**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**PHILIPPIANS-007**. **THE DESCENT OF THE WORD by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"5. Have this mind in you which was also in Christ Jesus: 6. Who, being in the form of God, counted it not a prize to be on an equality with God, 7. But emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men; 8. And being found in fashion as a man, He humbled Himself, becoming obedient even unto death, yea, the death of the cross."*

*Philippians 2:5-8 (R.V.)*

The purpose of the Apostle in this great passage must ever be kept clearly in view. Our Lord's example is set forth as the pattern of that unselfish disregard of one's own things, and devotion to the things of others, which has just been urged on the Philippians, and the mind which was in Him is presented as the model on which they are to fashion their minds. This purpose in some measure explains some of the peculiarities of the language here, and may help to guide us through some of the intricacies and doubtful points in the interpretation of the words. It explains why Christ's death is looked at in them only in its bearing upon Himself, as an act of obedience and of condescension, and why even that death in which Jesus stands most inimitable and unique is presented as capable of being imitated by us. The general drift of these verses is clear, but there are few Scripture passages which have evoked more difference of opinion as to the precise meaning of nearly every phrase. To enter on the subtle discussions involved in the adequate exposition of the words would far exceed our limits, and we must perforce content ourselves with a slight treatment of them, and aim chiefly at bringing out their practical side.

The broad truth which stands sun-clear amid all diverse interpretations is--that the Incarnation, Life, and Death are the great examples of living humility and self-sacrifice. To be born was His supreme act of condescension. It was love which made Him assume the vesture of human flesh. To die was the climax of His voluntary obedience, and of His devotion to us.

**I. The height from which Jesus descended.**

The whole strange conception of birth as being the voluntary act of the Person born, and as being the most stupendous instance of condescension in the world's history, necessarily reposes on the clear conviction that He had a prior existence so lofty that it was an all but infinite descent to become man. Hence Paul begins with the most emphatic assertion that he who bore the name of Jesus lived a divine life before He was born. He uses a very strong word which is given in the margin of the Revised Version, and might well have been in its text. Being originally as the word accurately means, carries our thoughts back not only to a state which preceded Bethlehem and the cradle, but to that same timeless eternity from which the prologue of the Gospel of John partially draws the veil when it says, In the beginning was the Word, and to which Jesus Himself more obscurely pointed when He said, Before Abraham was I am.

Equally emphatic in another direction is Paul's next expression, In the form of God, for form means much more than shape. I would point out the careful selection in this passage of three words to express three ideas which are often by hasty thought regarded as identical. We read of the form of God (verse 6), the likeness of men (verse 7), and in fashion as a man. Careful investigation of these two words form and fashion has established a broad distinction between them, the former being more fixed, the latter referring to that which is accidental and outward, which may be fleeting and unsubstantial. The possession of the form involves participation in the essence also. Here it implies no corporeal idea as if God had a material form, but it implies also much more than a mere apparent resemblance. He who is in the form of God possesses the essential divine attributes. Only God can be in the form of God': man is made in the likeness of God, but man is not in the form of God. Light is thrown on this lofty phrase by its antithesis with the succeeding expression in the next verse, the form of a servant, and as that is immediately explained to refer to Christ's assumption of human nature, there is no room for candid doubt that being originally in the form of God is a deliberately asserted claim of the divinity of Christ in His pre-existent state.

As we have already pointed out, Paul soars here to the same lofty height to which the prologue of John's Gospel rises, and he echoes our Lord's own words about the glory which I had with Thee before the foundation of the world. Our thoughts are carried back before creatures were, and we become dimly aware of an eternal distinction in the divine nature which only perfects its eternal oneness. Such an eternal participation in the divine nature before all creation and before time is the necessary pre-supposition of the worth of Christ's life as the pattern of humility and self-sacrifice. That pre-supposition gives all its meaning, its pathos, and its power, to His gentleness, and love, and death. The facts are different in their significance, and different in their power to bless and gladden, to purge and sway the soul, according as we contemplate them with or without the background of His pre-existent divinity. The view which regards Him as simply a man, like all the rest of us, beginning to be when He was born, takes away from His example its mightiest constraining force. Only when we with all our hearts believe that the Word became flesh, do we discern the overwhelming depths of condescension manifested in the Birth. If it was not the incarnation of God, it has no claim on the hearts of men.

**II. The wondrous act of descent.**

The stages in that long descent are marked out with a precision and definiteness which would be intolerable presumption, if Paul were speaking only his own thoughts, or telling what he had seen with his own eyes. They begin with what was in the mind of the eternal Word before He began His descent, and whilst yet He is in the form of God. He stands on the lofty level before the descent begins, and in spirit makes the surrender, which, stage by stage, is afterwards to be wrought out in act. Before any of these acts there must have been the disposition of mind and will which Paul describes as counting it not a thing to be grasped to be on an equality with God. He did not regard the being equal to God as a prey or treasure to be clutched and retained at all hazards. That sweeps our thoughts into the dim regions far beyond Calvary or Bethlehem, and is a more overwhelming manifestation of love than are the acts of lowly gentleness and patient endurance which followed in time. It included and transcended them all.

It was the supreme example of not looking on one's own things. And what made Him so count? What but infinite love. To rescue men, and win them to Himself and goodness, and finally to lift them to the place from which He came down for them, seemed to Him to be worth the temporary surrender of that glory and majesty. We can but bow and adore the perfect love. We look more deeply into the depths of Deity than unaided eyes could ever penetrate, and what we see is the movement in that abyss of Godhead of purest surrender which, by beholding, we are to assimilate.

Then comes the wonder of wonders, He emptied Himself. We cannot enter here on the questions which gather round that phrase, and which give it a factitious importance in regard to present controversies. All that we would point out now is that while the Apostle distinctly treats the Incarnation as being a laying aside of what made the Word to be equal with God, he says nothing, on which an exact determination can be based, of the degree or particulars in which the divine nature of our Lord was limited by His humanity. The fact he asserts, and that is all. The scene in the Upper Chamber was but a feeble picture of what had already been done behind the veil. Unless He had laid aside His garments of divine glory and majesty, He would have had no human flesh from which to strip the robes. Unless He had willed to take the form of a servant, He would not have had a body to gird with the slave's towel. The Incarnation, which made all His acts of lowly love possible, was a greater act of lowly love than those which flowed from it. Looking at it from earth, men say, Jesus was born. Looking at it from heaven, Angels say, He emptied Himself.

But how did He empty Himself? By taking the form of a slave, that is to God. And how did He take the form of a slave? By becoming in the likeness of men. Here we are specially to note the remarkable language implying that what is true of none other in all the generations of men is true of Him. That just as emptying Himself was His own act, also the taking the form of a slave by His being born was His own act, and was more truly described as a becoming. We note, too, the strong contrast between that most remarkable word and the being originally which is used to express the mystery of divine pre-existence.

Whilst His becoming in the likeness of men stands in strong contrast with being originally and energetically expresses the voluntariness of our Lord's birth, the likeness of men does not cast any doubt on the reality of His manhood, but points to the fact that though certainly perfect man, He was by reason of the divine nature present in Him not simply and merely man.

Here then the beginning of Christ's manhood is spoken of in terms which are only explicable, if it was a second form of being, preceded by a pre-existent form, and was assumed by His own act. The language, too, demands that that humanity should have been true essential manhood. It was in the form of man and possessed of all essential attributes. It was in the likeness of man possessed of all external characteristics, and yet was something more. It summed up human nature, and was its representative.

**III. The obedience which attended the descent.**

It was not merely an act of humiliation and condescension to become man, but all His life was one long act of lowliness. Just as He emptied Himself in the act of becoming in the likeness of men, so He humbled Himself, and all along the course of His earthly life He chose constant lowliness and to be despised and rejected of men. It was the result moment by moment of His own will that to the eyes of men He presented no form nor comeliness, and that will was moment by moment steadied in its unmoved humility, because He perpetually looked not on His own things, but on the things of others. The guise He presented to the eyes of men was the fashion of a man. That word corresponds exactly to Paul's carefully selected term, and makes emphatic both its superficial and its transitory character.

The lifelong humbling of Himself was further manifested in His becoming obedient. That obedience was, of course, to God. And here we cannot but pause to ask the question, How comes it that to the man Jesus obedience to God was an act of humiliation? Surely there is but one explanation of such a statement. For all men but this one to be God's slaves is their highest honour, and to speak of obedience as humiliation is a sheer absurdity.

Not only was the life of Jesus so perfect an example of unbroken obedience that He could safely front His adversaries with the question, Which of you convinceth Me of sin? and with the claim to do always the things that pleased Him, but the obedience to the Father was perfected in His death. Consider the extraordinary fact that a man's death is the crowning instance of his humility, and ask yourselves the question, Who then is this who chose to be born, and stooped in the act of dying? His death was obedience to God, because by it He carried out the Father's will for the salvation of the world, His death is the greatest instance of unselfish self-sacrifice, and the loftiest example of looking on the things of others that the world has ever seen. It dwindles in significance, in pathos, and in power to move us to imitation unless we clearly see the divine glory of the eternal Lord as the background of the gentle lowliness of the Man of Sorrows, and the Cross. No theory of Christ's life and death but that He was born for us, and died for us, either explains the facts and the apostolic language concerning them, or leaves them invested with their full power to melt our hearts and mould our lives. There is a possibility of imitating Him in the most transcendent of His acts. The mind may be in us which was in Christ Jesus. That it may, His death must first be the ground of our hope, and then we must make it the pattern of our lives, and draw from it the power to shape them after His blessed Example.