

## **Triumph: Part Two**

### **Essay 8 in the series “Ode to Joy”**

As we saw in Part One last week, Paul in his Ode to Joy, his letter to the Philippians, gives us one of the great classic texts of Scripture, Philippians 2:5-11, in which he envisions a triumphant picture of every tongue confessing that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Now we might from this picture billions of reprobate, despicable, disgusting sinners forced to bow their knees, forced to confess in some kind of great cosmic scene of inquisitional torture, except for this – that the word Paul uses for “confess” is the same verb used in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of Hebrew scripture, for confession as praise and thanksgiving. That’s how it’s used in Isaiah 45:23, the text Paul is drawing on here. Now a dictator may force subjects to bow against their will, may even force certain words out of them, but praise and thanksgiving come only from the heart.

These people are either bowing at the name of Jesus sincerely or they’re not. If they’re not sincere, there’s no glory brought to God. Attila the Hun or other barbarian kings may take pleasure in forcing defeated enemies to bow against their will, but a God who loves and who honors truthfulness never would. It’s pure fraudulence. On the other hand, if they’re bowing sincerely, it’s because they’ve finally somehow sometime in some way maybe even beyond our formula and expectation been reconciled to God. The never-failing love of God has finally won through.<sup>1</sup> There is much more that could be said about all this, but I will only note that there is much about God’s future that, I believe, will astonish many people and when these things happen we will remember texts like this – and many others.

Don’t, however, miss the main point of this text. It follows from Paul urging the saints, the called-out ones in Philippi, to “stand firm in one Spirit, contending as one for the faith of the gospel” back in 1:27, to be a band of brothers and sisters devoted to one another and devoted to the great good news of a world lit by resurrection and open to the Spirit of God, a world where grace reigns where somehow in absolutely all things God works for our good, a world in which our lives expand and fill to the measure of all the fullness of God. And then Paul begins to tell them how; he writes, “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit – that’s all empty glory. Instead in humility consider others better than yourselves, not just advancing and promoting your own interests but also the interests of one another.”

And it’s now in this context, with this purpose in mind, that Paul writes:

“Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:  
 Who being in very nature God,  
 did not consider equality with God  
 something to be grasped,  
 but emptied himself,  
 taking the very nature of a servant.”

That, Paul says, is the Spirit of Christ Jesus, not grabbing, not grasping, not holding on to his rights and privileges, but emptying himself. It's always about emptying ourselves. Whatever you face, whatever you're up against, whatever the challenge, the solution is always emptying yourself. No big surprise. Because that's what God does.

Notice now what Paul is saying about the nature of God. Jesus being in very nature God took on the very nature of a servant. Servant? No, the NIV is not quite right here. It's *doulos* in Greek. It means slave. Jesus being in very nature God took on the very nature of a slave. So in Jesus we see God being our slave, cleaning up behind us, picking up after us, taking out our garbage, finally humbling himself in death on a cross, not, I think, so much because God demanded it as because we demanded it. And we thereby learn how far God's "servanthood" goes – all the way to the cross.

But all of this is said so that our mindset, our attitude, will be the same as that of Christ Jesus, which takes us back to humility, this almost uniquely Christian virtue which in the Greco-Roman world was considered not a virtue but a failing. To a victorious Caesar, we offer a crucified Messiah. Rather than standing on our own strength and insisting on our own way, we put our hope in God, trusting God, and depending on God. And with regard to one another, we consider one another better than ourselves, more important than ourselves, with needs every bit as important as our own.

We are always aware of our own limitations. We are always open to learning from one another. Every time we want to force our way of thinking on others, however right we may think we are, we think again. We become the servants of all. We wash feet. We take out the garbage. We clean up after one another. We listen to one another. We seek to understand one another. We take care of one another. We rethink and reorder our lives in terms of our deep, abiding spiritual connectedness to one another.

But ...

No pretension.

No grandstanding.

No play-acting.

No claim to special goodness.

No claim to special brilliance.

No claim to special anything.

Just emptying ourselves so that God might fill us.

Then when we recognize our own limits and fully realize our dependence on God and on God's grace, there begins to come into our lives a deep sense of soul relief, of freedom, the first hints of the joy Paul speaks of. And so we are back to joy. And of course one of the great causes of joy, one of the great reasons for joy, is the magnificent way everything ends and then begins again, in cosmic triumph, the one who emptied himself being exalted to the highest place, every knee bowing at his name, every tongue confessing that Jesus is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. It ends well. God's love wins through. It ends in loving reconciliation. Every knee bows in recognition of this God who takes the very nature of a slave. Every tongue freely confesses that Jesus Christ is Lord because

one day people get it. The foundational truth of the universe lies in this: The Lord who empties himself and takes the very nature of a slave.

You are always being called then to emptying yourself. To doing nothing out of selfish ambition or empty glory. To in humility consider others better. To look not just to your own needs but to the needs of others. Emptying. Emptying yourself. It's all about emptying. It's always all about emptying, so that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God, bowing in joy, confessing in joy that the slave of us all is our Lord.

– Dale Pauls

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<sup>i</sup> Indebted to Thomas Talbott, *The Inescapable Love of God*, 69.