

The God of Christmas Present

Philippians 2: 1 – 11 (various texts)ⁱ

Born in the Likeness of Men

When we think about Christmas certain things come to mind almost automatically: angels, shepherds, wise men, donkeys, sheep, and other “friendly beasts”—this is the Christmas that we know and love—uncrying babies in idyllic mangers, round young virgins, and elderly, doting fathers. The classic video, *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, highlights all of this to some extent when Charlie throws up his hands in despair and cries, “Isn’t there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about?”

Then Linus replies, “Sure, Charlie Brown. I can tell you what Christmas is all about,” and he follows this by quoting Luke 2, verses 8 – 14, the story of the angels proclaiming the birth of Jesus to the shepherds in the fields around Bethlehem. After that he says, “That’s what Christmas is all about, Charlie Brown.”ⁱⁱ It’s a classic moment in a classic cartoon and it encapsulates much of what we typically think about when we think about Christmas (to say nothing of family get-togethers, turkey dinners, trees, presents, and Wassail).

Of course, by now someone is asking what all this has to do with the text that we read just a moment ago from Philippians chapter 2. The answer is, “Not much,” but it’s not completely disconnected. See, where Luke 2 and other more familiar Christmas readings are addressing what happened on that night long ago in Bethlehem, Philippians 2 is getting to the theological heart of why it happened. After the exhortation of verse 5:

⁵ Have this mind among yourselves, which was also in Christ Jesus... Philippians 2:5 (ESV – alt.)

Paul went on to say:

⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied himself, **by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.** Philippians 2:6–7 (ESV)

Or, as we confess in the Nicene Creed:

[He] for us...and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary, and was made man...ⁱⁱⁱ

This is what Paul was referring to when he wrote that Jesus Christ “emptied Himself.” He who was

God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father...^{iv}

chose to be made man—to take to Himself the form of a servant—and He did so for a reason that was not to be found there at the manger in Bethlehem. We need to keep this in mind because the event that we refer to as “the first Christmas” is a moment frozen in time. There was a night when the virgin, Mary, gave birth to her firstborn son, and the sky outside Bethlehem caught fire as the glory of the Lord shone around the angels announcing His birth.

There was a day, probably a year or two later when wise men—magi—came from the east bearing gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. All of these worshipped the Lord Jesus Christ at Bethlehem in a manner appropriate to their own time and place, but these were simply never-to-be-repeated moments in history, they were not the whole story and they were certainly not the end of the story.

In fact, these events weren't even the beginning of the story. The incarnation of Jesus Christ—the Son of God taking to Himself true human flesh—did not happen at Bethlehem. It happened about 9 months before when the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary to inform her that even though she had never had sexual relations with a man, she would conceive in her womb and bear a son.^v So (and I deliberately try to say this every year), if there was ever any question about when life begins, the incarnation of Jesus is absolute proof that it begins at conception, period, full stop. There is not even a question after reading Luke chapter 1. Human life (which is always a gift from God), begins at conception.

Very God of Very God

But really, that wasn't the beginning of the story either. The Gospel of John tells us that long before both Nazareth and Bethlehem,

¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. John 1:1 (ESV)

So, when Paul wrote in Philippians 2 that Christ Jesus,

⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. Philippians 2:6–7 (ESV)

among other things, He is declaring that Jesus Christ was indeed “God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God.” There are so many Scripture texts that speak to this reality, but remarkably (maybe), one of those is Joshua, chapter 5, just after the passage we considered together last Lord's Day. There we read that

¹³ When Joshua was by Jericho, he lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, a man was standing before him with his drawn sword in his hand. And Joshua went to him and said to him, “Are you for us, or for our adversaries?” Joshua 5:13 (ESV)

In other words, are you on our side, or do I have to fight you right now? But look at the response in Joshua 5, verse 14:

¹⁴ And he said, “No; but I am the commander of the army of the LORD. Now I have come.” Joshua 5:14 (ESV)

In effect, no, I am not “on your side,” nor am I your adversary, instead, you are on my side. “I am the commander of the army of the Lord,” not you. What follows is instructive.

And Joshua fell on his face to the earth and worshiped and said to him, “What does my lord

say to his servant?” Joshua 5:14 (ESV)

At this point, if you know anything about angels in Scripture then you know that a mere angel, mighty as they are, would have said something to the effect of

⁹ ...“You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your brothers the prophets, and with those who keep the words of this book. Worship God.” Revelation 22:9 (ESV)

because only a fallen angel would even dare think of accepting the worship that belongs to God alone. That’s why we can be certain that this was no mere angel; that, and the next verse,

¹⁵ And the commander of the LORD’s army said to Joshua, “Take off your sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy.” And Joshua did so. Joshua 5:15 (ESV)

See, this is no angel. This is what’s called a Theophany—“An appearance or manifestation of God,”^{vi} usually in the form of a human being. Additionally, the command that Joshua is given (“Take off your sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy”) only happens twice in all of Scripture. The first time is when the Lord God appeared to Moses at the burning bush, so, because God. The second time is, well, because God. No doubt Joshua knew what had happened to Moses, and he knew what what happening to himself, so, already down on the ground worshipping, now he takes the additional step of removing his shoes in the presence of the Living God. James Montgomery Boice wrote:

Can we doubt who this individual is? He is none less than Jehovah, appearing here perhaps in a preincarnate manifestation of the Second Person of the Trinity, the Lord Jesus Christ.^{vii}

As we will see in a moment, there is good reason for that identification, but ultimately, even if this is Yahweh in some less specific sense, the Second Person of the Trinity was still there, for, as Paul wrote in our text, Christ Jesus existed “in the form of God,” and possessed “equality with God,” although He did not regard that equality as something to which He needed to cling. Even so, as we have seen, He

⁷ ...emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. Philippians 2:7 (ESV)

For Us and For Our Salvation

That was His conception, and birth at Bethlehem, but as I mentioned earlier, it was not the beginning of the story and it certainly is not the end. Paul went on in Phillipians 2, verse 8:

⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Philippians 2:8 (ESV)

And this was the purpose—the miracle, if you will—of Christmas. This was the purpose for the incarnation. This was the purpose for the emptying and humbling of the Lord Jesus Christ. It was not so that we could relate better to Him, or even worship Him as a helpless,

little baby in a manger, or so that we could have a nice little holiday to break up the bleak midwinter. It was so that He, our faithful and obedient High Priest, could enter

¹² ...once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, **thus securing an eternal redemption.** Hebrews 9:12 (ESV)

For,

²⁴ He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. 1 Peter 2:24 (ESV)

Christ Jesus came into this world “for this purpose,”^{viii} so that we, by grace through faith could look to Him, repent of our sin, and find salvation and eternal life in His name. Because,

¹¹ He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. ¹² But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, ¹³ who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. John 1:11–13 (ESV)

So, if you have known him only as the baby in a manger at Bethlehem, then please understand that salvation is not found in receiving Him as a baby. It’s found in believing that when that boy-child of Mary grew up, He was crucified, died, and rose from the dead to bear your sin and to secure your eternal redemption. Believe in Him then—trust in Him alone—and having believed, call upon His name—bow before Him and confess that He is Lord—because the purpose of the incarnation was for Him to “save His people from their sins,”^{ix} but Philippians 2 goes on to tell us that there was a point to that purpose.

To the Glory of God the Father

Verses 8 – 11:

⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. ⁹ **Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name...** Philippians 2:8–9 (ESV)

And it’s interesting that we see this very thing when we meet “the commander of the armies of the Lord” near the end of Scripture in Revelation chapter 19, verses 11 – 15, where John wrote:

¹¹ Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. ¹² His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems, and he has a name written that no one knows but himself. ¹³ He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God. ¹⁴ And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses. ¹⁵ From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. ¹⁶ On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, **King of kings and Lord of lords.** Revelation 19:11–16 (ESV)

So, we are not here to worship as if this were “the first Christmas” morning. We are not here to honor the baby worshipped by the shepherds or the toddler before whom the magi bowed. That was appropriate then. That was Jesus in the state of humiliation. But now,

⁹ ...we see him who **for a little while** was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, **crowned with glory and honor** because of the suffering of death... Hebrews 2:9 (ESV)

And this is the God—this is the Christ—of Christmas **present**. We were saved, and we are here to worship, not “the newborn” King, but rather, the one called Faithful and True, Jesus Christ, the Word of God—King of kings and Lord of Lords. Hallelujah! All glory be to God. As we read in Philippians 2:

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.** Philippians 2:9–11 (ESV)

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- i All Scripture citations, unless otherwise noted, *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016).
 - ii “That’s What Christmas Is All About” at, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0pHfnfJ3T5g>
 - iii R. C. Sproul, ed., *The Reformation Study Bible: English Standard Version (2015 Edition)* (Orlando, FL: Reformation Trust, 2015), 2389.
 - iv Sproul, *The Reformation Study Bible*, 2388.
 - v Cf. Luke 1: 26 – 38.
 - vi Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, “Theophany,” in *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 2050.
 - vii James Montgomery Boice, *Joshua* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005), 44.
 - viii Cf. John 12: 27.
 - ix Cf. Matthew 1:21.