in Galatians 3:13, “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree.’” By allowing himself to be cursed by the Jews and by the Gentiles and even by God himself, Jesus’s death on a cross broke the curse of sin and death. What was indeed the most shameful event in human history in that moment became the greatest event there ever could be. Athanasius put it like this:

A marvellous and wonderful thing has indeed happened; for the death which they thought to inflict on Him as a dishonour, this became an honourable trophy over death itself.⁷

Righteous by Obedience

That Jesus would obey the Father and die is one thing; that he would obey the Father and die like this is quite another. There simply is no other way for the eternal Son of God to be more humiliated than to subject himself to crucifixion. Here we see him go as low as one could go. His descent from the glory of heaven to the humanity of earth is a massive journey. But his descent to this kind of death is unimaginable.

You see, there is no further descent that could be made once the Son of God had succumbed to the humiliation of the cross. Having gone to the lowest depths there was, his mission was accomplished. He had come not to be served by us but to serve us, “to give his life as a ransom” for us (Mk 10:45). The only ransom for sin was death. But because Jesus died an *obedient* death, his death alone could be sufficient to bear the curse of death for all.

This is the logic of the Christian gospel. Romans 5:19 says it plainly enough. Just as one man’s disobedience made us sinners, so now “by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous.” Just as Adam represented us in his disobedience, bringing us into a state of sin by his act, so Jesus has represented us in his obedience, bringing us into a state of righteousness.⁸ The only way to be righteous is by being “right,” by being in accord with the standards of God himself. Jesus has brought us into that state by his obedience, his obedience to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Righteous Obedience

The mission of Jesus was to make us righteous, but do you see how he achieved it? *By his humble obedience.* There is no righteousness before God without obedience to God. So we have been “made righteous” only because the righteousness of Christ’s obedience is credited to us. It is by his obedience, never by our own, that we are righteous in God’s eyes. How amazing it is that we can say, “Sinner in Christ, you are righteous!” and find it true. But it is true, true because Jesus fulfilled his mission by his humble obedience to the Father on our behalf.

What greater gift could we be given than the gift of the incarnate Son of God? The Nicene Creed reminds us that it was “for us and for our salvation” that the Son of God “came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary, and was made man; and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate; he suffered and was buried,” and it was all for us.

To the extent that you see this and believe this, God knows you will be transformed by this. For you simply could not be given a greater gift than this. And the response of every one who receives such a marvelous gift will be something like this one from the Apostle Paul who, when facing the certainty of imprisonment and afflictions for his faith in Christ, said,

But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God (Acts 20:24).

This is what God wants. This is why he sent his Son, why he gave him to us so freely. It was so that we would lose our lives, to have our life taken up in his, and find true life. The kind of life that testifies to all the gospel of the grace of God.

He's given us everything, everything for free, so that his great grace will not stop with us but be shared with everyone, and so that the redemption that is in Christ may be enjoyed by all.

As we enter into this final week of the Advent season, may we all who adore Christ the Lord share this good news of great joy that is for all people.

¹ Elyse M. Fitzpatrick, *Found in Him: The Joy of the Incarnation and Our Union with Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 55. The last line is cited from Thomas F. Torrance, *Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 64.

² Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary, ed. D.A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1992), [723](#).

³ E. Lohmeyer, *Kyrios Jesus: Eine Untersuchung zu Phil. 2, 5–11*, rev. ed., vol. 28, Sitzungsberichte Der Heidelberger Akademie Der Wissenschaften; Philosophisch-Historische Klasse, Jahrgang (Heidelberg: Winter, 1961), 41, cited in Gerald F. Hawthorne, *Philippians*, revised and expanded by Ralph P. Martin, Word Biblical Commentary, ed. Bruce M. Metzger, David A. Hubbard, and Glenn W. Barker (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 2004), [120](#).

⁴ Bruce A. Ware, *The Man Christ Jesus: Theological Reflections on the Humanity of Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), [26](#).

⁵ *Ibid.*, [60](#).

⁶ Craig Blomberg, *Matthew*, The New American Commentary, ed. David S. Dockery (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1992), [420](#).

⁷ 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), [87](#).

⁸ Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, ed. F.F. Bruce (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), [345](#).