

The Incredible Incarnation

By David de Bruyn

Ask any Christian, 'What are we celebrating when we celebrate Christmas?' and they will probably answer, 'The birth of Jesus Christ.' And they're right. That is what we have chosen to do on December 25th – mark the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ into the world. But we are doing something far greater than celebrating a birthday. No, for the thoughtful Christian, this is a day when we stand in awe of the fact that God became a man.

We look beyond the beauty of the nativity to a truth behind that manger scene which is staggering and awesome to contemplate – the Creator became like one of His creatures. Christmas is a time to ponder the mystery of the incarnation – that the Eternal God, who had been satisfied in Himself for all eternity, would leave the privileges and delights of Heaven to become human.

C.S. Lewis captured it well when he wrote in his book *Miracles* (Chapter 14):

"In the Christian story, God descends to re-ascend. He comes down, down from the heights of absolute being into time and space, down into humanity... down to the very roots and seabed of the humanity which He Himself created. But He goes down to come up again and bring ruined sinners up with Him... one may think of a diver, first reducing himself to [near] nakedness, then glancing in mid-air, then gone with a splash, vanished, rushing down through green and warm water into black and cold water, down through increasing pressure into the death-like region of ooze and slime and old decay. And then up again, back to colour and light, his lungs almost bursting till suddenly he breaks the surface again holding in his hand the dripping precious thing that he went down to recover. He and it are both colour now that they have come up into the light. Down below where it lay colourless in the dark, He lost his colour, too."

In Philippians, we are exposed line by line to what that dive entailed. We see just what it meant for Jehovah to become Emmanuel – God among us. The end of **Philippians 2:5** directs us to the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. We then read:

...Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, and took upon Him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: and being found in fashion as a man, He humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.

Philippians 2:6-8

Let's break it down to better understand.

'Who being in the form of God'

Jesus Christ was, from all eternity – God. The word for *being* is literally, 'existing.' It is in the present tense: Jesus, existing in the form of God, as He had always existed in the form of God.

The word *form* is not easily translated into English. The idea in the original language is one not of shape, but of His very essence. It suggests what you are in the deepest sense – the unalterable, unchangeable,

permanent part of who you are. Your circumstances may change, but your essential being as a human cannot change.

Jesus, in His very being, was God. This is who Jesus always existed as; this is who Jesus was in His nature from eternity past – God. Not somewhat less than God, or second only to God, or the highest angel, or the most exalted prophet. The language used here unmistakably says – ‘Jesus has always been God.’ Other Bible verses support this:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God.

John 1:1-2

For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given: and the government shall be upon His shoulder: and His name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.

Isaiah 9:6

But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall come forth to Me The One to be Ruler in Israel, whose goings forth are from of old, from everlasting.

Micah 5:2

And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifested in the flesh, ...

1 Timothy 3:16

Jesus had always been in the position of the Second Person of the Trinity, God the Son. He was never made or created; He never came into being; He had always existed with the Father and the Spirit as God. But then we see His sevenfold descent to being a man who would die for our sins. The incarnation for Jesus was steps down and down.

1. ‘Thought it not robbery to be equal with God’

This phrase is translated into English in a way that can be misleading. The idea here is that Jesus was fully equal with God; equal in power, authority, privilege, position, honour and glory. Jesus was co-equal with the Father and the Spirit. Even on earth, He made it clear that He was equal with God and His enemies understood Him:

Therefore the Jews sought the more to kill him, because he not only had broken the Sabbath, but said also that God was his Father, making himself equal with God.

John 5:18

When He said to the Jews in **John 8:58**, “*Verily, verily, I say unto you, before Abraham was, I am,*” He was making a claim to be the same person who spoke to Moses from the burning bush when He said, ‘*My name is I AM that I AM.*’ When Jesus said to Philip, “*If you have seen Me, you have seen the Father,*” He was making a clear claim to be equal with God. And when He said in **John 10:30**, “*I and My Father are one,*” He was saying the same thing.

The words, ‘*thought it not robbery,*’ carry the idea of snatching, seizing, or clutching for, as if stealing or robbing. The idea is that Jesus did not regard equality with God as something He had to clutch with both

hands and refuse to give up. He did not regard His Divine Status as something He had to snatch, or jealously retain. In other words, the privileges of being God were not something He considered He had to grasp and hold onto.

Think about that for a moment. We're not talking about the status or privileges of being a CEO, or an extremely wealthy person. We're not talking about the status or advantages of being a powerful politician, perhaps a king or a state president. We're talking about the privileges and advantages that come with being The One and Only True GOD! You can't go any higher! You can't have more privilege or honour or power or glory or status! But, such is the humble heart of God, that He did not regard that as something that had to be kept at all costs.

This did not just happen in His heart and attitude. Jesus didn't consider this equality with God something to be selfishly clung to, *but* – the next word suggests the contrasting thought.

2. 'But made Himself of no reputation'

This phrase in Greek phrase could be literally translated as 'He emptied Himself,' or 'He made Himself nothing.' Now, what does that mean? It does not mean He emptied Himself of Deity – of being God. God can only be God. Jesus could not be only 50% God and still be God. If He emptied Himself of being God, God would cease to exist, and so would the universe.

No, what Jesus did was lay aside some of the expressions of His Deity, some of the prerogatives and privileges of Deity. For example, He laid aside His heavenly glory with the riches of heaven. That is why in **John 17:5**, Jesus prayed, *'And now, O Father, glorify thou Me with Thine own self with the glory which I had with Thee before the world was.'*

Some of that glory was revealed to the disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration. There they saw some of His glory that was being veiled from people. But Jesus laid aside independent authority. We'll never fully understood the mystery of this – how He was fully God, but at the same time fully man, and as such, dependent upon God:

Though He were a Son, yet learned He obedience by the things which He suffered...

Hebrews 5:8

Jesus did not require the status symbols of being God. He did not require the uniform, the badge, or the insignia of being God. In order to accomplish His mission, He laid aside His personal splendour, His riches and honour, His absolute freedom. We might think that amazing in itself, but Jesus did not come to earth as royalty. He stooped even lower.

3. 'and took upon him the form of a servant'

The word for 'servant' here is the word for 'bondservant.' This was the servant that had no rights, no will, and no life outside of his master. The Bible says Jesus took this form:

In **John 13**, we perhaps see this most clearly, and we see some parallels between it and this Scripture. Compare what the two say, side by side:

- **John 13:4** – Jesus arises and lays aside His outer garments .

- **Philippians 2:7** – He emptied Himself, laid aside the visible manifestations of His glory.
- **John 13:5** – He takes a towel, wraps it about Himself, puts water in a dish and washes the feet of the disciples – a task assigned to slaves. Hebrew Midhrāsh (a mode of biblical interpretation prominent in Jewish literature) taught that no Hebrew, even a Hebrew slave, could be compelled to wash feet.
- **Philippians 2:7** – He takes the form of a servant, being born in human likeness and then humbling Himself.
- **John 13:12** – When finished, He puts His outer garment back on and takes His place at the table from which He got up.
- **Philippians 2:9** – God highly exalted Him and gave Him a name above every name.
- **John 13:13** – Jesus says, *“you call me Master and Lord...”*
- **Philippians 2:11** – Paul writes, *“every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.”*

The point is that Jesus was willing to serve. The One before whom the seraphim cried out ‘Holy, Holy, Holy,’ the One whom infinite numbers of angels served, He laid aside the outer garments of Deity, so He could serve His own creatures. As **Matthew 20:28** put it, *“...the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.”*

4. ‘and was made in the likeness of men’

Though He was God from eternity past, and though He’d always had a servant heart, at a particular time in history, Jesus became a man. He truly entered humanity. A real likeness, not a phantom, as **Hebrews 2:14-17** tells us.

The word ‘likeness’ reminds us Jesus was more than an ordinary man. He was not less – like just God in a body. He was a real man. And here we enter that wonderful mystery that is so often brought out in the Christmas story – the Virgin Birth. The Holy Spirit conceived in the womb of Mary the greatest miracle of all. Dust added to Deity, The Almighty appears as a baby. Try to imagine that!

I hope I am not being offensive, but I cannot imagine that God becoming man would be an inviting prospect to God. God delights in man; man is made in His image. But, for God to enter human flesh is, I think, like one of us imagining becoming an insect. Picture the all-powerful, self-sufficient God now experiencing tiredness from walking long distances, sweat from being too hot, and discomfort from sleeping in makeshift beds.

Imagine the God who had created all things for His pleasure enduring thirst and hunger, feeling the irritations of thorns and insect bites and cold nights. Picture the God who was perfect in Himself now having to care for His human body – wash it, clothe it. The God who knows all, sees all, hears all, now having two eyes, two ears, a human brain. I don’t claim to understand all the mysteries of how Jesus was 100% God and 100% man, but it was definitely part of the ‘dive down.’

5. ‘and being found in fashion as a man’

This is not Paul just repeating the last phrase. This phrase emphasises Jesus was found, or seen as a man. That is, He was thought of as *just* a man. He was unrecognised as God.

It is hard enough to lay aside the status symbols that would immediately identify you as God. It is hard enough to then enter humanity, and not just enter it, but specifically in a very poor family in an obscure town in Galilee. But then to have humanity regard you as being just a man must be terribly humiliating. That the Son of God should have been among us, and what most people did was dispute with Him that He was who He said He was:

And they said, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How is it then that he saith, 'I came down from heaven'?"

John 6:42

However, we know where this Man is from; but when the Christ comes, no one knows where He is from.

John 7:27

For He shall grow up before Him as a tender plant, And as a root out of dry ground. He has no form or comeliness; And when we see Him, There is no beauty that we should desire Him.

Isaiah 53:2

6. 'He humbled Himself'

The word here for *humbled* means 'to be made low,' 'to be abased,' 'to be humiliated.' Jesus, with all His power, all His authority, all His Deity remaining in Him, did not assert His rights, demand recognition, punish His deniers or accusers.

You would think that the King of Kings, having humbled Himself to become a man, and adopt the posture of serving His creatures, might have drawn the line if His creatures had not believed Him or recognised Him. He could have said, 'I have given up enough to come here and teach you. It is treason against heaven for you to reject Me. That's it! I am returning to My Father, to take up the glory that is rightfully mine.' But He did not do that.

Though men rejected Him, though even His own disciples failed to recognise who He was, He continued to dive down, humbling Himself, accepting the rejection, the unbelief, the anonymity, the obscurity, the lack of recognition. Consider His trial. There are mere humans putting the Judge of the Universe on trial. They beat Him. They punch Him. As all of heaven watches in amazement, yet He says nothing, and does not reply: God humbling Himself.

7. 'and became obedient unto death'

As we said, one of the things Jesus laid aside was independent authority. He was fully yielded and submitted to the will of the Father. How amazing that the lawgiver should be perfectly obedient to His own laws.

But His obedience was far greater than that. He submitted to death. The thing most alien to God would be death. We are told of Jesus in **John 1:4**, '*In Him was life, and the life was the light of men.*' Jesus called Himself '*the way, the truth and the life.*' (**John 14:6**). He also referred to Himself as the Resurrection and the Life, the Bread of Life, and the Living Waters. All that lives does so by His life.

Now such was the humbling of Jesus that the Life Himself submitted to death. His obedience was not just a high cost; it was the ultimate cost. Yet into this dark and dreadful place called death, which was the punishment that we incurred for our sins, He went.

‘even the death of a cross’

The death of Jesus was not the dignified death of a king on His royal bed. It was not the noble but painless death of a hero in a story. It was not even a glorious death in battle, fighting against evil. No, the death of Jesus was the most undignified, cruel and torturous death ever – death by crucifixion.

Romans weren’t crucified – it was a form of death reserved for the worst of criminals. Jews despised it because of the curse of hanging on a tree (**Galatians 3:13**). But this death is what He willingly embraced. There on that cross, the half-naked body of the Son of God, beaten beyond all recognition, heaving between gasps of air and excruciating pain, gruesomely covered in blood, amid mocking cries to prove He was God by coming off the cross – even this, He willingly took. Jesus endured it for us:

Who His own self bare our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed.

1 Peter 2:24

Somewhere along the path of Christ’s descent, you’d think He would say to Himself, ‘These people really aren’t worth redeeming. This is too degrading and humiliating!’ But the heart of Jesus is humility. He was relentless in His love. Not even our pride could stop His humility. Note too, that seven is often the number of perfection in the Bible. Well, the humility of Jesus was sevenfold – absolutely perfect:

1. He did not grasp or clutch the privileges of deity.
2. He made himself of no reputation.
3. He took upon Himself the form of a bondservant.
4. He took on the limitations and frailty of a human body.
5. He accepted not being recognised or honoured as God.
6. He humbled Himself and did not react or retaliate.
7. He became obedient to the point of death, even death by crucifixion.

Jesus Himself said this:

Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

Matthew 18:4

But he that is greatest among you shall be your servant.

Matthew 23:11

If humility is what makes one great – Jesus is by far the greatest. No one can ever be as humble as Jesus, because no one will ever have as much to give up, or as deep a dive as He had, being God.

Why did He do all this? So that He could rescue lost sinners. So that He could pay the price for our sins and offer us forgiveness and reconciliation with God. So that He could restore the broken relationship between God and man. That’s what we celebrate today. That God dove down – deep, deep down, so that He could die for us, and bring us up – up, up to glory with Him.