

When God Stepped Down

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"Christ Jesus . . . though He was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men."—Philippians 1:5, 6, 7 (RSV).

God stepped down in order that He might lift men up. His impoverishment was in order to our enrichment. If we miss this gigantic truth, we have miserably fumbled the Christmas story. If we glimpse it, even a little, we have at least struck close to the heart of the Nativity. Christmas, let us understand, is the everlasting miracle of the God who stepped down.

When God stepped down in Jesus, it was a voluntary limiting of Himself. *"Though he was in the form of God,"* says Paul, He *"did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself . . . being born in the likeness of men."*

Ponder this phrase: "He emptied Himself." Whatever it means, it signifies that all the poverty, all the frailty, all the hunger, all the thirst, all the physical weakness, all the suffering and humiliation, all the countless restrictions upon deity, that you and I see in Jesus of Nazareth, were the limitations that God put upon Himself when He chose the route of childbirth and a developing human nature as the path of His redeeming revelation to sinful men.

"It can't be done," some philosopher may say. "You can't reduce the infinite to the finite like that." To which the Christian replies, quite boldly and historically, "But it was done," and then hastens to add: "Only it was not something that was done to the Infinite." As Forsythe puts it, in his illuminating volume on The Person and Place of Jesus Christ: "If the infinite God was so constituted that He could not live also as a finite man, then He was not infinite."

Follow Paul's thought carefully. He says of Christ that He "was in the form of God." "Was!" Past tense! When? Before His human birth at Bethlehem! How long before? Forever—always. The word "form" can easily mislead us. Dismiss from your mind any thought of physical shape. That comes in a later phrase which refers to Christ in His earthly existence. This word "form," in the Greek, means what we understand by the English word "essence"—that which makes a thing centrally and fundamentally what it is.

Now to Christ, says Paul, has always belonged the quality of Godhood, or "Godness," and nothing will ever change that fact. In His human birth He did not empty Himself of this essential deity—a thing which He could not have done without ceasing to be God. Of what, then, did He empty Himself? What do we mean by the voluntary limitations that He set about Himself when He chose to unite with His divine nature a human nature, and to fashion, in that mysterious union, one unique personality—the personality that the world knows as Jesus Christ?

We have Jesus bringing His divine nature into a union with our human nature and, through that human nature, passing down to where His experiences are no longer simply the experiences of One who possesses "the form of God" but rather, as Paul puts it, of

one who possesses "the form of a servant."

Look at Him—this amazing Jesus! He is helping Joseph make a yoke in that little carpenter's shop at Nazareth. Before He "emptied" Himself He could far more easily make a solar system or a galaxy of systems.

Look at Him again! He is dressed like a slave, and He is washing the feet of some friends of His. Before He "emptied" Himself He was no servant, but the Lord of an army of servants—angels in white livery who rejoiced to fly at His beck and nod. Yes, He who was the universal Sovereign became the universal Servant.

*"Thou didst leave Thy throne and Thy kingly crown,
When Thou camest to earth for me;
But in Bethlehem's home there was found no room
For Thy holy nativity."*

*"Heaven's arches rang when the angel's sang,
Proclaiming Thy royal degree;
But in lowly birth didst Thou come to earth,
And in great humility."*

Exploring our theme a step further, let us say that when God stepped down, He visibly expressed Himself. Take this phrase in verse 8: "being found in fashion as a man." It would do no violence to Paul's meaning if we were to read it: "He made Himself visible in the likeness of a man."

Do we overstate the case when we say that one of the deepest cries of the human spirit—a cry that is at once insistent and incessant—is for a God who gives proof of His nearness, and this in a way that furnishes us assurance and comfort? We long for some guarantee that He is personally available, intimately accessible, compassionately helpful.

And we make a mistake if we imagine that evidences of His majesty and power and wisdom are enough for our satisfaction. We want God Himself. We yearn for assurance that His character is such as to be trustable, lovable, redemptive.

Says Dr. James Stewart of Edinburgh: "The Christian religion is first and foremost and essentially a message about God . . . It is not just a gospel of brotherliness and loving our neighbor and accepting the Golden Rule. It is not in the main a philosophy of life or a social programme. Doubtless it includes all that . . . but basically it is none of these things. It is not a message about human virtues and ideals at all. It is a message about God."

"That message is this—that the living God, eternal, immortal, invisible, has at one quite definite point broken through into history in an unprecedented way. Once and for all, in an actual life lived out upon this earth, God has spoken, and has given the full and final revelation of Himself."

When God stepped down in Jesus—stepped down to gather little children in His arms and bless them, to take men and women of reeking record and give them a new start, to take the broken hearts of the sorrowing and mend them—He achieved, for all eyes to behold, a visible expression of Himself for which the weary world had long been waiting.

Furthermore, if we are to follow St. Paul in the teaching that is associated with our Text, we must see that when God stepped down, it was a victorious sacrifice of Himself. Return

to verse 8: "Being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross." Actually, you see, the humiliation of God in Christ appears in two stages, one lower than the other. It was stage One when He descended to the level of birth at Bethlehem. It was stage Two when He descended even lower to the level of death at Calvary. The first was when He stepped down to earth; the second when He stepped down on earth.

You and I can never understand the amazing self-abasement and sacrifice of God upon the Cross unless we understand the central purpose for which God came into the world in the person of His Son. That purpose is stated frequently upon the pages of the New Testament, and always with reference to man's sin and his deliverance therefrom: "Thou shalt call his name Jesus, for he shall save his people from their sin" (Matthew 1:21). "The Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10). "He who knew no sin was made to be sin for us, that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him" (II Cor. 5:21).

W. Crosby Bell makes the remark that "in all reflection a point is always reached where, before further progress can be made, something must be done." With utmost reverence I venture to suggest that this was precisely the case with God in the ongoing of His relations with the sinning, striving, warring, lusting, hating children of men. Their sins, from the first, had been a grief and a burden to Him. He had condemned evil. He had made plea after plea for righteousness.

But now, at long last, something must be done—something more and something decisive, So He comes in Jesus and lets the sin of man sear His soul and smite His body with its shame. He acts as though that sin and shame were His own. Up the hill of Calvary He staggers, bearing our sin—yours and mine—identifying Himself with it, suffering, bleeding unto death over it. Sin killed Him, we say. Yes, but the other side of it is that, strangely enough, He killed sin. Death conquered Him, we may say. Yes, but, gloriously enough, hell was smashed into terrible defeat at the very moment of its seeming victory.

And now this humiliated God, triumphant in resurrection, powerful in grace, moves down the centuries and across the continents, forgiving man's guilt, routing out man's corruption and furnishing his soul with righteousness, driving out the hopelessness that sits within his spirit and lighting lamps of cheer warmer than any which a fond mother ever set in the window to welcome a wandering son.

That, my friends, I beg you to believe, is the all-important reason why God stepped down. It was a voluntary limiting of Himself—and that was impressive. It was a visible expression of Himself—and that was illuminating. But, mainly, supremely, it was a victorious sacrifice of Himself—and that was imperative. It calls us to hope, and faith, and love and worship.

*"O Christ, Love's Victim, hanging high
Upon the cruel Tree,
What worthy recompense can I
Make, mine own Christ, to Thee?"*

*My sweat and labor from this day,
My sole life, let it be,
To love Thee aye, the best I may,
And die for love of Thee."*

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— — A Joyous Christmas To You All — —