

The Condescension of God and Sundry Other Thoughts

It's everywhere in Scripture yet we miss it. In a few places, such as Philippians 2, it becomes more overt, yet we still miss it. The word doesn't appear in Scripture, nor in our theology texts, nor in our preaching and teaching. Yet it's the most stupendous and wonderful thing that should thrill us continually. I'm referring to the great condescension of the ineffably majestic, infinitely holy Creator God that He would deign to care about finite (and offensive) human creatures. Who are we that the God who made life, light, space, matter, time, the cosmos, everything that exists, should love us and seek our love in return? God condescends to love His creatures, to watch over them, to provide for them, to reveal Himself to them, even to grant their access to Him. He gave us Scripture in great condescension so we could know Him. He condescends to protect us and guide us when we don't deserve it. More amazing: This infinitely vast and great Being condescends to listen to us when we pray, and more astounding, He answers us! Why should the infinite God of the universe, who knows each star in the heavens, who knows everything that happens, that will happen, that could happen, who is independent and has no needs that can be satisfied by anything or anyone outside of Himself, stoop so low as to willingly be involved in our petty lives? Something even greater to marvel at is this, Why would so great a Being as God is not annihilate us because of the ugliness of our rebellion and willful indifference to Him? Instead, He enters finitude, enters humanity, enters into the world He made – as if that is even possible! – in order to bring us to a higher state of existence capable of fellowshiping with Himself forever. That is too exalted, too lofty, too superlative a thought for my simple mind to understand. God is glorious. Oh, to know Him more! And the Son, with whom we can relate, is the greatest reality and the greatest Person we can know. And love. And to be like Him!

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War is worship! We don't think of it that way, but it is. It's the worship of demons. It's not even merely the pursuit of power or fame or glory or heroism, nor the gain of some political movement. In essence it's the idolatrous sacrifice of humans on a battlefield. It's the religious worship of demons and wicked gods. Our seeking a life of progress and prosperity and success and power will necessarily become a nightmare. That's because war is the inevitable result of such a worldview. The demons of war always take over such nations. In ancient times, it was more explicit than it is in modern times: The nation that won a war had a more powerful god than the nation that lost. Warfare then was explicitly a religious venture. We today think we're more advanced and don't believe in demons or gods. Baloney! They're there and we worship them, if unwittingly. Why else do we constantly prepare for war and go to war? Nationalism and empire-building are idolatrous. It's the spirit of Babylon still being expressed even in these modern times. Our pursuit of power, whether military or economic or cultural or political, is ultimately a religious belief. We disguise our idolatry, but the terms and language we use reveal that war is worship. Thus we say that war involves "loyalty," "dedication," "the ultimate sacrifice," and "sacred obligation." These religious terms are used to justify killing. War is wickedness. There is no justification for war.

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We don't really grasp how hostile modern American society is to Christianity. There's no overt persecution of Christians (or Jews), yet. Nevertheless, our culture is deeply inimical to Christianity. Consider the following: Evolution is pushed onto everyone except the few who refuse to compromise. Evolution clearly means there's no accountability to any God. (Theistic evolutionists in the churches and bible colleges unwittingly give atheists the confirmation they need that they're correct.) The sexual revolution that began in the 60's with the birth control pill has totally transformed America with the view that we're here to pursue pleasure without concern for the Puritanical views of any God. Who wants to become a Christian and forego the pleasures of free sexual expression? How dare the Church interfere with our pursuit of pleasure by insisting it's sin? Conscience is no longer formed by exposure to biblical values. We're a nation without a conscience! Society's deliberate embrace of other religions teaches that no religion is truer than any other. The Bible's truths cannot possibly be universally valid! Sin is openly mocked. The Bible is held to be just another religious book among many others. Christians who evangelize are "arrogant" if not evil, spewing what is now called "hate speech" because it causes unbelievers to feel bad, and it seeks power over others. Marxism, technology and science are essentially ideologies (better, idolatries) that demand the minds and souls of college students. Government schools

openly teach all manner of pagan ideals to our children, and social media totally control the minds of our adolescents. We have contempt for Sundays; it's the best day of the week for shopping or for recreation. The next generation of Americans is not merely lost. It's hostile to the very existence of God.

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Theologians in academic circles today are abandoning the Church's traditional penal substitutionary view of the atonement. Their problem is, they can't accept that God would punish an innocent Son for the wrongs done by others. They reject the concept of "retributive" justice. They don't have another theory of the atonement, they just don't like what the Church has been holding to for centuries. And they don't base their ideas on Scripture, but on personal feelings. The modern American Church is deeply compromised if it fails to instill godly humility in those who profess to follow Jesus. The modern American Church also fails to teach a theology of good works. We are allowed to retreat or escape into a bubble of self and turn our backs on a world of need. The very concept of fruit-bearing, of living the righteous demands of the Law, seems to be forgotten if not now anathema. We don't practice discipleship in our churches because no one even seems able to disciple anyone.

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I find the patriotic zeal in our evangelical churches appalling. "America is great!" But is it? A nation is the aggregate of its people. So. Are its people really great? Don't we get it? We're all enslaved by a sin nature. And that sin nature is able to erupt in all manner of ghastly behavior at any moment. In anyone. It happened in Nazi Germany. It happened in Stalinist Russia. It happened in Maoist China. And elsewhere, everywhere. All thru history. Right now, most Americans are controlled by a conscience and by a tradition of civility. But that's tenuous. Dostoevsky understood by seeing it happen that we're all inhibited or intimidated by habits. But if some ideology grips us, we will jettison all inhibitions and exhibit the violence, cruelty and hatred we're all capable of. After all, "the end justifies the means," and the "end" (goal, purpose) of any ideology is always in control. If a sense of virtue is added to the cause, cruelty and even torture becomes a good. We think ourselves compassionate, principled, enlightened and sophisticated people. We're only that in our imagination. We're the very same people as God described in Genesis 6:5. The very people who today are cheering the Muslim "resistance" against Israel, indeed, the very people among us who accuse Christians of wicked microaggressiveness, would, if given the opportunity, murder us. And be proud for having done it.

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We don't realize how deadly Groupthink is. Yes, God made us to be social creatures. But when we identify closely with the group we're in and express the values of the group, we're in danger of being disobedient to God. That's because in the first two parables of Matthew 13, Jesus states that there will be a mixture of true and false followers in our midst. So we must exercise great discernment and ignore what others do or don't do and instead follow the Word. The imputation to us of Christ's righteousness doesn't mean we don't have to pursue righteousness in our own lives. In the same way, Christ's obedience needs to be formed in us. His righteousness and His obedience, His humility as well, and His purposefulness, and His selfless love, indeed His very character, needs to be formed in us. In our churches, we're surrounded by professing, nominal Christians, but we mustn't understand what our lives are to be like by imitating them. If we have Christ's life, if we're united to Him, if we're indwelt by His Spirit, we will conform our lives to His Word, to His Person. And so we continue Christ's incarnational mission in this evil age we inhabit. But wait! Doesn't our future glorification mean transformation in this life is optional? No. Our transformation in this existence is proleptic of the glorious new era of righteousness and holiness that is coming. God's irruption is on-going, *in us*. We demonstrate by our changed persons and our works the truth of a living Christ, the truth of new life, the truth of our glorious Father's love. Our lives are the evidence of the invisible salvation that's on offer to a sinful world. That should be our passion and burden.

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What does election mean? Most people suppose it means that God shows favoritism to certain people. In my understanding, the concept of election is deep and worthy of some thought. To me, election means privilege that also

entails responsibility. The two are inseparable. And mission derives directly out of election. In Genesis 3:15, God ordained certain ones from among all humanity (“seed of the woman”) to overcome not just the Serpent, but all evil, all opposition to God. And suffering would necessarily result from carrying out the mission (the “heel”). The seed of the woman is the ones who are elect! Thus, the Nation of Israel was elect, and it was their mission, their responsibility to overcome evil by revealing the living Creator God and His righteousness to the world of Gentile nations. This is the background of Paul’s argumentation in Romans 9-11. (Paul’s use of the word election refers there NOT to individual or personal election, but to national election: Israel, not Edom.) Election means the privilege and responsibility of serving God in the way He has revealed and empowered. The “seed” is singular, because it’s a collective, a corporate unity. The Son is the ultimate One who fulfills the Servant role, but we who are united to Christ, who identify with Him, are included in that corporate unity. Thus we’re also God’s servants; we’re elect. And we defeat Satan and evil by our fulfilling Christ’s Word, His commission to His followers. And in carrying out that mission, yes, we may suffer. But what privileges we have, all the blessings of salvation. Election is God’s means of dealing with sin and evil in His creation by the choice of certain ones who serve Him with special, revealed responsibilities and with unique privileges. The privileges include forgiveness of sins, knowing God, access to the Father, and future glory. The responsibilities include living for others and bearing witness of the great reality of Christ – whatever personal loss or sacrifice might be entailed.

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The Book of Revelation is difficult. We’ve tried to discuss it again and again in these lessons, with uncertain success. But it’s so important to us it deserves one more attempt. What is the connection between the two chapters on the seven churches and the rest of the book? Is the rest of the book really important for the church today or is it just a puzzling and prolonged vision there for us to guess at its meaning? Let me suggest it’s the following. First, the book has to do with justice. Justice for both the wicked and the faithful. Justice is necessary so that *shalom* can exist. This is why the book is placed at the end of the canon. So if we suffer loss in our service to Christ in this life, we are assured by this magnificent vision that we’ll not only be vindicated but wonderfully blessed in the future. We can confidently go even to our death if necessary for the sake of Christ because we know that God has great blessing in store for us. Second, the letters to the seven churches say (at least) this: Do not compromise, and do not be complacent. Babylon and the Beast represented the spirit of oppression, of ungodly values, of conquest, of idolatry, of power-lust, and worse. Evidently, believers had – and can – be ensnared by the spirit of Babylon/Beast. If so, such Christians are at danger of being judged along with the ungodly who know only the evil spirits. The Kingdom we all hope to enter comes only by judgment on earth. Christians must be aware of the danger of defilement and disentangle themselves from the primeval forces of evil that were incarnated at Rome. Now. Or else also suffer the coming judgments. Allegiance to Jesus may entail dire consequences, but justice for them will prevail at the end. Self-glorification and luxuriant lifestyle characterized Rome (Babylon). We overcome by eschewing such pagan lusts and worldviews and instead willingly suffer and serve in weakness, as Jesus did. While God delays, we must be faithful to Christ and His Word. So . . . Christians living in prosperity and comfort: Beware! Such a lifestyle directly results in complacency and compromise. Don’t suppose otherwise.

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I’ve heard too many times over the years Christians say, “God hates sin but loves the sinner.” I’m not sure that those who utter this inanity have even thought about it; it’s just a slogan intended to avoid talking about judgment. But let’s think about this catchphrase. It’s true but it isn’t. It’s true in the sense that God loves all His creatures, even those He justly casts into hell. God’s giving guilty sinners what they deserve doesn’t preclude His loving them. So yes, God loves sinners. But that appallingly misleads those to whom this slogan is directed. No one can be content and secure that God’s love (and therefore one’s eternal destiny) results in blessedness in heaven in spite of the sins they’ve committed that God hates. To suggest this by mouthing this slogan is deceitful and wicked. So it’s not true in that it certainly implies that God’s love trumps sin, that God’s love for humanity leads Him to ignore wrong-doing. If it were true, the Son need not have come to earth to be humiliated and suffer so horribly. The Gospel is exactly this, that God hates sin so much that in perfect justice sinners must be punished, and the punishment for offending an infinitely holy God is eternal separation from God, from blessing. It’s eternal death. But in transcendent love for the sinner, God took that punishment on Himself in the Person of the Son, so that His justice is upheld. If we take responsibility for our offenses by acknowledging

our sinfulness and our deserving of eternal punishment, and receive the offer of rescue from that punishment by believing in the resurrected, living Son, we are saved from it. More could be said, but anything less than this is deceitful. We mustn't avoid the very real matter of justice. God's love is not His primary or fundamental attribute, as some claim (and many wish). We dare not stress one attribute above the others because it's the one we like best.

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The Western world right now is in the throes of a terrible crisis. It's a crisis of knowing what's true. Epistemology has been abandoned, and so anything goes. Marxism, systemic racism, victimology, personal experiences, personal beliefs, personal identities, things we're passionate about, all these and more are claimed to be "true." In truth, everything secular is a lie. The current hate and outrage in society is because modern people easily believe lies. So, transgenderism is a lie. God chooses what our sex will be, just as He chooses what life circumstances will be ours. He chooses what gifts and faculties we'll have, where and when we'll live, etc. Thus "equity" (an enforced equality of all persons) is a lie, as is "inclusivism" (tolerance of wickedness). Islam, Hinduism, and other religions are a lie. Allah is certainly not the God of the Bible. Evolution is a lie. That democracy is the best form of government is a lie. "Rugged individualism" is a lie. So is the notion, "the real me inside me." "Make America great" is a lie. Everything secular is a lie! And lies are an expression of evil. Because God created an intelligible world, it is possible to know truth. Sin makes it difficult, but it can be done. Truth can't be known apart from Christ however. If we're a follower of Christ, let's be focused on the reason for which God called us, and ignore the countless lies that swirl around us. We need to do our assigned work of delivering people from this world of lies and evil. That way we exalt Christ, we proclaim truth, and we show that we're on the side of good.

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The Westminster Confession says that the purpose of life is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. OK. But I suggest that there's something deeper, and that is to express in this physical world the image of the invisible God. We *are* God's image, we don't have it. We're here to reflect God's character, that is, His Person, and to carry out His purposes. Why else is the "image of God" right there in the narrative of God making us? It's His creational intent. Everything in the Bible in one way or another has to do with our expressing God's image. In fact, we could say that the grand story of the Bible is the drama between Creator and humanity with respect to the image. The entire Old Testament is a story of longing for the image to be restored. Redemption is precisely because we're His image. Christ is the perfect likeness of God. So if we're in Christ, the image is restored. It will be complete in the future, but now, thru sanctification we express the image albeit imperfectly. This is why obedience to the Word is so critical; Christ, the perfect likeness of God, is to be formed in us. The image also creates responsibility: We mirror our Creator's character, or Christ's character. So we do righteousness, shun evil, show love, be humble, etc. We recognize that others also bear that image, so we treat them and relate to them accordingly. The goal of all history, of all creation, could be that God's glory is fully revealed in His goodness, love, and blessing, toward His image.

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Peter begins his first Letter with an astounding statement. He writes that we've been chosen ". . . for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood" (1:2c). For several reasons, a better translation of that first phrase would be, "by the obedience of Jesus Christ." Peter is referring to Exodus 24:3-8 where obedience comes first, then the sprinkling of blood. And it also refers to Christ's continuing work, now, at the Father's right hand on our behalf. His obedience maintains for us all that He accomplished in His humiliation and exaltation. What however does the "sprinkling by his blood" mean? There are only two places in the Pentateuch where people are sprinkled with blood, Exodus 24 and later the consecration of the priests. In Exodus 24, the people of Israel were being sprinkled with blood because they were to serve God as priests. *All* the Israelites were to serve God as priests. Peter is therefore saying that we, followers of Christ, are being sprinkled with Christ's blood to consecrate us so that we too serve as priests. Jesus is our great High Priest, and we are also priests. Although Israel failed, we now are to serve in the role that was originally intended for them, priestly service to God, in God's presence. Thus in Peter's Chapter 2, he refers to us a holy priesthood (v. 5b), as a royal priesthood (v. 9a), and as God's servants (v. 16c). We stand before God mediating the needs of people to God. What an awesome calling we have! May we faithfully fulfill all that God expects of us.