

Bethesda Meditation. 25 February 2007. 'Jesus – humiliated and humbled'. Acts 8. 32-33; Phil. 2. 8-9.

I want focus for a few minutes upon Paul's words concerning in Phil. 2. 8, 'He humbled Himself'. I want first to distinguish this from what *men did to Him* according to Acts 8. 33, and then to contrast it with what *God* has since *done to Him* according to verse 9 of our chapter.

First, what *men* did to Him. As the Ethiopian Chancellor of the Exchequer returned home, he was reading Isaiah 53 in his Greek Old Testament.¹ As we noted in our reading, when Philip joined him, the eunuch was reading the section which speaks of Messiah's 'humiliation' – 'in His humiliation His judgement was taken away' – a reference, in context, to the gross miscarriage of justice which the Saviour suffered at His several so-called 'trials'.

Many translations render Isa. 53. 8, 'He was taken from prison' – but I note that the Hebrew word rendered 'prison' there is used to describe not only 'imprisonment' but 'oppression' – and particularly 'oppression' which takes the form of restraint and custody. And I suspect that the Hebrew text may well refer to the repeated binding of our Lord's hands when He was taken and led to each of His so-called trials² – and which therefore represented a small, but very real, part of His humiliation.

And at each of these so-called trials, with no friend or defender to plead His cause, our Lord was, according to Acts 8. 33, denied even common justice. 'In His humiliation His judgement was taken away' – His 'judgment' – a just and fair hearing and outcome – was taken away – was withheld from Him.

And how men *humiliated* Him at every stage!

What of His appearance before Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin? – when, according to Luke, the men of the council and their attendants 'mocked Him', ridiculing the popular view that He was a prophet – covering His face and demanding, 'Prophecy, who struck you'.³ Matthew fills in some of the violent details – that they spat in His face, struck Him with their clenched fists, and then slapped Him.⁴

What of His appearance before Herod? – when Herod Antipas and his soldiers 'set Him out nought' – treated Him with contempt, that is – draping around Him some bright and splendid clothing- and 'mocked Him'.

What of His appearance before Pilate? – when the soldiers of the governor, together with the whole Roman cohort, crowded around to ridicule His supposed kingly claims ... *parading* Him in a reddish-purple cloak in mock imitation of the short cloak worn by the Caesars ... *pressing* a crown of thorns down on His head to play the part of the laurel wreath which, according to Suetonius the Roman historian, was worn by the then Emperor Tiberius⁵ ... *thrusting* a thick and sturdy reed/staff into His right hand to do duty as a sceptre ... *bowing* the knees before Him in mock obeisance – their act of bogus, counterfeit worship ... *mocking* Him with their 'Hail (rejoice), King of the Jews' in sneering imitation of the official salute 'Avé, Imperator' ('Hail, Emperor') addressed to Caesar ... and *spitting* at Him – their filthy spittle substituting for the kiss of homage and allegiance given to the Emperor.

Oh, yes, my Lord knew what it was to be treated like scum. He knew all about suffering *humiliation* at the hands of men. But Paul's point in Philippians 2 is different. Here it is not that our Lord was *humiliated by others* but that He *humbled Himself!* By men *disgraced*, but by Self *abased*. For *this* was His own deliberate act.

That is, having, according to verse 7, made Himself nothing – having stripped Himself of the outward display of His splendour and majesty – having become man ... He then humbled Himself – and He did this, Paul says, in 'becoming obedient' – obedient to God, of course.

For, as God's willing 'bondservant', v. 7, the Lord Jesus took the lowly – the 'humble' – place before God – rendering Him glad obedience from Bethlehem to Golgotha – bowing Himself under God's yoke – fulfilling all His will – obeying His every command. As you know, it is John who, in his gospel, draws particular attention to our Lord's constant submission to His Father's commands ... 'The Father which sent Me, *He gave me a commandment*, what I should say, and what I should speak'⁶ ... 'If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept *My Father's commandments* and abide in His love' ... 'the ruler of this world is coming, and he has nothing in Me (he has no legal claim on Me). But that the world may know that I love the Father, and as *the Father gave Me commandment*, so I do' ... and yet again, 'I lay down my life, that I might take it again ... *This commandment* have I received of my Father'. Yes, one of the Father's commandments was that He, the Lord Jesus, should lay down His life.

And our Lord's obedience to His Father *knew no bounds or reserve*. And so, Paul says, the Saviour became 'obedient to the point of death'. As one Bible version paraphrases it, 'He walked the path of obedience *all the way to death* – and His was no common or ordinary death, but 'death on a cross' – the painful, shameful death of a guilty and condemned bondservant – when the One who had 'made *Himself* nothing', v. 7, and 'humbled *Himself*', v. 8, 'offered *Himself*' without spot ('unblemished') to God, Heb. 9. 14, and, in *unreserved* love for us, 'gave *Himself* for us', Gal. 2. 20.

Think for a moment of the words of Psalm 113. 5-6; 'Who is like the Lord our God, who dwells on high, who *humbles* Himself to behold the things that are in the heavens and in the earth?' – that, on account of the infinite distance which exists between the transcendent Lord and His creation⁷, it is an act of enormous condescension for

Him even to notice His creation at all. I cannot help wondering what that psalmist would have made of Paul's words here – that the One on equality with God, not only stooped to 'behold' us, but actually stooped to take our nature – and then, in that nature, further 'humbled' Himself in obedience to His Father's will – even to the extent of suffering death on a cross!

Make no mistake, had our Lord not first *humbled* Himself in obedience to the will and command of God, He would never have been *humiliated* by men.

And God responded to our Lord's self-humbling, not only by 'exalting' Him, but, as Paul insists, by '*highly* exalting Him' – by 'super-exalting Him – by '*hyper-exalting* Him', as the word is⁸ – by exalting Him to the very summit – to the highest pinnacle.

And I note that the word '*Him*' in verse 9 is emphatic.⁹ For Paul is stressing that God has elevated '*Him*', who '*made Himself* of no account, v. 6 – has elevated '*Him*', who '*humbled himself*', v. 8 ... that God has elevated Him, who descended to *the lowest depth* in humble obedience to His (God's) will, to *the loftiest height*¹⁰ – unrivalled now in glory as once He was in suffering. And I note again that the word translated 'highly exalted' here is used in the Greek Old Testament in Psalm 37. 35; 'I saw', says David, 'the ungodly *highly exalting himself*'. And the apostle uses a synonym in 2 Thessalonians 2. 4 to describe 'the man of sin ... the son of perdition, who opposes and *highly exalts himself above* all that is called God or that is worshipped'. The contrast could hardly be more striking. The ungodly man and the man of sin 'highly exalt' *themselves*. But the Lord Jesus didn't highly exalt *Himself* – God did that for Him!

And so, as we take the bread and cup this morning, let us remember that, though our Lord Jesus certainly *did not* 'exalt Himself', He most certainly *did* '*humble* Himself' – walking 'the path of obedience *all the way* to death' – and let us praise Him that neither *His humble obedience to His Father* nor *His love for us* knew any reserve.

Footnotes

¹ Possibly recently purchased at Jerusalem. Interestingly, the Greek Old testament had been translated in Egypt, which was geographically adjacent to Ethiopia and with which Ethiopia had much contact; see, for example, Isa. 20. 4.

² John 18. 12; Matt. 27. 2.

³ Luke 22. 63,

⁴ Matthew 26. 57.

⁵ See too TDNT, vol. VII, pages 619 etc.

⁶ There is great emphasis in John's gospel on the fact that the Lord's words and works were not His. Disclaim done on own authority: 'I can of Myself do nothing. As I hear, I judge', 5. 30; 'I have many things to say and to judge concerning you, but He who sent Me is true; and I speak to the world those things which I heard from Him', 8. 26; 'I do nothing of Myself; but as My Father taught Me, I speak these things', 8. 28; 'Jesus answered them and said, "My doctrine is not Mine, but His who sent Me', 7. 16; 'He who does not love Me does not keep My words; and the word which you hear is not Mine but the Father's who sent Me', 14. 24; 'Then Jesus cried out, as He taught in the temple, saying, "You both know Me, and you know where I am from; and I have not come of Myself, but He who sent Me is true, whom you do not know', 7. 28; 'Then answered Jesus and said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, The Son can do nothing of himself, but what he seeth the Father do: for what things soever he doeth, these also doeth the Son likewise', 5. 19.

⁷ I note that 'Michael' means, 'Who (is) like God'. Seemingly, *the* archangel (Jude 9) is occupied with the immeasurable distance between himself and God Most High.

⁸ 'Highly exalted' is not comparative but superlative.

⁹ By position.

¹⁰ And the vast arc described by our Lord in descending from His position in heaven's glory and splendour down to His ignominious death on a cross sweeps up again to heaven and to the restoration of the glory which He had enjoyed with the Father before creation, John 17. 5. Note the Lord's own summary in John 16. 28.