

PAUL'S THEOLOGY

Lesson 6

The Preexistent Christ

Previously, I have mentioned the Bailey Bookstore I frequented while a high school student growing up in Lubbock, Texas. Ron and Betty Bailey owned the Christian bookstore located on 50th Street, just ten minutes from my house (of course, almost any place in Lubbock is at most ten minutes from any other place!).

The Bailey Bookstore was a great place. They had a wide assortment of Sunday School material, a good selection of contemporary Christian music, and wonderful Bibles of every translation and cover style. The section that grabbed my attention, however, was one that held the more intensive study books. They had books that dealt with the Greek New Testament, the Hebrew Old Testament, commentaries, and other scholastic works. I could spend hours looking through those books for just the right one to spend my limited money on.

One day, I figured that I had just enough money to buy a great book; so, off I went to work my way through the shelves at the Bailey Bookstore to find the perfect book. A dusky orange cover on a hardback book by F. F. Bruce captured my attention: *New Testament Development of Old Testament Themes*. I liked the title. It concerned both the Old and New Testaments, and it appeared to cover material I had not yet been taught in Sunday School. I thumbed through the pages and happened upon a section that spoke about the possibility that Jesus Christ had come to earth before his incarnation. “Theophany” was the huge word used for such a theory¹. I was intrigued and bought the book.

The idea was that in multiple places in the early Old Testament we read of the “angel of the LORD” where the passage indicates the angel might actually be God. For example, in Genesis 16, Sarah’s harsh behavior causes her handmaid Hagar to run away after the handmaid became pregnant with Abram’s child. Genesis 16:7 tells us “The angel of the LORD found her by a spring.” Again in verses 9, 10, and 11, the “angel of the LORD” speaks to Hagar. Hagar ultimately “called the name of the LORD who spoke to her, ‘You are a God of seeing’” (Gen 16:13). We read of similar encounters with an “angel of the LORD” being called God causing some to believe that the angel/messenger was actually God, part of the Godhead.²

¹ From the combined Greek words for “God” – *Theo* (θεο) and “appear” – *phaneia* (φανηα) (as in “epiphany”).

² See also Gen. 22:11-18; Ex. 3:2-6; 23:20-23; Jgs. 6:11-14, 20-22; 13:21-23.

Because God the Father is an unseen spirit, and because Jesus (God the Son) takes on bodily form ultimately in the incarnation, some scholars believe that the angel himself must have been an earlier visit of God the Son to earth in human form as God's messenger. Zechariah 12:8 is frequently cited as an Old Testament text that demonstrates that God is sometimes termed the "Angel of the Lord" ("On that day the LORD will protect the inhabitants of Jerusalem...and the house of David shall be like God, like the angel of the LORD, going before them.").

This was my first introduction to the questions that might arise when one thinks about Jesus *before* the incarnation.³ Today's lesson asks the question: What does Paul teach, directly or indirectly, about the "preexistent" Christ. By "preexistent," we are focusing on the Messiah prior to his incarnation in the human body named Jesus.

Paul does not write of theophanies, but he does make some very direct and instructive statements about the Messiah prior to the incarnation. We will focus upon three of the passages that most clearly speak to this subject: Philippians 2:5ff, Colossians 1:15ff, and 1 Corinthians 8:6.

PHILIPPIANS 2

In the midst of writing his letter to the church at Philippi, Paul reached a point where he instructed the Philippians on the need for an attitude of humility. Paul urged them to "do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves" (2:3). The inspiration and model for the Philippians on this is Christ. Paul tells them to:

Have this mind in yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a

³ If I had been a better student of Church History, I would have read of Eusebius's Ecclesiastical History and confronted these theophany issues. Eusebius, writing around 300 A.D. believed any proper history of the church must begin with a discussion of who Jesus Christ was not only in history on earth but also before history. Therefore, Eusebius began with the preexistent Christ. For Eusebius, God was speaking to Christ in Genesis 1:26 when he said, "Let us make man in our image and likeness." Eusebius believed that many in the Old Testament saw the divinity of Jesus. He argued, for example, that Abraham saw Jesus under the oaks of Mamre in Genesis 18. When Abraham worshipped the visitor and said, "O Lord, judge of all the world, will you not do justice?" (Gen. 18:25), Eusebius believed that Jesus was the visitor so Abraham worshipped. Similarly, Eusebius points to Jacob's wrestling at the Jabbok, to Moses at the burning bush, and to Joshua at Jericho as further "theophanies" (a fancy theological word for appearances of God/Jesus prior to the incarnation in Mary's womb). Eusebius then answered the question, why wasn't Jesus "proclaimed long ago to all people and all nations, as now?" He asserted that "In the past humanity was not capable of grasping the teaching of Christ in all its wisdom and virtue." See the Church History lesson on Eusebius available for download at: <http://www.biblical-literacy.com/lessons/CHL/Handouts/CHL20-Eusebius.pdf>

thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross (2:5-8).

As Paul made the plea to the Philippians to imitate Christ, he turned not simply to the life of Christ lived in humility and self-sacrifice, but to a time even before the incarnation. Paul began explaining Christ's road to humility by writing of Christ in the very presence and being of God. Paul wrote here of the "preexistent Christ."

Most scholars consider this to be one of Paul's most profound passages on Christ (along with the verses that follow the excerpt above). As a result, there are more books and scholastic articles dissecting and discussing this passage than we might imagine. Not surprisingly, many of those articles find fine points of disagreement over certain issues of structure,⁴ source,⁵ context,⁶ and precise meaning of the passage.⁷ Rather than delving deeply into these points of intellectual discussion, our goal is to gather a fair understanding of the passage in its context, gleaning some understanding of Paul's thoughts on Christ pre-incarnation.

Gordon Fee points out the two main points behind this passage within its context:

1. Being God, Christ made himself nothing, in humility taking a human form, in order to redeem humanity. This was a demonstration of God's character choosing humility for the good of others over self-interest.
2. Being then in human form, Christ perfectly modeled sinless behavior by humbly submitting to the point of death in order to save the lost. Again, this is the true image of God in man by choosing humility for the good of others over self-interest.⁸

As Paul wrote this, he was departing from his personal experience of Jesus, and even the personal experience of the apostles. For neither Paul nor the other

⁴ Scholars debate whether the passage is a hymn, a poem, or simply a well-structured story.

⁵ Scholars debate whether Paul is using a hymn or poem that was already being used in the church or has written it himself.

⁶ Scholars debate whether the passage is a paradigm (model for behavior) or whether such a view reduces the true value and merit of the passage.

⁷ Is Paul referring to Christ as a second Adam here or is his language dealing with Christ in a different sense?

⁸ Gordon D. Fee, *Pauline Christology: An Exegetical-Theological Study* (Hendrickson Publishers 2007) at 373.

apostles had experienced Jesus in his preexistent state. Paul is writing about an aspect of Jesus that he understood, even though no human had observed it.

Paul's writing here does take the form of Greek verse, whether intended as a hymn or a poem. It is hard to write (or teach) on this subject without delving into the beautiful parallel structures and thoughts used by Paul (especially for one with a degree in Biblical languages!). For our purposes now, we simplify our focus here to several key Greek terms Paul used.

- ***“though he was in the form of God”*** (verse 6a)

The English Standard Bible translates this phrase as given above. The New International Version gives it as, “being in very nature God.” In the New King James version, we read, “being in the form of God” while the New American Standard translation gives us, “He existed in the form of God.” Why do these wonderful translations give us such nuanced differences in translating this passage? First, they are struggling to convey the *time element* of Paul's point. Each one, in its own way, manages to convey the generally accepted belief that Paul is writing of the condition of Christ prior to his incarnation. They are similarly doing so in a way that shows that Christ had *always* existed in that form (the effect of the Greek participle!).

The translations are also attempting to give the best meaning to the Greek word Paul is using that is translated “form” or “nature.” This word is *morphe* (μορφη). It occurs nowhere else in the New Testament, even though it has a thorough usage in other Greek of the period. Paul uses it twice here, first as a reference to Jesus in the *morphe* of God and then of Jesus taking the *morphe* of a servant (verse 7). What does the word mean?

When we think of the English “form,” we often think of something's shape in the sense of what it looks like, its external appearance. The Greek word conveys something different than that and translators struggle to put into one English word the Greek idea of *morphe*. The Greek idea behind *morphe* are the “characteristics and qualities essential”⁹ to whatever is referenced. It is the essence of a matter that gives the matter its true meaning.

As Paul writes of Jesus in the “form” of God, Paul is not simply suggesting that Jesus looked like God. Paul is placing Jesus as the actual essence, the true identified God. Similarly in verse 7, Paul will note that God (Jesus) truly became a servant, being made in the likeness of man.

- ***“did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped”*** (verse 6b)

⁹ Fee at 378.

Here, Paul sets out two matters we must note. First, as Paul writes of Jesus not grasping “equality with God,” we see another phrase that confirms our interpretation of the earlier phrasing about Jesus in the “form” of God. Second, Paul says this equality with God was not something Jesus considered worth grasping.

The word translated “grasped” has also given translators a pause in an effort to give it its best rendering. The Greek is *harpagmon* (αρπαγμα), a rare word even when looking outside the Greek New Testament. Many articles are written over the precise meaning as Paul used the word. The word is generally found in reference to something that is violently taken or snatched (think “robbery”). Paul obviously does not mean that. Most scholars opt for a translation that conveys the idea that Christ was not seeking to hold tight his grasp refusing to let go. The ESV does this by “a thing to be grasped” similar to the NIV’s “something to be grasped.” The New King James gives the translation “did not consider it robbery to be equal with God.”

Regardless of the nuance chosen in the translation, the general meaning in the context of Paul’s writing is clear. Jesus Christ was in essence and reality God, but rather than sustain that preexistent state as it was, he took the form of a servant, made in the likeness of man. How Christ did this is the next phrase we consider.

- Christ “*made himself nothing*” (verse 7a).

Again, we have phrasing by Paul that has sparked considerable debate among the translators, especially in light of the possible theological differences in just slight translational changes. In other words, how they chose to translate this phrasing can change what we believe about the nature of God!

So, the New King James translates this verse as he “made himself of no reputation.” The New American Standard says he “emptied Himself” while the NIV is the same as the ESV that he “made himself nothing.”

The issue is this: Is Paul saying that in becoming man Jesus truly and literally emptied himself of *something* becoming less in the process? If so, what did he empty himself of? Or, is this simply a strong metaphor trying to express “the divine mystery of God incarnate.”¹⁰ There is an indication from Jesus that there was some measure of “emptying” in the incarnation. In Matthew 24, we read of Jesus discussing his second coming. Jesus told his apostles that, “concerning that

¹⁰ Fee’s view set out, albeit gingerly, on page 384.

day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only” (Mt 24:36).¹¹

Whether this is what Paul had in mind, we do not know for certain. We can know, though, that Jesus had the preexistent glory synonymous with existence as God, and rather than hold onto this, Jesus left the glory behind and became, in all humility, a man. Paul finishes the lesson to the Philippians adding that while Jesus was human, he suffered the ultimate humiliation at the hands of other men dying the shameful death on the cross. But God did not remain silent, nor did Christ remain dead! God highly exalted Jesus and gave him the preeminent name and position for eternity. Christ exalted is restored not only to the throne of God, but restored also in victory bringing along the praise and bended knee of everyone! (Phil. 2:9-11)

COLOSSIANS 1

In Colossians, we find a passage of Paul’s concerning the Preexistent Christ that has caused a good deal of havoc in the church. Paul wrote:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross (Col. 1:15-20).

Here again, like in the previous Philippians passage, we are considering verses that most scholars consider a hymn used by Paul to illustrate his point. There is debate over whether Paul wrote the hymn, adapted a previous Christian hymn, or adapted a hymn written to the praise of Wisdom sculpting it into Paul’s Christian message. While many articles and books delve deeply into those issues, we will not consider

¹¹ In commenting on this lesson, Dr. David Fleming noted his support for this view that Christ actually emptied himself of something, “At its core, Jesus willingly “emptied himself” of the attributes of His deity, placing those attributes on reserve. It was always at His disposal, but He chose to limit/empty Himself to fulfill all righteousness as a man. Satan’s temptation of Jesus (what He could do) and His response to each (what He chose to do) is an example. Self-emptying.”

them in any depth here. Our goals in this passage center on putting it into context to understand the fair theological implications of what Paul says.

We agree with the scholars who call this a hymn in praise of Christ. The hymn does not address Christ, but rather makes Christ its subject.¹² Dunn makes the point that Paul does not use language that suggests he is directly confronting some heresy in Colossae (known as “polemic” language after the Latin word for “war”). Instead, Paul is likely dealing with some at Colossae who were devaluing Christ, as opposed to attacking him. It is within that context of some considering Jesus less than he is that prompts Paul to write much of Colossians, including this passage.

While the passage is worthy of multiple lessons in itself, we narrow our focus down to several parts that convey important, and often misunderstood messages.

- ***“He is the image of the invisible God”*** (1:15a)

A central idea coming from Moses and the Old Testament is that man could not see God in his glory (In Exodus 33:20, God explained to Moses, “man shall not see me and live.”). Some scholars believe this is the reason behind the theophanies discussed in the introduction to this lesson. Because God cannot be seen, in his glory, he made appearances as an angel.¹³

This fits in closely with last week’s lesson on the transcendence of God. God is removed and fully existent outside of space and time. How then can mankind know God? If we cannot see God, if God himself is invisible, how do we truly know him? The answer, in varying degrees, is in seeing an image or reflection of God.

In Romans, for instance, Paul wrote of knowing God by seeing his attributes in the created world. Jesus told his followers that they “saw” or knew the Father by “seeing” or knowing Jesus (Jn 14:7-11). In this vein, Paul writes that Jesus is the “image” of the invisible God.

Being experts at the Greek word *morphe* from studying the Philippians passage earlier, we should note that Paul does NOT use that word here. Paul is not saying that Jesus is the *essence* of God. Here, Paul uses the word *eikon* (εικων). We get the word “icon” from it.

¹² See James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and Philemon: a Commentary on the Greek Text* (Eerdmans 1996) at 86.

¹³ See Dunn at 87.

Dunn and others make a compelling case that *eikon* was used in the Greek world of Judaism (as opposed to the Judaism of Palestine) in reference to the “wisdom” of God. Dunn explains, “The importance of this in Hellenistic Judaism was that ‘image’ could thus bridge the otherwise unbridgeable gulf between the invisible world and God on the one side and the visible creation and humanity on the other.”¹⁴ In the language we studied last week, the *eikon* (whether “wisdom” or not¹⁵) serves as a way of showing God’s immanence while safeguarding his transcendence.

- “*The firstborn of all creation*” (1:15b)

This short phrase of Paul gave sustenance to one of the early heresies in the church, Arianism.¹⁶ Arianism taught that God had created Jesus, rather than Jesus existing as part of God from eternity. This Colossians passage was used as supporting the view because it references Jesus as “firstborn of creation.”

We can better grasp what Paul means by considering the Greek word he used, *prototokos* (πρωτοτοκος). The word *prototokos* can actually mean either first born in the sense of time (*i.e.*, what happened first) or in the sense of authority (*i.e.*, “first” in the sense of having precedence, like being “first” in one’s class). In the first sense, it would mean that in some sense Christ is regarded as the first one to be born among creation. In the second sense, Paul would mean that Jesus is preeminent or over all of creation.

Paul’s context certainly seems to point to the second meaning. Paul follows up the phrase by noting that it was **by** Christ that all things were created. Christ, the image of God, the bridge between the invisible God and the seen earth, is over all creation. He is the one that gave birth to creation. He is preeminent in all things.

We do not do Paul justice here if we fail to mention the parallel structure to Christ over creation with which Paul ends the passage. Christ was the divine purpose that shaped creation; he was also the divine purpose that retrieved creation from its fall. It was “through him” that God chose “to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross” (Col. 1:20). In this sense, Paul writes that Christ was the “firstborn” (again *prototokos*)

¹⁴ *Ibid.* at 88.

¹⁵ Fee goes to great lengths to attempt to disprove the assertions of Dunn and others that Paul is referencing Wisdom in his language of Colossians. See Fee at 317ff.

¹⁶ See our lessons on Arianism from our classes in Church History Literacy-lessons 22-24 at www.Biblical-Literacy.com.

“from the dead” (Col. 1:18). Here, we see Paul using the same word, “firstborn,” as indicating Christ’s preeminence over death.¹⁷

1 CORINTHIANS 8:6

In 1 Corinthians 8:6, Paul writes:

Yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

In this passage, Paul echoes forth the Jewish *Shema*¹⁸, placing Christ in the position of Yahweh God. While this passage speaks of the Preexistent Christ, it speaks of much more in equating Christ with God. Therefore, if you wish to hear about it, you need to return next week when we consider Jesus – Fully God.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. “He humbled himself” (Phil 2:8).

The story of the Preexistent Christ is a story of glory, purposely left behind to restore a relationship with created mankind. As Paul reminded the Corinthians, “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich” (2 Cor. 8:9). If we dwell on that for even five minutes, are we not driven to our knees in gratitude as well as in confession for any moment of self served living or prideful arrogance? God, have mercy on us!

2. “He is the image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15).

Jesus answers the predicament of how we can ultimately know what an invisible God looks like. Not the physical appearance of God, but the true

¹⁷ “First” could also be used in a temporal sense both here and in the passage earlier referencing Christ the firstborn of creation without doing damage to the integrity of the Trinity. Here, because Christ is “firstborn from the dead,” it does not mean Christ had no existence *before* died. He clearly did.

¹⁸ This is the passage from Deut. 6:4, Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the LORD is one.” *Shema* is the first word in the Hebrew of the passage.

essence and character of God. Look to Jesus, study his life, read the gospels, pray, and meditate, for in Jesus, we behold the image of God.

3. “He is...the firstborn of all creation...the firstborn from the dead” (Col. 1:15, 18).

Jesus reigns over the cosmos, over all created things. Jesus reigns over death. Now, as a follower of Jesus, we must ask: What do we fear? If Christ is for us, who can be against us? What can separate us from Christ’s love for us? Nothing in life; nothing in death! Jesus reigns supreme! Another question to ask, “Jesus reigns over the universe, but does he reign over our hearts and lives?”