

**'The Exaltation of Christ. Bethesda Meditation. 30 November 2008.**

My reading for this morning comes from the very familiar passage in Philippians chapter 2 ... breaking in at verse 8.

*And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the extent of death, even the death of a cross. Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

I find it helpful to view our Lord's great example of self-denial – which occupies verses 6 to 11 – under *five headings*.

First, that of *His status and glory before He ever became a man* – which occupies most of verse 6.

Second, that of *His breathtaking descent from His glory and throne to the manger at Bethlehem* – which occupies the remainder of verse 6 and verse 7.

Third, that of *His self-humbling when a man, taking Him down to death on a cross* – which occupies verse 8 ... when, as the Good News Bible (Today's English Version) paraphrases it, 'He walked the path of obedience *all the way to death*' ... and it was, the apostle makes clear, *in the manner* of His death – death on a cross – that our Lord's humiliation reached rock bottom.

Fourth, that of *what, in response, God has already done for Him* – which occupies verse 9.

And fifth, and finally, that of *what God has decreed shall be done for Him by all others in the future* – which occupies verses 10-11.

Whenever I read down to verse 8, I want to exclaim, What a wonderful Saviour! Just to think that He cared less for His heavenly glory and splendour – less for Himself and His own things – than He did for me!

But when I come to verse 9, I note the change in the principal Actor – this role no longer being filled by the Lord Jesus but by God the Father – who takes the initiative from then on. So, although *the Lord Jesus* 'made *Himself* of no reputation (of no account), v. 6, and 'humbled *himself*', v. 8, it is *God* who elevated *Him*.<sup>1</sup>

Because the Lord Jesus descended to *the lowest depth*, God exalted Him to *the loftiest height* – unrivalled now in glory as once in suffering.

And God not only 'exalted' Him, but '*highly exalted*' Him! He 'super-exalted' him ... He '*hyper-exalted*' Him, if you like<sup>2</sup> – and that to the very highest pinnacle.

And I note that the word translated 'highly exalted' here is used in the Greek Old Testament of Psalm 37. 35; 'I saw', says David, 'the ungodly *highly exalting himself*'.<sup>3</sup> And the apostle Paul himself uses a synonym in 2 Thessalonians 2. 4 to describe 'the man of sin ... the son of perdition, who ... *exalts himself above* all that is called God or that is worshipped'.<sup>4</sup> The contrast is striking. Both the ungodly man and the man of sin *highly exalt themselves*. The Lord Jesus *didn't* highly exalt *Himself* – God did it to Him!

We can hardly miss the three occurrences of the word 'every' in verses 9 to verse 11 – one in each verse.

First, we have '*the name above every name*'. This reminds me of ***the days of the men of Babel***, who aspired to make themselves a name. 'Go to', they said, '*let us* build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and *let us make us a name*, lest we be scattered ...'.<sup>5</sup> But then we read that 'the Lord said ... *Go to, let us* go down, and there confound their language ... So the Lord scattered them ... and they left off to build the city. Therefore is *the name* of it called Babel (which means 'confusion' in Hebrew).<sup>6</sup> *Some name* they made for themselves! But the name of Jesus is *above all* others!<sup>7</sup>

But what *is* the name which God is said here to have given to the Saviour?

There is something to be said for 'the name' referring to our Lord's earthly, human name of 'Jesus'. That, after all, is the name which is picked up in the next phrase, 'at (or 'in') in the name of Jesus'. If 'Jesus' is the name, Paul obviously doesn't mean that it is only at His exaltation He has been given that name – for it had been His personal name since before His incarnation. Paul would have to be saying, I guess, that, in highly exalting the Saviour, God has enriched and invested the name '*Jesus*' with an added and special significance.

But we should note that verse 10 reads, not 'in *the name Jesus*', but 'in the name *of* Jesus'. That is, 'in the name belonging to Jesus' – without tying us down to 'Jesus' being the name. I suggest that, in the context, it is more likely

that Paul is referring to the word 'Lord' – and I have in mind particularly the confession of verse 11. In other words, in response to our Saviour 'taking' the form of a 'bond-servant', God 'gave' Him the contrasting name 'Lord'.<sup>8</sup> Which fits well with Peter's message on the day of Pentecost, in which, having spoken of the One who had 'been exalted to the right hand of God', Peter says that 'God has made *this Jesus*, whom you crucified, both *Lord* and Christ', Acts 2. 33, 36.<sup>9</sup>

Second, we have 'every knee shall bow'. This reminds me of **the days of the prophet Elijah**, when Jezebel's decree was that every knee should bow to Ba'al. 'Yet', God said, 'I have reserved to myself seven thousand men, who have *not bowed the knee* to the image of Ba'al', Rom. 11. 4; cf. 1 Kings 19. 18. And God's resistance movement stood firm. But *all* will bow to the lordship of Jesus!

There were those, who 'in the days of His flesh', bowed the knee to Him – such as the man at the foot of the Mount of the Transfiguration in Matthew 17, the leper of Mark 1, and the rich young ruler of Mark 10.<sup>10</sup> But the Father's sworn decree is that one-day *every knee* will bow.

And I note that the 'Lord' to whom all in heaven, on earth and under the earth<sup>11</sup> are to bow has Himself once been 'in heaven', v. 6, has lived 'on the earth', vv. 7-8a, and has visited, albeit briefly, the domain of the dead, v. 8b. That is, He has personally experienced all three realms over which He will one day hold universal sway.

And, third, we have 'every tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ is Lord'. This reminds me of **the days of the Roman Emperor Domitian** at the close of the first century when it was state policy that all residents of the Empire had to swear an oath of allegiance to the Emperor, declaring 'Caesar is Lord', as well as burning a pinch of incense to an image of the Emperor.<sup>12</sup> But the Christians wouldn't – and paid dearly for it. But there will be no exceptions in that day – *every* – but every – tongue will confess that Jesus Christ – and no-one but Jesus Christ – is Lord.

To Paul it was *not* the Emperor of Rome, whether Nero<sup>13</sup> – before whom one day he would stand on trial – or any other – Domitian or whoever – but 'Jesus Christ' who was the only true and universal 'Lord'! And Paul knew that the day is to come when, not only he and his readers, but their 'Lord Caesar' would join all others in bowing before and acknowledging the absolute lordship of the very One who was once crucified on the authority of a Roman prefect.

In summary, God has *highly exalted* the One who *humbled Himself* ... God has *given the name above every name* to the One who made Himself of no account, *who made Himself of no reputation*. And God has decreed that the One who voluntarily became a 'bond-servant' is one day to be *universally acknowledged as 'Lord'!*

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## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> He has passed through the heavens, Heb. 4. 14; been made higher than the heavens, Heb. 7. 26; has ascended far above all heavens, Ephesians 4. 10; and entered into heaven itself, Heb. 9. 24.

<sup>2</sup> 'Highly exalted' is not comparative but superlative.

<sup>3</sup> See too its use in 'Thou art Lord most high over all the earth; thou art *greatly (highly) exalted* above all gods' (i.e. God has not 'been' highly exalted), 97. 9, and in 'Now I Nebuchadnezzar praise and *highly exalt* and glorify the King of heaven', Dan 4. 34. Note also Isaiah's use of the word 'exalted': 'the Lord alone shall be *exalted* in that day', Isa. 2. 11, 17, and 'Behold, my servant shall deal prudently, He shall be *exalted* and extolled, and be very high', 52. 13. (Compare also Isa. 30. 18; 33. 5, 10.)

<sup>4</sup> 2 Thess. 2. 4.

<sup>5</sup> Gen. 11. 4.

<sup>6</sup> Gen. 11. 6-9. 'Although the name Babel means in Babylonian 'Gate of god', here it has a pejorative connotation.

We must not assume the verse to mean that the city was actually given a name—especially a derisive one—on the basis of Hebrew etymology. Its intention is to say mockingly: How befitting for her is this name, which in our tongue is a designation signifying confusion!', U. Cassuto.

<sup>7</sup> It is not only that 'there's *no greater* name than Jesus' – as if another name might be *as great* – but that His is greater than any other name.

<sup>8</sup> In favour of this interpretation, 'Lord' was certainly the name or title most commonly used of Jesus by the early church – being used of Him about 250 times in the epistles of Paul alone. Some may question whether it is really accurate to speak of 'Lord' as a 'name', rather than as a title. I think the answer must be 'yes'. For I note that Hebrews 1. 4 says of our Lord that He is 'so much better than the angels, as He has by inheritance obtained a more excellent *name* than they' – and the very next verse makes it clear that the 'name' is that of 'Son'; 'For unto which of the angels said he at any time, Thou art my *Son*, this day have I begotten thee?', v. 5. That is, the word 'name' is used to describe that which we might regard as a title rather than as a proper name.<sup>8</sup> I see no reason to regard the word 'Lord' any differently. In one sense, of course, as the one 'in the form of God', the Saviour had always been 'Lord'. There can be no doubt that in the New Testament the word 'Lord' is often used as the Greek counterpart of God's personal Hebrew name 'Jehovah'. And that 'name' had always been the Saviour's. But, though the Son had always shared, of course, in the nature of God, this name of Lord was given to Him – subsequent to His incarnation and humiliation – in His exaltation – that is, it was bestowed on Him – officially – who was, and is now, 'the man Christ Jesus', 1 Tim. 2. 5. At the end of John 6, Jesus spoke to His disciples in terms of them seeing 'the Son of man ascend up where he was before', v. 62. But we must remember that He returned to heaven as something more than when He left it – for He took back with Him to the Father and to heaven His glorified manhood! As one of the so-called Church Fathers, Ruffinus,<sup>8</sup> wrote, 'Christ ascended into the heavens *not* where the Word of God had *not been before*, ... *but where the Word made flesh had not sat before*'. And for God to 'give' the equivalent of the name 'Jehovah' to Him is enormously significant – for, of that name, God Himself said in Isaiah 42. 8, 'I am the Lord (*Jehovah*): that is *my name*: and my glory *will I not give to another*, neither my praise to graven images', and Asaph wrote in Psalm 83. 18, 'that men may know that thou, whose name *alone* is Jehovah, art the most high over all the earth'. And just as 'Jehovah' is the name which outranks all others in the Old Testament, so here 'Lord' is the name which outranks all others in the New Testament – it towers 'above every name' – and it belongs to Jesus Christ!

<sup>9</sup> 'Through the Resurrection, He becomes manifest Lord', Sydney Cave, '*The Doctrine of the Person of Christ*', page 44. 'Lord' is 'used in the New Testament for a title of Christ, who as man has the place of Lordship over all things', J. N. Darby on page xxiii of the Revised Preface to the Second Edition of his New Translation.

<sup>10</sup> See Matt. 17. 14; Mark 1. 40; 10. 17. And He never rebuked them!

<sup>11</sup> 'Of heavenly beings, and earthly beings, and beings under the earth' – which I take to encompass 'all rational and intelligent beings', as does the similar language of Revelation 5, where John says, not only that 'no one *in* heaven, nor in earth, neither under the earth, was able to open the scroll', Rev. 5. 3, but that 'every creature which is in heaven, and on the earth, and under the earth' helps swell the great tide of praise which surges outward from the throne, Rev. 5. 13.

<sup>12</sup> Though the Roman state saw this only as a display of political allegiance, Christians rightly interpreted it as idolatry – and refused to participate, often paying with their lives.

Compare, 'Within North Korea, those perceived disloyal include anyone who worships someone other than Kim Jong-un. Nettleton explains, "It's treason. It undermines the very legitimacy of the North Korean government. That's why Christians are persecuted so severely ... believers must hide their decision to follow Christ. Being caught with a Bible is grounds for execution or a life-long political prison sentence"'. 2014. <http://www.mnnonline.org/news/real-story-north-korea/>

<sup>13</sup> At the time Paul wrote (or dictated) his letter, Nero was 'lord'. Festus spoke of him in just that way to Agrippa; 'when I found that he (Paul) had committed nothing deserving of death, and that he himself had appealed to Augustus, I decided to send him. But I have nothing certain to write to *my lord* concerning him', Acts 25. 25-26. This is backed up by the detailed evidence set out by Adolf Deissmann in his 'Light from the Ancient East', pages 353-354.