

The Sovereign Became a Slave

Humility, Part 5

Philippians 2:8b

The world is intrigued by the powerful, the rich and the famous.

Forbes publishes its annual lists of the top 100 celebrities and the 400 richest Americans – there is the Fortune 500 with the most powerful and wealthy corporation.

Other news outlets publish lists like: The 10 most powerful people in the world; or, The 50 most powerful people in Washington.

I came across one article from a website connected to the business community of Wall Street. It had an unusual twist on their list of names. They called it, “The 100 Least Powerful People in the World.”

It included a former CEO of an oil company, who after a major spill in the Gulf of Mexico, was effectively disgraced.

It included the CEOs of former money making technologies that lost their place almost overnight by new inventions – they cited the CEO of Blockbuster as one example.

Anybody remember renting video cassettes?

The list included failed investors, like two brothers from India, who lost billions of dollars in the most recent market collapse.

The list also included aging Hollywood superstars whose faces and reputations have been ruined by too many trips to plastic surgeons.

It included athletes who once commanded the world’s attention, but now for one reason or another no longer mattered.

All of these individuals on this list – and I read through all 100 names – all of them are now considered by the world to be among the powerless – either through poor business decisions; wrong investments; moral failure; lack or loss of talent; changing circumstances; but here’s the point I want to make – none of them chose to become powerless.¹

None of them chose – none of them volunteered to become powerless.

I mean, who does?

I know Someone who did. And so do you.

When God the Son came to earth and became the Son of Man – He literally chose the powerless role and lifestyle of a servant.

There isn’t anyone more powerless, than a slave.

And in Paul’s letter to the Philippians, he uses the life of Christ as his supreme example of humility – and then calls us to imitate Him.

And if you’ve been with us in our past few sessions, you remember that the Apostle Paul begins quoting an ancient hymn – perhaps one of the first hymns of the early church.

And this hymn, like any good hymn, is packed with theological truth.

For the past few weeks we’ve been working our way through the lyrics of *Philippians chapter 2 beginning at verse 5*.

- This is a hymn about His incarnation – when God the Son took on human flesh;
- This is a hymn text about His humiliation – when He became a *doulos* – literally, a slave;
- This is a hymn about His crucifixion and death on a cross;
- And then the hymn ends by singing about His exaltation and ultimate vindication – when every tongue will admit that He was and is indeed sovereign Lord.

Now, in keeping with the context of Paul’s use of Christ’s incarnation as the ultimate illustration of humility – the laying down of His personal rights – I have suggested as we’ve studied our way through this ancient hymn text, four different personal rights that God the Son relinquished when He came down to earth.

1. Jesus gave up the right to live like God.

In *verse 6* we’re told that even though *He (Jesus) existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped*.

The original language is actually much more expressive to declare that even though Jesus pre-existed in the very nature and essence of God the Father as God the Son, He didn’t clutch His equal rights with God the Father.

He gave up His legitimate right to live like God.

2. Secondly, Jesus gave up the right to act like God.

Verse 7 tells us that **He emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant** – a *doulos* – literally a slave.

So the sovereign Lord becomes a slave in His humiliation. And because of that reversal He now refuses to demonstrate any of His power and attributes for His own convenience or comfort.

3. Then we noticed, thirdly, that Jesus gave up the right to look like God.

Again, in *verse 7* and the first part of *verse 8*, Paul sings these ancient lyrics that Jesus was **made in the likeness of men, being found in appearance as a man**.

In other words, prior to His incarnation He was clothed with unspeakable, unimaginable splendor, but then – with incredible humility according to the Prophet Isaiah, He chooses the face and physique of an unattractive and unimpressive male of Jewish kin (*Isaiah 53:2*).

I mean, since He could have chosen everything from the size of his nose to the height of His stature, He could have been the most handsome man on the planet. And yet He adds to the demonstration of His humility by not only becoming a man, but choosing to become an ordinary – literally – a homely man.

In fact, He was so run-of-the-mill ordinary and unimpressive, that when He announced who He was, the Jewish leaders said, **Is this not the Carpenter's son . . . and they took offense at Him** (*Matthew 13:55-57*).

Listen, if we had seen Him in the first century we would have no doubt echoed the sentiment of everyone around Him – we would have said to Him, “Listen, we’ve never seen the Son of God but you definitely can’t be Him.”

When Princess Elizabeth was married to the Duke of Edinburgh in 1947, the streets and parks of London were packed with people as they crowded together to catch a glimpse of the future queen in her wedding dress. Heads of state and royalty from all around the world had come as well to pay homage to the queen elect and her empire. Among them was 12-year-old King Faisal II, a Middle eastern sovereign who wasn’t interested in the wedding and all that stuff, in fact, he had refused to wear all of his own regalia and had dressed like a normal young lad. He wanted a better view of the horses pulling

the royal carriage. So he pulled away from his entourage and jostled his way to the curb so he could get a better look. Once there, the policemen grabbed him by the arm and treated him rather roughly. That is, until they found out who he was. That incident became another headline later as the newspapers apologized with the headline, “We’re sorry King Faisal . . . we didn’t know who you were!”

We didn’t know who you were.

Which leads me to the fourth and final right the Jesus gave up in His humility and incarnation.

4. Jesus gave up the right to be treated like God.

Paul writes in the middle part of *verse 8*. **He humbled Himself** – literally, He laid Himself low (*ταπεινωω*) . . .ⁱⁱ

. . . **by becoming obedient to the point of death.**

He will lay Himself low **in obedience to the very point of death.**

By the way, this is one more signature phrase that indicates Jesus is more than meets the eye.

His death required His obedience.

Our death doesn’t. For us death isn’t a matter of obedience. We die whether we want to or not.ⁱⁱⁱ

For us, death isn’t an elective – it’s required . . . and it is as certain as taxes, right.

We’d rather not think about it . . . and we’ll do anything and everything we can to avoid it.

My parents told me some time later that when I was in Middle School, we were traveling as a family – one night we were packed into a hotel room – I was sharing a bed with one of my brothers and around midnight, my mother said, I suddenly sat up and shouted one word – death – . . . then laid back down.

Without any reason or provocation, I just sat up in bed, looked straight ahead at the wall in front of me, called out – death – and then laid back down and went back to sleep.

My poor mother, of course, was ruined for the night.

Death is a mystery that we aren’t all that eager to engage in – even though we know what’s on the other side.

And we don’t know when it’s going to happen. Jesus did.

This is what Paul means here – **He became obedient right up to the very moment – or point – of death.**

In other words, it will require the obedience of Christ in order to experience death. This is what He meant when He told His audience, *No one has taken [My life] away from Me – but I lay it down on My own initiative. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again (John 10:18).*

On the cross, Jesus will demonstrate this as he *yields up His spirit* in death to the Father (*John 19:30*). The verb to yield (παρεδωκεν) refers to *giving up voluntarily*.^{iv}

In other words, as Paul effectively says here – Jesus died at the very moment He decided to die – and it was an act of obedience all the way to that very moment – and it was obedience to the will of His Father as they had predetermined it all before the foundation of the world.

It wasn't an accident – it was the plan.

Peter would later preach to a stunned nation of Israel – the man you killed was actually determined in advance by God to die in just that manner and for this very reason (*Acts 2:23*).

You see, from the perspective of mankind and the events of His death – Jesus was murdered. But from the perspective of the triune God and the plan of redemption – He was not murdered – He was sacrificed.

He was the *Lamb of God who had come to take away the sin of the world (John 1:12)*.

And His last act of obedience – in a perfectly obedient life – was to yield up His Spirit in death to His Father.

And Paul here adds one more freighted statement here – it wasn't just any kind of death – notice the last part of *verse 8* – it was *death on a cross*.

I want us to pause here in amazement and wonder . . . the Spirit of God through Paul would want us to – *He became obedient unto death, even – as if to say, if you can imagine it – death on a cross*. He was giving up His right to be treated like God.

Death on a cross was the ultimate insult by man and the crowning act of humility by God.

Paul would write that to the Gentile, the death of Christ on a cross would be utter foolishness if He were indeed God the Son (*1 Corinthians 1:23*).

God's don't die.

Paul also wrote to the Corinthians that to the Jews, the crucifixion of Christ was a stumbling block – in other words, they couldn't get past the fact that their own law – *Deuteronomy 21:23* – clearly stated that anyone put to death by hanging on a tree – which would have included crucifixion – was actually cursed by God.

In other words, if He were God's Son He wouldn't have become cursed by crucifixion and if He were truly God in the flesh – the Messiah of Israel, He wouldn't have died.

The Jews were waiting for their liberating, ruling, enemy-defeating Messiah . . . Jesus couldn't possibly be the one.

When I was in Israel, I was at the site of the place where they have discovered the ruins of King David's palace. The walls of his palace home are literally underneath the visitor's center. It's a stunning discovery and rather recent. They've built a supporting foundation for the Visitor's center and basically excavated everything below – you can now see the stone walls of David's house.

In that visitor's center is a gift shop with lots of books with pictures – I still like those kind – I was waiting for my group as they waded through Hezekiah's water tunnel underneath the city.

There wasn't anyone else shopping at the time and the young Jewish woman behind the counter didn't seem to have much to do.

I struck up a conversation about some of the recent things they've discovered in the old city of David . . . after a bit I cut to the chase and said, "Listen, I want you to tell me something.

Whenever you hear Christians talk about Jesus being the Messiah – I want you to tell me your strongest argument that you have in your mind and heart – what's the strongest argument against Jesus being the true Messiah.

And without blinking an eye, she said, "He isn't the Messiah because He died." She went on, "And He didn't bring peace." What good is that?

What kind of Messiah is that?

He died!

Before I could tell her that *Isaiah* said He'd come first to suffer and that He would come back to bring peace and rule on earth, other tourists showed up.

But she was adamant . . . He isn't the Messiah because He died.

This is the stumbling block – 2,000 years later – to the nation Israel.

And Paul will deal with it head on – with both Gentiles who think a dying God is foolishness and Jews are scandalized by the thought.

Paul will write about the cross, he will glory in the cross, he will explain the cross and he will redefine the cross.

In fact, he writes to the *Galatians* that Christ came to bear our sin and suffer the curse and wrath

of God for our sake. He writes, “*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” (Galatians 3:13)*

In other words, this is *exactly* why Jesus came and was sacrificed on a cross . . . He gave up His right to be treated like God – and in all humility bore the curse of sin and the wrath of God so that we wouldn’t be cursed forever by God.

But even to the world at large, back when the early church was singing this hymn of Christ’s humility, the crucifixion was simply beyond humility . . . it was utter horror and degradation.

In fact, it was the crucifixion that separated Christianity from any and every other religion – and made it repulsive . . . mankind would much rather worship a god that killed other people, not one who was killed by people . . . what kind of god is that?

It was simply unimaginable to the world of Paul especially.

Crucifixion was invented by the Persians who wanted a way to kill someone without touching their goddess, Earth.

The Carthaginians developed it further, the Greeks popularized it and the Romans perfected the torture.

It was the popular method of capital punishment for those who were not Roman citizens.

Cicero, the Roman philosopher who died 50 years before the birth of Christ wrote, “To bind a Roman citizen is a crime; to flog him is an abomination; to slay him is almost an act of murder; to crucify him is – what? There is no fitting word that can possibly describe so horrible a deed.”^v

Josephus, the first century Jewish historian, and an eyewitness of Titus the Roman General who came and surrounded conquered Jerusalem, destroying in AD 70, just as Jesus Christ had predicted that not one stone of the temple in Jerusalem would be left upon another.

Josephus writes that the Jews who tried to escape from the city knew they were too late to make any supplication for mercy; so they were first whipped, and then tortured and then, before they died they were crucified in front of the wall of Jerusalem. Titus (the Roman general) felt pity for them, but since there were so many [attempting to escape] – nearly 500 a day – it was too great a risk to let them go or put them under guard and so he allowed his soldiers to have their way, hoping the gruesome sight of the countless crosses might move the citizens to surrender. So the soldiers, out of the rage

and hatred they bore the prisoners, nailed those they caught, in different postures, to crosses, our of cruel mockery; and their number was so great that there was not enough room for the crosses and not enough crosses for all the bodies.^{vi}

Part of our misunderstanding of the Lord’s death is the fact that the church over the centuries rather romanticized the cross. Jesus had a little trickle of blood and he’s hanging symmetrically on a cross some 10 feet tall.

The Roman cross was actually only around 6 feet tall, and the victim would be nailed to a portable cross beam – then the victim was stood up while the cross beam – which had a hole carved into the center – was lifted up and placed over the vertical beam.

That vertical beam – or stipe – was typically permanently embedded in some hillside or roadway. The victim was then seated upon on a block of wood – or a saddle it was called – which was located in the middle of the vertical beam. Then his feet were nailed as well.

The victim could last for days and even weeks. He was close enough to earth to be talked to, cried over, spat upon, mocked and even beaten.

Many died insane.

Another aspect of crucifixion that made it the most demeaning of executions was the fact that most victims were never buried. They were simply left to suffer and die and then be eaten by wild animals.

Under Domitian, the first century Roman Caesar, we have one record of a robber who was hung on a cross and then soon after torn to pieces by a bear.^{vii}

There were vultures named after the place of crucifixion because they flew around, ever ready to descend and dispose of corpses.

One first century Roman poet by the name of Juvenal, wrote, “The vulture hurries from dead cattle and dogs and crosses to bring some of it to her offspring.”^{viii}

Another first century account tells of one man who was crucified for the wild beasts and birds of prey.^{ix}

Now, if the Romans needed the cross for another victim and didn’t have time to wait for the wild animals to dispose of the body – or if the Jews wanted some Jewish victim taken down before Sabbath – which was the case of Jesus – the soldiers would break the legs of the victims and push them off that block of wood – the saddle – and they would quickly die – literally unable to breath.

You remember from John's account that the two victims on either side of Jesus had their legs broken, but Jesus had already died (*John 19:33*).

This is the reason the Gentile world considered worshipping a crucified God total folly. They called it mania – and those who worshipped Christ to be maniacs.

One first century writer asserted that Christians were viewed as people who worshipped a criminal and his cross.^x

Lucius Caecilius, a successful Roman banker who lived during the days of Christ's death wrote that Christians put forth sick delusions – they are a senseless and crazy superstition which leads to the destruction of all true religion; not least among the monstrosities of their faith is the fact that they worship one who has been crucified.^{xi}

It's easy to understand why the world was repulsed by the idea of Christianity being founded by a peasant who died such a vile death.

In fact, you need to understand one more critical issue surrounding crucifixion – crucifixion was reserved primarily – and mainly – for the execution of slaves.

Slaves had no rights . . . they had no justice to defend them . . . they owned nothing and were offered nothing in return for their servanthood . . . they were at the mercy and whim of their masters.

The cross came to be thought of, as one early Roman author put it, “the slave penalty . . . the slave punishment.”^{xii}

There was no mistaking Paul point here. The early church would have immediately connected Paul's reference in *verse 7* to Jesus *taking on the form of a doulos* – literally, a slave – with *verse 8* – *that He died on a cross*.

Because that's how slaves who were executed most often died.

The stanzas of this hymn begin, not by taking us upward to see the glory of heaven or the splendor of the Triune God; they take the singer down – one author wrote – down, down, down to the deepest, darkest [moment] in human history to see the horrific torture, unspeakable abuse, and bloody execution of a slave on a cross. And this hymn celebrates the death of *this* Slave on this cross.^{xiii}

He chose that cross . . . He chose to die.

By the way, don't miss the fact that Jesus Christ, in His humility and obedience becomes what no animal sacrifice ever was. They were insufficient and merely a shadow of the coming reality – the coming spotless, infinite Lamb.

And get this, all those sacrificial animals – they were all uncomprehending of their sacrifice; they were all unsuspecting of their role; they were all involuntarily assigned to die.^{xiv}

But the Lamb of God:

- He was consciously consenting;
- He was infinitely aware;
- And He was ultimately willing to die in our place and for our sin.

Isaiah wrote, “He was oppressed and He was afflicted” – that's a tolerative niphal in the Hebrew language – you have to spend \$200 dollars an hour in seminary to learn that – I'm giving it to you for free today – it means that He willingly, voluntarily was *oppressed and afflicted and He did not open His mouth. (Isaiah 53:7)*^{xv}

The Son of God chose to become powerless – to the point of death.

In my study it was quite obvious that analogies abounded that I had never thought much about. I'll quickly summarize with six of them.

1. First, the cross revealed mercilessness – and Jesus received no mercy as He bore our sin in His body upon that tree; He cried out in agony as the wrath of God the Father poured out upon Him (*Matthew 27:46*). For He – at that moment – *became sin, who knew no sin (2 Corinthians 5:21)*.
2. Secondly, the cross always involved public shame. The Romans made sure that the cross was placed high on some hill or even along a busy highway as a deterrent to criminals and a public shaming of the criminal. *Hebrews 12:2* refers to the shame of Christ on the cross which He willingly endured in order to win His bride.
3. The cross was used for those guilty of high treason. I can't help but think of Christ who dared to call men and women to follow another kingdom – to live for the coming of His kingdom. And His followers will soon suffer death for their refusal to call Caesar, Lord.
4. The cross was used to execute prisoners of war. I can't help but think of our Savior who for a season was a prisoner of sin and captured by death so that we could be free of incarceration in Hell forever.
5. The cross was primarily used to kill slaves and deter slave rebellion. And the early church sang here of their Lord who came

and took on the form of a slave – and became submissive and obedient to the very point of death – so that we, slaves to sin could be freed to live unto righteousness.

6. The cross was used to put to death violent criminals and thieves. Did not our Lord violently steal the power from the grave and the sting away from death; did He not crush the Serpent’s head? And did He not steal away our hearts and affection.

Can we do anything other than join the early church in this hymn?

This is why we, like Paul here – and like the early church – even though it is considered maniacal – and foolish – are singing to this day about the cross of Christ.

This is why you wear a cross as a necklace – a piece of fine jewelry . . . but the cross is a symbol of torture and death; that’s like wearing a necklace with an electric chair or a guillotine hanging from it . . . why would you ever do that?

Because the cross . . . this instrument of torture has become the symbol of your everlasting redemption . . . that’s why.

The Romans used the cross to deter crime . . . and inflict punishment . . . and create fear; Christ used His cross to satisfy holy wrath; to bear away the curse; to satisfy the law; to remove the penalty of sin; to prove the love of God.^{xvi}

This is love; not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins (1 John 4:10).

As the greatest demonstration of humility the world has ever seen, Jesus Christ gave up his rights:

- He never stood up for what He deserved;
- He never demanded a fair trial;
- He refused to defend Himself;
- He didn’t demand worship or even respect.

Think about it – nearly everywhere in our world, there is a huge birthday party called Christmas – can

you imagine coming to a birthday party and giving gifts to everyone but the one having the birthday?

In fact – to take it one step further – can you imagine inviting everyone to the party except him?

If that were to happen to someone today, the birthday boy would sue everybody . . . emotional distress and a violation of their personal rights.

Think of all the lawsuits in our land, just because someone didn’t get what they believe they deserved. Think of the glorious Son of God who gave up His rights in order to be treated in a way He did not deserve:

- He gave up the right to live like God
- He gave up the right to act like God
- He gave up the right to look like God
- And He gave up the right to be treated like God?

Why?

John the Apostle answers it wonderfully as he writes, ***But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God (John 1:12).***

Jesus Christ gave up everything He deserved to hold, so that we could have a right we don’t deserve to have – to be included forever in the Family of God – forgiven, cleansed, redeemed.

Athanasius, the early church father in Alexandria, defended to his own peril the deity of Jesus Christ – as both fully God and fully man. He wrote with such sweetness on this text these words, “Crucifixion was the only death a man can die with arms outstretched . . . Jesus died that way as if to invite all people . . . of all nations . . . and all generations . . . to come to Him.”^{xvii}

This is the humility of Christ.

The sovereign became a slave –
so that through His suffering –
and His sacrifice –
we can be saved forever.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 3/29/2015 by Stephen Davey.

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i Adapted from, The 100 Least Powerful People in the World, 24/7 Wall Street Morning Newsletter; 3/29/11;

www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2012/november/2112612.html

ii Fritz Rienecker & Cleon Rogers, *Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament* (Regency, 1976), p. 551

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- iii Adapted from John MacArthur, Philippians (Moody Publishers, 2001), p. 133
- iv Rienecker, p. 259
- v G. Walter Hansen, The Pillar New Testament Commentary: Philippians (Apollos, 2009), p. 157
- vi Hengel, p. 26.
- vii Ibid, p. 35
- viii Ibid, p. 54
- ix Ibid, p. 76
- x Martin Hengel; translated by John Bowden, Crucifixion (Fortress Press, 1977), p. 3
- xi Ibid
- xii Ibid. p. 51
- xiii Hansen, p. 159
- xiv Adapted from J.A. Motyer, The Message of Philippians (IVP Academic, 1984), p. 117
- xv Ibid
- xvi Adapted from Tremper Longman & David Garland, gen ed; The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Volume 12 (Zondervan, 2006), p. 221
- xvii Sam Gordon, Philippians: An Odyssey of Joy (Ambassador, 2004), p. 81