

THE MAJESTY OF THE INCARNATION

Ben Janssen | **Philippians 2:9-11** | December 29, 2019

⁹ Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

We've been studying this passage in Philippians during Advent this year because it has so much to tell us about the incarnation of the Son of God. If we want to understand Christmas and why the birth of Jesus is so important to us as Christians, why it is so central to the message of the Christian faith, these are some of the verses that can help us do that. They tell us about the mystery of the incarnation, how the plan for the Son of God to take on flesh was conceived by the triune God in eternity past. They tell us, of course, about the miracle of the incarnation, how it is that the Son of God emptied himself by adding a fully human nature. We've pondered the might of the incarnation, that the incarnate Son of God lived his life as a fully human like you and me by depending on the power of the Holy Spirit. And we discussed the mission of the incarnation, how the Son of God was born to fully obey the Father's will for him all the way to his obedient death on a cross.

But now Christmas is over. The holiday is behind us. One of our Goers in Japan told us that their city goes all out on the decorations for the holiday, but everything comes down promptly on December 26. I'm thinking about taking down the decorations pretty soon, too. But this is a little odd, isn't it? I mean, the party is just getting started, isn't it? Every new parent finds out that all the anticipation, all the waiting for the new baby to arrive is soon forgotten for the day by day enjoyment of actually having that baby to hold and to snuggle and to kiss. What are the days of engagement compared to the years of married life? What is the Advent season compared to the joy in the world now that the Lord has come?

You see, the majesty of the incarnation is what I'd like us to see next in our passage, but we can only really see it now after Christ has come. It's only as we look back at his birth, at his life, at his death, that the picture comes into its full, majestic focus. It's only after Christmas that we can really see the majesty of it all.

The majesty of the incarnation is revealed by how God the Father exalted the incarnate Son of God after his death on the cross. And that is what is before us now, in verses 9-11. Here we see the majesty of the incarnation in the vindication Jesus received, the name he was given, and the authority he possesses.

THE VINDICATION HE RECEIVED

First, we see the majesty of the incarnate Son of God in the vindication he received. The obedience of Christ in the previous verse appears to human eyes to be a complete failure and loss. For what did Jesus receive for his obedience? Death. Death on a cross.

Had that been the end of the story, had Jesus's incarnation ended with death, his obedience would have been for nothing. Oh, it would have been inspiring. Perhaps Jesus would be seen as brave and heroic. But he would not have been a Savior. Our lives would merely end like his did.

The Father Responds

But here in verse 9 we read, "Therefore God has highly exalted him." The word *therefore* tells us what happened next, as a consequence of what has just been done when Jesus died on the cross. And what follows in these three verses is the response specifically of God the Father. The first person of the trinity is the main actor in these verses.

And what the Father does is he highly exalts Jesus. This exaltation of Christ is not merely a reward for Jesus's obedience, but rather the divine vindication of Jesus's obedience. The Father responds to the obedience of Jesus in such a way that his obedience which led to his death is completely vindicated.

Incarnate Vindication

How has the Father vindicated Jesus's life? How has he "highly exalted" Jesus? The rest of the verse, which we'll come to momentarily, speaks of God bestowing on Jesus "the name that is above every name," which surely refers to this "highly exalted" status the Son has been given.

But it is important here to note that the Father does not merely ensure that Jesus goes down as the most significant person in the history of the world. This is a *vindication* of Jesus that is being described here, not a mere celebration of his life. The Father is responding in a way that shows he has approved of Jesus's life, that Jesus's humble obedience was an accurate way for one who is equal with God to live.¹

So when we read of God's vindication of Jesus, his act of "highly exalting" the one who had descended so low that he died a cross-death, we can't help but think, first, of the resurrection of Jesus. That is, his *bodily* resurrection from the dead. The *incarnate* resurrection of Jesus. He was conceived as a human being. He was born as a human being. He lived and died as a human. But now, in divine vindication of the perfect human life of Jesus, he was raised from the dead, the same body that was conceived, born, lived, and died, now lived again.

The resurrection is not explicitly stated in verse 9, but who can doubt that it is implied in God's vindication of Jesus? If Jesus's mission was to beat sin and the death that comes because of it, the only way he who had died could be shown to have won is by being raised to life, never to die again. The same must then be true of Christ's ascension, his *incarnate* ascension into heaven. His "going away" was also a vindication, because, we know, he "ascended into heaven" where he now "sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty." By taking his seat there in heaven, at God's right hand, we see that Jesus is as highly exalted as you could possibly be. To ascend is "a picture-word implying exaltation" and God's right hand expresses Jesus's regal function, his possession "of supreme dignity and power."²

Who Now Reigns?

So we see that God the Father has indeed highly exalted Jesus. His resurrection, ascension, and his session at the Father's right hand means not that he is now someone greater than he was before the incarnation or while he lived on earth. There is no exaltation of the Son over the Father, but rather an exaltation of the Son over all created things. The one "who made himself so very lowly," writes one commentator, "was made by God very high, so high, in fact, that he is placed over all things."³

At the same time, this is not just a return to glory for the eternal Son of God. There is something different now, for he has returned to the glory he had with the Father before the world existed (Jn 17:5) as the *incarnate* Son of God. In heaven right now, where the faithful dead are enjoying the presence of God though absent from their bodies (2 Cor 5:8), there is one, and only one, who is there in the body. Surely, he occupies all the attention of heaven as the highly exalted, incarnate Son of God.

So we see the majesty of the incarnation in the fact that the Son of God who became incarnate, obeyed, suffered, and died, was then vindicated as the incarnate Son of God by being raised in that same incarnate body, ascending to heaven and sitting down at God's right hand as the incarnate Son of God.

THE NAME HE WAS GIVEN

But that's not all. Next we see the majesty of the incarnation in the name he was given. Verse 9 says that God the Father "bestowed on him the name that is above every name." What is this name that God the Father has given to the incarnate Son of God? What is this name that is the highest name one could possibly be given? And what is the significance of possessing "the name that is above every name"?

A Naming Ceremony

As we attempt to answer these questions, we should remember that we're looking here at an act of God the Father in relation to the Son that is distinctive only now because of the incarnation of the Son. The Son *now* is given the name above every name, now at this moment of his vindication. This is a naming ceremony.

What is this name? In the current context, there really are only two possible answers. Verse 10 would suggest that it is the name *Jesus* that is our answer, for "at the name of Jesus every knee" will bow. "Because of the incarnation," says one commentator, "the human name, 'Jesus,' is acclaimed as the highest name."⁴ But, of course, the Son of God was given this name not at his vindication but at his conception, at the moment he humbled himself and took on a human nature. Our text does not say that God exalted a name, but rather that he exalted the Son by giving him "the name that is above every name."

When we get to verse 11, then, we are told that "every tongue" will "confess that Jesus Christ is Lord." So the second option is that the name Jesus is given at his vindication is "Lord." A difficulty

here is that “Lord” is not so much a name as a title, a rank. Going back to verse 10, we recall that it is “at the name of Jesus,” that every knee bows. And Jesus is frequently called “Lord” during his life on earth, not only now at his vindication.

So what is the answer? The answer, I think, is to be found when we put “Jesus” and “Lord” together.⁵ It is not the name “Jesus” that is bestowed upon the Son by God in his exaltation, but neither is it that the Son of God now is Lord but was not so previously. What is distinct now at resurrection and ascension is the fact that it is this same human Jesus, the incarnate Son of God, who now reigns as Lord at the right hand of the Father. So it is the “name of the Lord Jesus” that we find reference often throughout the New Testament (e.g. Acts 8:16; 19:5, 13, 17; 21:13; Col 3:17; 2 Thess 1:12; 3:6), but only twice in the Gospels, and both of those only after the resurrection (Mk 16:19; Lk 24:3). What name did the Son of God have bestowed upon him at his resurrection, ascension, and session at God’s right hand? The name, “Lord Jesus.”

The Highest Name

It is this name, we are told, that is “the name that is above every name.” There is no name higher than this, for only the mention of *this* name brings everyone to their knees. Here we have to observe something very important. Verses 10 and 11 are a clear allusion to the words of the prophet Isaiah, who is speaking about the uniqueness of Israel’s God.

*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.” (Isa 45:21-23)*

So what we are being told here in Philippians 2:10-11, is that the incarnate Son of God has been given the same name and the same rank as Israel’s one Lord, Yahweh.⁶ Yes, this is one of the clearest biblical proofs of the deity of Jesus, but that is not its main purpose here. Its main purpose here is evangelistic. It is missional.

The Urgent Message

That is to say, there is an urgency that comes now with Jesus’s vindication. During his life, there were plenty who would not submit to the lordship he already possessed as the incarnate Son of God. They rejected him. They crucified him. And they lived to tell about it.

But now, the tables have been turned. Jesus has been vindicated, and he has been given “the name,” the mention of which will elicit the response of a universal submission to his lordship. Now that he has been vindicated and exalted, there can be no more rebellion. There will be no more resistance. Every knee will bow.

And I mean *every* knee. Verse 10 describes not only people “on earth” but also angels “in heaven” and demons “under the earth.” “All—all principalities and powers as well as all people—are to bow their knees before Jesus and do obeisance to him in adoration and awe.”⁷

Because God has so highly exalted the incarnate Son of God, any refusal to submit to his reign simply cannot last. As Paul proclaimed to the Athenians, God

has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead (Acts 17:31).

The response of some of those who heard Paul say this sadly matches the response of many today. “Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked” (Acts 17:32). The idea that one could be raised from the dead as is claimed for the man named Jesus is ridiculous to the ears not only of modern, scientific naturalists but to so many who lived in ancient times as well. But the resurrection of Jesus is not mocked because it is so miraculous but because it is so momentous. For if Jesus has been raised then he has been vindicated and he alone holds the power over sin and death.

THE AUTHORITY HE POSSESSES

That is the message of the gospel and the majesty of the incarnation, that Jesus not only has been vindicated and given the name above every name, but that Jesus possesses an authority that silences every other voice and power. Jesus possesses absolute authority. And therefore, Jesus cannot be ignored with immunity. “The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent” (Acts 17:30), to live under the authority of Jesus. Here’s how to do it.

Confessional Christians

First, we must confess that Jesus has this absolute authority. “Because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (Rom 10:9). The absolute authority of Jesus is for your freedom, not your slavery.

The devil does not want you to believe this; he wants you to believe the opposite and thereby to hold you under his thumb. He would even be thrilled to have you think that *you* are Lord, living in the autonomy of your own will and desires. “Go ahead, live as you please. Be your own master. Be free!” –but it is slavery of the greatest kind.

And if you don’t believe me then just ask anyone who does not confess “Jesus is Lord” what hope they have of ever escaping death. Naturalism will tell you that there is no life after death. So death has the final word. Eastern religions will tell you that you will be reincarnated, only to die a

thousand deaths in the circle of life. And if at some point you do indeed break the cycle it is only to become liberated from the material world. But death here in this world has the final word.

Christians have a better confession: *Jesus is Lord!* The evidence from history shows that this confession was the earliest confessional formula of the church.⁸ At the very least of what it means to be a Christian is this. And it is by this confession that we are saved—saved from sin, saved from death, saved from the lies of Satan, saved from the slavery of our own selves.

Obedient Christians

But, second, we not only confess that Jesus is Lord, we also live like it is true. We are not to be mere confessional Christians; we must be obedient Christians. Jesus said, in Luke 6:46, “Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do what I tell you?” *Jesus is Lord* is not a mantra we recite as if it is some superstitious slogan. If that’s all that *Jesus is Lord* is to you, you might want to take heed of what happened to the seven sons of a Jewish high priest in Acts 19:13-17.

When Christians confess “Jesus is Lord,” we are also declaring who it is to whom we owe complete allegiance and obedience. It will not do for us to say we are Christians but refuse to follow Christ. And because the Christ is the incarnate Son of God, it will not do for us to excuse ourselves from this obedience by pretending like he is some unintelligible, distant ruler who cannot be known or heard from and who never (or rarely) commands our lives.

To say *Jesus is Lord* is to say that we are devoted to someone who has a face and a name.⁹ We live our lives under his authority; we get our assignments from him alone. Now we know that our Lord makes his will known to us, first, through his word, but also through the gospel community in which he has placed us. We do not believe that we can be devoted to Jesus and ignore his word and his people. But we also know the difference between blindly following the advice of our brothers and sisters and discerning the voice of our Lord through their ministry to us.

Missional Christians

We know the difference because we know the mission our Lord has sent us on. We are not trying to please one another but our Lord who has poured out his great love upon us. We cannot be a servant of Christ, Paul said, if we are only trying to please one another with our lives (Gal 1:10).

Those who confess, *Jesus is Lord*, are those who live in obedience to him by living on his mission. The resurrected, incarnate Son of God told us, “All authority in heaven and on earth” has now been given to him, so we are to “go ... and make disciples of all nations” (Matt 28:18-19). That is our Lord’s command. And disciples of Jesus are those who seek first the kingdom of God, who pray that the kingdom of grace will advance day by day with ourselves and others brought more and more into it (catechism, Question 67).

You see, as Christians we profess *Jesus is Lord*, and this is the joyful privilege we have after Christmas, to see the majesty of the incarnate Son of God and learn to increasingly submit every single area of our lives to his authority. The holiday isn’t over. For us, it is never over, because the

incarnate Son of God, the Lord Jesus, is alive and well, ruling and reigning over us, commanding our lives. And our response to his majesty is to proclaim to one another and to our neighbors:

Joy to the world, the Lord has come!

¹ Gordon D. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, ed. Gordon D. Fee (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), [220](#).

² J. I. Packer, *Growing in Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994), [64](#).

³ 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), [125](#).

⁴ C.F.D. Moule, "Further Reflexions on Philippians 2:5–11," *Apostolic History and the Gospel: Biblical and Historical Essays Presented to F. F. Bruce on His 60th Birthday*, ed. W.W. Gasque and R.P. Martin (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 270, cited in Moisés Silva, *Philippians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, ed. Robert Yarbrough and Robert H. Stein (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), [110](#).

⁵ Silva, *Philippians*, [110](#).

⁶ G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, eds., *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), [838](#).

⁷ Hawthorne, *Philippians*, [128](#).

⁸ *Ibid.*, [129](#).

⁹ Ralph P. Martin, *Philippians*, The New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1976), 101, cited in Hawthorne, *Philippians*, [127](#).