

Exaltation – Philippians 2.9-11

Having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come (Ephesians 1.18-21).

INTRODUCTION

The gospels and the epistles both accentuate the exaltation of the post-resurrected Jesus. This emphasis on the transcendent majesty of Jesus is a necessary balance to a view that, by disproportionately stressing the immanent nature of the Incarnate One, fails accurately to portray the glory of the post-resurrected Lord Jesus Christ. The tendency in liberal theology to focus on the humanity of Jesus while neglecting or, worse, denying his divinity deprives the Gospel of its saving message. The doctrine of Christ's exaltation is not something exclusively confined to the events of the post-resurrected Jesus as though it were a postscript to his life. The transfiguration experience on top of the mountain (Mark 9.2-13) prefigures the ascension and glorification of the resurrected Christ. This supernatural incident was etched into the memories of the disciples who witnessed it: *...we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For when he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased," we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain (2 Peter 1.16^b – 18).* Additionally, we note that during Jesus' conversations with the Jewish leadership in John 8 he said, *If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing. It is my Father who glorifies me, of whom you say, "He is our God" (John 8.54).* Again, in the garden of Gethsemane, after the observance of the Lord's Supper, Jesus prayed: *I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed (John 17.4-5).*

The apostle John spent at least three years living in close proximity with Jesus. He is listed in all the gospels as one of the three disciples included in Jesus' brief forays away from the larger group and he describes himself as the beloved disciple. So it seems reasonable to assume that of all those who knew Jesus, John would have as accurate an appraisal of him as anyone could hope to have. In brief, John declared that Jesus was something more than just a man (e.g., John 1.14; 20.28). A cursory reading of his Gospel reveals that Jesus insisted that he pre-existed with God and that God was uniquely his Father (not just in the sense of creation as with the rest of mankind, but that he was God's one and only son, John 3.16; cp. 5.17; 8.19). Any other relationship that anyone else might have with God is qualitatively less than his. John's vision of the post-

resurrected Jesus in Revelation 1.12-17 is even more telling: *Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest. The hairs of his head were white like wool, as white as snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength. When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead.* Likewise, Paul's description of his encounter with the resurrected Jesus also depicts the effulgence of God's glory displayed in the exalted Christ (Acts 26.12-15; cp. 2 Corinthians 12.1ff).

If the gospels are clear about the glory of Christ, it is not surprising then that we should find additional teaching in the epistles on this subject. Philippians 2.9 is a good example, *Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father* (cp. Ephesians 1.19-23). The writers of Scripture seem to grope for superlatives in describing the glory of the exalted Christ. In sum it may be said that, Jesus Christ is Lord! Developing an appreciation for the nature of the post-resurrected Jesus will not only help the believer to enjoy a greater appreciation for worship, but it will excite his imagination for the day of Christ's coming.

EXALTATION (Isaiah 52.13; Philippians 2.9 - 11)

Some systematic theology textbooks define the exaltation as consisting of four events: the resurrection, ascension, the session, and the physical return of Jesus (e.g., Millard Erickson *Christian Theology*, vol. 2, pp. 176 – 178; Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, pp. 346 - 355). However, not every text of the New Testament that speaks of the exaltation associates it with these events, of which Philippians 2.9-11 is an example, though it is certainly reasonable to assume the ascension as something that happened prior to Jesus' exaltation. Paul's description of Jesus' exaltation is the more startling because of its juxtaposition to Paul's reminder of Christ's humiliation (cp. Colossians 1.15; 1 Timothy 3.16; Hebrews 1.3).

This section (Philippians 2.1-11 - thought to be a hymn by some) is divided into two parts. In the first part Paul appeals to the Philippians to be humble because the Lord Jesus himself was the epitome of humility. Indeed, Jesus *did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage* (Philippians 2.6-7, TNIV). This is to say, that there was nothing in the Godhead to which Jesus had to aspire (cp. Colossians 1.15-20). Given this, which in itself is almost unfathomable, it is even more astonishing that the Divine Incarnate One should take the form of a servant. As a servant he accomplished God's salvific purpose and became the perfect model of meekness and humility. The psalmist writes, *For though the Lord is high he regards the lowly* (Psalm

138.6; Isaiah 57.15; cp. Matthew 23.11; 1 Peter 5.6; James 4.8-10). Jesus aspired to nothing for himself (*made himself nothing*, Philippians 2.7; cp. 2 Corinthians 8.9) and in his humiliation secured salvation for those whom he would call brethren (Romans 8.29). By this he honored and glorified the Father. There was no higher position to which Jesus might aspire in his pre-incarnate state. He enjoyed true equality with God both in essence and function. It was his delight to accomplish the Father's will by bringing salvation to men (Titus 2.11).

The phrase “*being in very nature God*” could be understood in one of two ways. It could be understood concessively: *although* he was in very nature God, he took the form of a servant. Or it could be understood causally: *because* he was in very nature God, he took the form of a servant. On the whole, the latter better suits the context. The eternal Son did not think of his status as God as something that gave him the opportunity to get and get and get. Instead, his very status as God meant he had nothing to prove, nothing to achieve, and precisely because he is one with God, one with this kind of God, he “made himself nothing and gave and gave and gave.”

... The expression “he emptied himself,” far from meaning he emptied himself of something, is idiomatic for “he gave up all his rights” or similar expressions. He emptied *himself*, hence the NIV’s “[he] made himself nothing” (2:7). ... By contrast, the eternal Son has always had all the rights of deity. He was one with God. Yet precisely because of this, he did not perceive his equality with God something to be exploited, but became a nobody. He “made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant [literally, slave] ...” (2:7).

But Paul does not tell us that Christ exchanged one form for another; he is not saying that Jesus was God, gave that up, and became a slave instead. Rather, without ever abandoning who he was originally, he adopted the mode of existence of a slave. To do this, he (literally) *became* “in human likeness” (2:7). The idea is not that he merely became *like* a human being, a reasonable facsimile but not truly human. Rather, it means that he became a being fashioned in this way: a human being. He was always God; he now becomes something he was not, a human being. “And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross!” (2:8). (D. A. Carson, *Basics for Believers*, pp. 45-46)

God's gift to man was the incarnation of his son, who, in his humility and complete humanity, yielded to his Father's will and therein rescued mankind from an eternal death through his own unnatural death on a cross.

The focus of the hymn shifts in verse nine from Christ's willing humiliation to God's exaltation of the Son. The double conjunction of verse nine, “therefore, also,” strongly emphasizes the resulting natural consequence of Jesus' obedience and humiliation in his exaltation. “These conjunctions affirm what Jesus taught, namely that in the divine order of things self-humbling leads inevitably to exaltation. This is an inflexible law of

God's kingdom that operates without variance, equally applicable for Christians at Philippi as for Christ himself" (Hawthorne, *Philippians*, p. 90). Consider the words of Jesus in Matthew 16.25-26, Luke 14.11, and John 13.13-16 (cp. Philippians 3.7-8; 1 Peter 5.6; James 4.10) as an exhortation to be humble. The post-resurrected Jesus received a name that is above every name, to be precise, *Lord*. Paul must certainly have been thinking about Isaiah 45.23 when he was writing of Jesus' exaltation.

Turn to me and be saved, all 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." Only in the LORD, it shall be said of me, are righteousness and strength; to him shall come and be ashamed all who were incensed against him. In the LORD all the offspring of Israel shall be justified and shall glory. (Isaiah 45.22-25)

"Once again, the implications for who Jesus is, if such words as these are unhesitatingly applied to him, are staggering. To confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, using the language of this passage in Isaiah ... is a transparent ascription of deity to Jesus Christ. Yet even so, Jesus is distinguished from God the Father; it is *God* who has exalted Jesus to the highest place. Moreover, the confession that 'Jesus Christ is Lord' is 'to the glory of God the Father' (Phil. 2:11)" (Carson, p. 48).

All creation will acknowledge the ineffable worth of the exalted ruling Lord Jesus Christ. This includes all the current inhabitants of heaven, the seraphim, cherubim, the angels, archangels and the redeemed saints who already worship around the throne (Ephesians 1.20-22; Hebrews 2.8; Revelation 5.13). Every human being on the earth (1 Corinthians 15.40) will confess Jesus as Lord, whether they are saved and delight to call him Lord, or whether they are among the damned who in their eternal agony are constrained to confess him Lord. All will confess the Lordship of Christ to the glory of God. Moreover, every condemned creature in hell, humans in their lost estate, evil angels and demons will be unable to restrain their voices from the praise of the exalted name of the Lord Jesus Christ. "In other words, Paul is not making this claim about a Jesus who is domesticated, easily marginalized, psychologically privatized, remarkably sanitized, and merely personal. He is one with God, yet he died on the cross to redeem us to himself. ... Now Paul insists that the Father has vindicated him in his humiliation and sacrifice and that every knee will bow before him" (D.A. Carson, p. 49).