

**Philippians 2:5-8**  
**“What Happened in Bethlehem?”**

- 1. THERE WAS AN EXIT FROM HEAVEN**
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- 2. THERE WAS AN ENTRANCE INTO HUMANITY**
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1. I fear that our idea of the Nativity scene and our conception of the birth of Jesus have been gilded a bit over time, until in our minds it looks more like a *Hallmark* Christmas card, and less like the humble, harsh reality that it actually was.

2. A lowlier, poorer, more pathetic birth cannot be imagined. Had we witnessed the actual birth of Jesus, but did not know who was being born, we would have wept in pity.

3. The stench of animals and the filth of a barn accompanied the cries of Mary as she struggled without the aid of medicine or midwife.

4. The infant was likely washed with the kind water you might expect to find in a stable. Then he was wrapped in strips of cloth, and laid to rest in a feeding trough turned cradle.

5. There was nothing quaint or cozy about the whole episode. It was messy, dirty, crude, and sad. The scene itself in no way indicated the magnitude of what was actually taking place.

6. To really understand what happened in Bethlehem, you must look past the traditional notion of the Nativity scene, and you must grasp the truths that underlie it.

7. To discover what really happened that night so long ago in Bethlehem, I want us to look at a text that would not normally be considered a Christmas passage.

8. In Philippians 2, the Apostle Paul tells the story of the incarnation of Christ in theological and spiritual terms that point beyond the stable and the manger to the real truth that makes Christmas worth celebrating.

9. As we look at this text, we are reminded of the some of the most significant things that happened the night that Jesus was born, and the impact they should have upon our daily lives. First of all, we see that in Bethlehem so long ago:

## **I. THERE WAS AN EXIT FROM HEAVEN**

1. In Philippians 2:5, the Apostle Paul encourages us to have the mind of Christ. Then he goes on over the next few verses to describe what that mindset looks like.

2. Describing Jesus, he says in verse 6, *“Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God:”*

3. In this verse we are given a glimpse into the existence of Jesus Christ *before* He came into the world through virgin’s womb.

4. The Bible clearly teaches that Jesus has always existed. He was alive before His birth. John says of Him, *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God (John 1:1).”*

5. When Jesus was born in Bethlehem, it did not mark the beginning of His existence. His birth on earth was the result of His exit from Heaven.

6. Notice what Paul tells us in verse 6 about the existence of Jesus in heaven even before His birth. First of all, Paul points us to:

### **A. The condition of Christ before His birth**

1. In verse 6, we read that prior to His arrival in Bethlehem, Jesus was *“in the form of God.”*

2. When we hear that word “form” we think of the shape of something. However, Paul is not saying that Jesus was in the shape of God.

3. No, the idea of the word translated as “form” is the essence of something. It is that which is inwardly true, regardless of shape.

4. Think of it of this way: my shape as a human being has changed in 31 years. I’ve grown taller, older, and a little heavier. However, the essence of what makes me Terry Trivette has not changed. I am essentially the same person.

5. What Paul tells us in verse 6 is that Jesus did not become God at the moment of His birth in Bethlehem.

6. No, if we could travel back into the blackness of pre-creation space, when there was nothing and no one but the Eternal God.

7. If we could travel before time ticked into motion, and before history became a story, there we would find Jesus Christ – just as much the essence and expression of God as He was when His glory was revealed on earth!

8. He is Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today, and forever! He was God without us long before He was God with us!

9. Notice not only in verse 6 that we see something about the condition of Christ before His birth, but notice also further that we see something about:

### **B. The character of Christ before His birth**

1. Look again at verse 6. It says, *“Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God:”*

2. Note that phrase *“...thought it not robbery to be equal with God.”* The translation can be a little confusing.

3. The word translated “robbery” in the *King James* is a word that can describe the act of robbery, but it can also describe a prize, or something that someone would try to seize or steal.

4. What Paul is saying is that Jesus did not view His eternal equality with God as something to be grasped and clung to as a prize.

5. In other words, the eternal state in which Jesus had dwelt was not something He hung on to tenaciously and selfishly.

6. What this means is that the selfless, sacrificial character of Jesus was already a reality long before He came to earth to give Himself up for man.

7. The baby that uttered His first cries that night in Bethlehem was not just another infant. He may have needed nourishment from Mary, but He needed none of her virtue. In Him already dwelt the fullness of the Godhead bodily!

8. Before the moment that Mary became pregnant, I imagine there was a farewell ceremony in heaven. All the angels and saints of old gathered round the gate of glory, and watched and worshipped as God the Father said goodbye to God the Son!

9. After living an eternity in glory, Jesus Christ exited the splendor of heaven, selflessly trading a throne for the womb of a Jewish girl.

*Down from His glory,  
Loves most wondrous story,  
My God and Savior came,  
And Jesus was His name!*

10. As we look on in Philippians 2, we see something further that happened in Bethlehem. We see not only that *there was an exit from heaven*, but we see also secondly that:

## II. THERE WAS AN ENTRANCE INTO HUMANITY

1. As we think about Bethlehem and the birth of Jesus, we realize that the heart of the story is not just the *work* of God coming down to earth. The story is also about the *way* in which God came down to earth.

2. Paul puts it this way in Philippians 2:7. He says that Jesus, “...*was made in the likeness of men:*”

3. The eternal Jesus did not descend from the clouds on a flaming chariot, robed in the shining light of His godly glory. No, He came to earth through the womb of a woman, in the likeness of men.

4. The Creator actually joined His creation! He entered into the human race! Bethlehem witnessed more than just a birth! It witnessed God becoming flesh!

5. Notice a couple of things Paul says about this entrance into humanity. He tells us something about:

### A. The process of His birth

1. Look again at verse 7. Paul says that rather than clinging to His eternal equality with God, Jesus, “...*made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men.*”

2. Obviously, it took a miracle for a virgin to become pregnant. However, the fact that a virgin conceived is not the only miracle involved in Christ’s entrance into humanity.

3. Think of what was required on the part of the eternal Christ in order for Him to be born in the likeness of men.

4. Paul says that He, “...*made himself of no reputation...*” That phrase is translated from three words that simply mean, “He emptied himself.”

5. He emptied himself into what? Paul says He emptied Himself into, “...*the form of a servant.*”

6. I confess we are over our heads in truth this deep and dynamic. However, don’t miss the fact that in coming to be born into the body of human, Jesus left behind His rule in heaven in order to come to earth and say, “...*I seek not mine own will, but the will of the Father which hath sent me* (John 5:30).”

7. Imagine trying to put all the water of the oceans in a single bottle. Imagine trying to harness the light of the sun in a single flashlight. Imagine trying to map out the universe on a *post-it note*.

8. Those feats would be nothing compared to the wonder of the process through which the glory of Jesus was poured into the body of a baby.

9. As we think of Christ entering into humanity, we see in this text not only the process of His birth, but also further, Paul points us to:

### **B. The purpose of His birth**

1. In verse 8, the apostle looks forward from Bethlehem to Calvary. He says, “*And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.*”

2. Though 33 years separated Bethlehem’s manger and Golgotha’s cross, the two are inextricably linked.

3. He was born to die. The whole purpose of His birth was to reach the day of His death. He came into the world to save sinners, and that was accomplished by His death on the cross.

4. His birth could not save us. His sinless life alone could not save us. Only His sacrificial death could pay the price for our redemption!

5. One writer put it this way: “...those soft little hands, fashioned by the Holy Spirit in Mary’s womb, were made so that nails might be driven through them.

6. Those baby feet, pink and unable to walk, would one day walk up a dusty hill to be nailed to a cross...That tender body, warm and soft, wrapped in swaddling clothes, would one day be ripped open by a spear. Jesus was born to die.”<sup>i</sup>

7. What happened in Bethlehem? The Lamb slain before the foundation of the world entered into the world, and began His journey toward place of His death.

8. At Christmas we celebrate His birth. However, there would be no reason to celebrate His birth if it had not been for His death.

9. Looking at Philippians 2, we see something else that happened that first Christmas in Bethlehem. We see not only that *there was an exit from heaven*, and *there was an entrance into humanity*, but we see also that in the birth of Christ:

## **II. THERE WAS AN EXAMPLE OF HUMILITY**

1. I said in the introduction that Philippians 2 is not a typical Christmas passage. In fact, if you study this text, you find that Paul is dealing with some very practical issues.
2. Look at the verses leading up to this great section on the incarnation of Christ. In verse 3, Paul says, *“Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves.”*
3. He goes on in verse 4 to say, *“Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others.”*
4. Then, beginning in verse 5, Paul takes the truth of how Jesus came into the world, and uses it as a guide for how we are to treat one another.
5. What we learn from this text is that the Christmas story is not just an expression of what God has done for us; it is an example of what we are to do for one another.
6. In His birth and life, our Lord Jesus demonstrates for us the kind of humility and compassion that is to mark our lives as His followers.
7. Notice a couple of things about the example our Lord has set for us. First of all, think of:

#### **A. The selflessness He demonstrated**

1. Again, Paul urges us in verse 3 to value others more than we do ourselves. He says in verse 4, *“Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others.”*
2. Is that not exactly what Christ did in leaving all that He had in heaven to come and minister to us on earth?
3. When He emptied Himself into the form of a servant, Christ gave to us an example of the selflessness with which we are to live and serve those around us.
4. Unlike our Lord, so often we cling tenaciously to our rights and to our sense of self. We defend ourselves, and assert ourselves, and serve ourselves.
5. We are sensitive when our egos are bruised and competitive when our territory is threatened. We say we want to serve, but we are offended when someone treats us like a servant.

6. The birth of Jesus, and the truth of His entrance into this world, ought to remind us all that the greatest in the kingdom of Christ is the one who will selflessly put others before their own interests.
7. As you walk into the stores this season, you will likely hear the sound a bell ringing, as a *Salvation Army* volunteer wishes you a Merry Christmas.
8. When you hear that bell, think of the name William Booth. Booth was the founder of the *Salvation Army* well over 100 years ago in the slums of London.
9. Late in his life, Booth's health was waning, and he was unable to address the annual meeting of the organization he had formed. He wired his message to them through telegraph. It was one word: "OTHERS".
10. In Bethlehem, at the birth of our Lord we see a demonstration of selflessness. Notice something further we see in His example of humility. Notice not only the selflessness He demonstrated, but notice also:

#### **B. The sacrifice He demonstrated**

1. Paul says in verse 8, that Jesus, *"...humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross."*
2. Jesus gave all He had for the sake of our salvation. His sacrifice on the cross was the ultimate act of giving.
3. In His sacrifice, we find an example of how we are to humbly give ourselves for one another. I John 3:16 says, *"Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren."*
4. This week, millions of people will give and receive gifts. Most of them will require little of the giver. We will spend some of our money, and give away just a small fraction of all we have.
5. The truth, however, is that our neatly wrapped boxes, and our easily purchased presents are not much of tribute to the sacrificial gift of the Lord Jesus.
6. If we really want to honor Him this Christmas, we will give much more than a tie, a toy, or a trinket. We will give our whole lives for the sake of others.
7. On a cold February day in 1943, a German torpedo ripped through the hull of the *SS Dorchester*. "She's going down," someone cried, as the men raced for the lifeboats.

8. One of the soldiers crept up to one of the nine chaplains aboard that vessel, and with fear in his eyes said, "I've lost my life jacket." The chaplain quickly removed his and said, "Here, take mine."
9. Before the ship sank, all nine of those chaplains gave their life jackets to soldiers. They all nine died as the ship sank. They were awarded posthumously the Distinguished Service Cross.
10. Jesus gave up His life, not just to rescue us, but also to reveal to us what true humility looks like. This Christmas, let us live by the example of Christ – selflessly and sacrificially.

1. It was December when Orville and Wilbur Wright first got their flying machine off the ground in real flight. They had accomplished what no man had ever done. They had flown!

2. They sent an excited message back home to their sister Katherine. It said, "We have actually flown 120 feet! Will be home for Christmas."

3. As soon as she received the telegram, knowing what historic news it was, Katherine took the message to the editor of the local newspaper. He read it and said, "Well, well. How nice. The boys will be home for Christmas."

4. That editor completely missed the real news in that telegram. Likewise, I fear that in all that the modern Christmas has become, we are completely missing the real news behind the Christmas story.

5. What really happened in Bethlehem? Behind the Nativity Scene, there is the message of how the eternal Jesus left the splendor of heaven for the stench of a stable.

6. He emptied all His deity into a human body, and all for the purpose of offering that body on the cross for sinners.

7. In His example we have more than a reason for a holiday. We have a pattern of selfless humility that ought to cause all of us to give all we have in the service of His holy name.

8. This Christmas, *"Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus."*

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<sup>i</sup> MacArthur Jr., John, God With Us, (Zondervan Books, Grand Rapids, MI, 1989), p. 116

**Terry Trivette 2009**