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THY WILL BE DONE – A SCRIPTURAL MEDITATION ON CHRIST’S OBEDIENCE

By David Streater

One of the most beautiful passages in Scripture concerning the Lord Jesus Christ is written by the apostle Paul in his letter to the Philippians, Chapter 2, verses 5-9. It is essentially a statement concerning the incarnation and its purpose, yet not written as such. Rather, it is set out as an example to the Christian believer of Christ’s unselfish life which is to be followed. The teaching concerning the Person of Christ, appears at first sight, to be incidental to the main thrust of the passage.

Warfield wrote:

[Paul] is exhorting his readers to unselfishness, such unselfishness as esteems others better than ourselves and looks not only on our own things but also those of others . . . For, says Paul, though we all know, in His intrinsic nature He was nothing other than God, yet He did not. . . look greedily on His condition of equality with God, but made no account of Himself (*emptied Himself*), taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of man, humbled himself, becoming obedient up to death itself, and that the death of the cross. Warfield: *Person and Work of Christ* pp. 38-39.

There is in that statement an outline of the story of Christ’s life, beginning in the eternal pre-existent state of equality with God which was voluntarily laid aside in the incarnation, and the life of a human servant substituted for the former state of glory. And that example is to be followed. Doctrine and ethics flow together in the New Testament and what God has joined together in his revelation, no man may put asunder.

There are two interlocking phrases in Paul’s statement which we wish to examine. The first phrase is ‘emptied Himself’ and which has given rise to no little controversy as to its precise meaning. The second phrase is ‘obedient up to death’ and we hope to demonstrate the true meaning of the first from consideration of the second.

The Greek verb underlying the English translation is *keno-o*. It means to empty and has given its name to the *kenosis* theory propounded in the nineteenth century that Christ abandoned His divine attributes, such as omniscience, in order to explain His genuinely human intellectual life and its development.

Martin rightly states:

The words . . . in the Pauline context say nothing about the abandonment of the divine attributes . . . [they are] to be interpreted in the light of the words which immediately follow . . . His taking of the servant’s form involved the necessary limitation of His glory that He might be born ‘in the likeness of men’. Martin: Art. N.B.D. p. 689.

The self-emptying began in the presence of the Father with the voluntary renunciation of the glory which was the Eternal Son’s by right in order to assume the nature of man. That voluntary renunciation led by the path of obedience to the death of the Cross. It is what is involved in that obedience which confirms the nature of the self emptying and sheds light on the sacrifice of Calvary. There is no doubt that obedience forms part of Christ’s atoning work, but that work did not commence in the passion and death of Holy Week. It was assumed as part of Christ’s humiliation ‘in the form of a servant’ and in the likeness of man’. The very term ‘Servant’ sends us back to the

prophet Isaiah and the great Servant passages where obedience is the keynote as the Servant of the Lord. (Isa. 42. 1 *et seq.*, 49.6) which leads to the atoning death (53.6 and 11-12). As Christ is everywhere represented as sinless, the atoning death based on the fulness of obedience is seen to be substitutionary in its God-given purpose. (*cf.* 2 Cor. 5.21 and Rom. 10. 1-4).

It was in his truly human nature that Christ was obedient to the Will of the Father, and for a Jew of the first century that meant obedience to the Law (Torah), not only in the moral, but also the ceremonial sphere. (Psalm 40.8 and Heb. 10.5-7).

Nor was it just in the external acts that the fulfilment of the Law consisted, but in the true motivation of love from the heart for God and love for His neighbour as Himself in which the direction of his mind and the purpose of His human will was set continually and without fail. The compass point of Christ's obedience always pointed to the magnetic north of the Father's will.

While Christ's obedience was perfect at all times, this should not deny the fact of His progression. Because human nature often fails, we have to learn by our mistakes, errors and sins and therefore we progress by fits and starts. But in the case of Jesus, his progression was not marred by falling short of God's standards. The progression was an all-round expansion. We read of Him in the Temple as an adolescent with the doctors of the Law and Luke comments that he, 'increased in wisdom and stature and in favour with God and man.' (Luke 2.52).

This progression by Christ in His obedience was met by the increasing demands that were made upon Him by the emerging circumstances of His life and ministry. And the demands were no doubt radically increased as He submitted to the baptism of John, ' . . . to fulfil all righteousness.' (Matt. 4. 14-15). The increasing knowledge of His Father's will and the wisdom necessary to apply that knowledge became His as He, ' . . . learned obedience from the things that He suffered.' (Heb. 5.8).

The growth of the Lord Jesus Christ in obedience was not in spite of His sufferings but because of them. His obedience was hammered out on the anvil of trials, temptations and troubles. In meeting these sufferings through the whole course of His life, and with their increasing intensity, He met the demands made upon Him as a man by continuing prayer and the study of the Old Testament writings as he willingly set out for Jerusalem to meet the final demands to be made upon Him in the death of the Cross.

For the death of the Cross was the final act of obedience, and it was not just the physical horror of crucifixion that filled Him with alarm as he increasingly understood the price that was to be paid for the salvation of others. There was the awareness of the coming separation from the love of the Father as Christ prepared to bear the righteous wrath of a Holy God for the sins of many in His own sinless body on the tree.

The prayers of Gethsemane are real prayers and they mean what they say. (Matt. 26.29 and Mark 14. 33). But gradually, the prayers, filled with horror and alarm, yet with a resignation to the Father's will, give way to a ready and confident obedience as He is spiritually strengthened for the coming ordeal of suffering and dereliction. The prayer of Matt. 26.42, 'O my Father, if this cup may not pass from me except I drink it, Thy will be done' is followed by the confidence of John 18. 11, ' . . . the cup which my Father has given me, shall I not drink it?' John Murray writes:

The Father, indeed, gave the cup: gave it, as it were, into our Lord's hand. But He must drink it . . . to its dregs. Any attempt to deny or tone down the reality of His recoil and revulsion betrays our failure to appreciate the bitterness of the cup and the intensity of His commitment to the Father's will. It was the cup of damnation voluntarily taken, vicariously borne, and finished in his agony. Murray: *Collected Writings* Vol. 2 p. 155.

The emptying of Christ by laying aside His eternal glory must be seen as a gracious and voluntary act of love for His people with a purpose. That purpose was to render perfect obedience to the will of the Father which would satisfy all the demands of Holy and Loving Justice. It is in the fulfilment of the obedience of faith that the Lord is crucified as the Lamb of God without spot or blemish to obtain salvation for those that would trust Him. Toplady expresses the truth in his hymn:

The terrors of law and of God
With me can have nothing to do,
My Saviour's obedience and blood
Hide all my transgressions from view.

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