



Fire and Ice Sermon Series

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Christ Humbled Himself

by Samuel Willard

Question 27: Wherein did Christ's Humiliation consist?

Answer: Christ's Humiliation consisted in his being born, and that in a low condition, made under the Law, undergoing the miseries of this life, the wrath of God, and the cursed death of the Cross, in being buried, and continuing under the power of Death for a time.

[This is the second in a series of 12 sermons on this question from the Westminster Shorter Catechism.]

We have taken an account of the nature of Christ's Humiliation, and it now follows that we will examine it in *several examples*. We will observe how he carried on the work of Redemption, which was the very purpose for his undertaking this state. We must keep it in mind as we study this subject that Christ's Humiliation properly consisted in his being *subject to the law for us*, so that in our place he might both merit and satisfy the requirements of the Law. In this way our whole salvation was to be obtained by his active and passive obedience, and our whole hope for eternal life depends on this: He obeyed in our place. We are therefore to remember in every passage that follows, the particulars of which are but summarily pointed at in the Answer before us. In order to examine these things in a systematic fashion, we will reduce them to their proper heads.

Christ humbled himself both in his life and his death. In the former of these his active obedience, and in the latter his passive obedience did more prominently appear; though both of them worked in each. He did what the Law required, that in so doing he might gain for us eternal life; he suffered and died that he might free us from eternal death.

1. *We are to begin at his life*, for he both lived for us as well as died for us. His whole life as well as his death was on our account. In the consideration of his life, we are to observe his entrance into the world, and his sojourn in it. He had to come into the world, because here were they who were to be redeemed by him, and here was that work to be done, which must save them. Because this work could not be accomplished in a moment, but required time to be completed, he was required to tarry here a while and dwell among men for such a period as was necessary for its performance. This is why he is said to "tabernacle among us," John 1:14. He sojourned here, as one absent from his home, until he had fulfilled the business his Father sent him here to do.

Christ Humbled Himself in His Birth

In his entrance into the world, there are two things to note: his *conception* and his *birth*, which are both mentioned in our [Apostles'] Creed; and examining them both is helpful to establish our faith in him as our Redeemer. I will pass directly to the consideration of his Birth, which is the first thing before us in the Catechism: *His being born, and that in a low condition, being made under the Law.*

Concerning his being made under the Law, we have already observed it in the general account of his Humiliation, but it is important to remember that he was not only made under the Law as Adam was before his fall. If that were the case, Christ would have only owed his active obedience to the Law. However Christ was made under the Law as if he were a fallen man, upon whom the curse had fallen, so that he was also obliged to pay a passive obedience to it. On this account he is said to be "made a curse for us," Gal. 3:12.

In fact the state in which he was born shows the depth of his Humiliation. Our Catechism seems to make his birth one part of his Humiliation, considered in itself, and his *low condition* that accompanied it an adjunct, or further degree of humiliation. We should consider Christ as humbled in that he would not only become a man, as Adam was before his fall, but he would be one of our stock, lineage, and kindred: one of us who had become base, ignoble, and vile. How remarkable for Heb. 2:14 to say, "Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared in the same, that through death he might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil." The same flesh and blood as us, he would be a brother of such worms, such corruption as we are, in order that the right of Redemption might belong to him. That is why the Scripture is emphatic in verse 16. It does not say, "the nature of man," but rather "the seed of Abraham."

The Humiliation of the birth of Christ consists mainly in its low estate. There were indeed notable flashes of his glory attending his birth, by which God testified that he was the Messiah. There was the glorious star that appeared around the time of his birth, which appeared as a signal to the world that the Sun of Righteousness was about to rise. The coming of the wise men from the East upon the invitation of the star to visit, worship, and homage to him was another, Matt 2. Also there was the stately appearance of a heavenly host of angels to a company of poor shepherds, proclaiming as heralds his birth and singing a glorious anthem upon it, Luke 2. But his birth itself was accompanied with an awe-inspiring humility, as he abased himself through it. He was born for us, and so he was born in a condition appropriate to our need. He showed in his birth what sin had made us. There are a few things we may take notice of as properly belonging to his Humiliation:

1. *He was born under a sentence of condemnation.* As soon as he had put on our nature, he stood under the doom of the Law. He was born to die, and was adjudged by it as soon as he was Man. We are all born children of wrath in our natural state, and he put himself in our place, and therefore came to *fulfil the Law*, Matt 5:17, and this is the main article of it. He would never have been born, if it was not intended to be made a sacrifice: God prepared him a body for this, Heb. 12:5. Justice took hold on him, as soon as he came into the world, and did not discharge him until it had taken its satisfaction of him: and he lived in view of it all his days, and spoke of it frequently.

2. *He was born of a sinful woman.* It was a particular condescension of the Son of God, to be born of any of Adam's sinful children. True honour in God's account consists in holiness, and sin is to Him the vilest disgrace. Original sin in Christ's mother had made her more contemptible and ignoble than anything else could; had she been an empress, it would yet have been to Christ an abasing of himself to derive his humanity from her. That a clean thing should come out of an unclean is strange; for though she was sanctified by grace, nevertheless she had not attained spotless perfection, but still had the stain and pollution of sin on her. As it is a disgrace to have a traitor as one's father, so it is no less to have a sinner for one's mother. Thus Christ, though without sin, would be intimately related to sinners, for whose sake he came into the world.

3. *Joseph and Mary were very poor and wretched.* Mary was his true mother, as really as any other mother is the mother of her children. And Joseph, though not really his father, was so in the esteem of men and was commonly accepted so; and the honour or contempt of his father's condition reflected on him. They were

indeed descendants of King David, but they were reduced to a inferior condition, little to be regarded among rich and wealthy neighbours. Joseph was a carpenter, a laborious calling which was not very profitable. Later this would be an excuse for other to speak so contemptuously of him, Mark 6:3, "Is this not the carpenter, the Son of Mary, and brother of James, Joses, Judas, and Simon? And are not His sisters here with us? And they were offended at Him." And why was this? Because sin has robbed us of our honour, and made us ignominious. We forfeited our right to all things, and reduced ourselves to poverty.

3. *The time of his birth is very important.* There was a time when the nation enjoyed its liberty, and had its sway; but he was not born then, but when the nation was in slavery to the Roman Empire. He was born at the time when, in witness of his slavery, there was a proclamation of a tax, and everyone was required to appear to his city to submit, Luke 2. And at that very time, while this striking picture of slavery was being painted, he must be born into the world. Therefore even in the circumstances of his birth, he not only took on himself the form of a man, but the *form of a servant*, Phil 2:7. And why? Because we now by sin have become slaves, and brought under the most cruel bondage.

5. *The place of his birth and circumstances of it do further set forth the low condition of it.* We have it described in Luke 2:7 "And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn." When we hear the report of the Great King of the World, the Supreme Potentate, that he is to be born, we would picture the greatest preparations imaginable to be made for the occasion. The most stately palace, the most sumptuous chamber, the most splendid furniture, the most royal attendants and magnificent provision might in some measure be appropriate for his importance. But alas! How far is it from this? Instead of a palace, he is content with a stable; for noble attendants, he is born among the beasts; for costly apparel, either some rags obtained by charity, or whatever his poor parents could afford. Instead of a costly cradle richly prepared, he had a sorry manger, with some hay for a pillow. The best attendants at this solemn occasion was a company of poor folks, who had better places to lodge than Joseph's. Thus he came silently into the world; no bells rang, no bonfires made, no proclamations issued to invite the world to come and pay homage to their prince. This was because we had turned ourselves out of all, and forfeited our right to every blessing.

6. *The reason of his being born in such a place add to this consideration.* "Because there was no room for them in the inn." Alas, what Very Important

People they are in comparison, who took up all the accommodations in Bethlehem, and crowd out the Lord of Glory. Would any of them think or say, that it is good manners for us to give place to our Lord and King? No, he must be so obscure, that his mother must be thrust out, to be delivered of him who is King of Kings and Lord of Lords, while the swaggering socialites command all the accommodations. Such an inconsequential, unimportant thing did Christ make himself in his very birth. Thus he came into the world, and thus he did in our place, and for our benefit.

APPLICATION: Learn from this, how low sin had laid us, and how much Christ has loved us. Truly everything Christ suffered in his Humiliation points to this lesson. When we consider what Christ made himself, it shows us what we had made of ourselves by sin. When we reflect on the fact that he did it for us, it then declares his unspeakable kindness to us. Let me lay out a few thoughts upon this matter before us. Let me invite you all to come to the birth of your Saviour: see the King of Glory, veiled in obscurity and entering into the world under a cloud. He is the Lord of Heaven and Earth entering into his dominion, in the lowest and most obscure situation imaginable. He who made both Heaven and Earth, not accommodated with so much as a house to be born in, but to be turned out among the beasts. And why? Our sins procured it; we lost our right to all, we deserved poverty and misery, we deserved to be turned out of house and home. We were under this curse. The Son of God was a great king; he could have commanded all the world, and with a word built a stately palace, and furnished it in magnificence for himself. But how would he be our redeemer then? It was "for our sake he became poor," 2 Cor 8:9. He was "born for us," Isa. 9:6. It was for this reason he was born. Was not this condescension a disclosure of his great love? Let this stable and manger make him exceedingly precious to us.

And if we enjoy any benefits in our birth, let us acknowledge them to him. For in the day of patience, God allows this favour even to wicked men, yet God's people should understand that all their mercies flow through Christ, and ascribe them to him. Every circumstance of own birth should help to establish and increase our love to him.

Christ Humbled Himself in His Life

We now proceed to look on him during his sojourning in this world. There we may follow him, first in his *Private*, and then in his *Public* life. Christ was indeed born to be a public person, and he acted as one from his entrance into the world;

however he took upon himself a private situation of life before he entered into his public ministry, at about the age of thirty years, Luke 3:23. For,

1. The circumstances of humanity, as he assumed it, so required. Indeed he might have taken our nature with a mature body, even as our first parents were made. But because he determined to be born, he was first an infant, and not suited for public office. There is no question, that if Adam had not fallen, children would have been born as children, with all their limitations until they were grown. These limitations of sinful man, learning to speak, to walk, and so on, are therefore sinless limitations which Christ took upon himself.

2. The Law under which he was born pointed to it. "He was made under the Law," Gal. 4:4, that is to say, Moses' teaching. Now the Levites were not to enter into public service until they were thirty years old, Num. 4:3. Although Christ was not of that tribe and order, they were types of him in this respect. Therefore, despite the wonderful example he gave of his accomplishments at 12 years of age (Luke 2:46, 47) he would accommodate himself to the Law to fulfil all righteousness, as much in this as in the moral law.

3. Some of God's people are called to lead a private life, and others are called to public service. Jesus Christ went through both situations, in order to sanctify both of them to his people. Whether we are called to serve God in a private or public capacity, we are able to exercise our faith in him for the application of his holiness to us in either situation, so to render us acceptable to God.

Let us begin to look at his life as a private person. We will consider, 1. His infant state, and 2. His later life. Observe how he humbled himself for us in both.

Christ was an infant, to sanctify the infancy of his people. Holiness is required of us from the womb, but our childhood and youth are vanity. David prays, Psalm 25:7, "Do not remember the sins of my youth, nor my transgressions." This he obtained by faith in Jesus who was a child. Just as it was a humbling of himself for the Son of God to be a baby, weak, hanging on his mother's breasts and depending on her for everything, so also there were three particularly significant occasions that showed his humility as an infant. They were his circumcision, his consecration, and his flight to Egypt. In the first two he complied with the ceremonial Law, not because he had any actual defilement of sin, for he was without sin, but because the Law pointed to him as its end, Rom. 10:4, "For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes." It was also to declare that he was a sinner by imputation. If his people had not been sinners,

there would have been no need for these ceremonies: they were a "handwriting of requirements that was against [the people]" (Col 2:14). Therefore he obeyed them according to their meaning, and so acknowledged himself to be the greatest sinner by imputation.

Concerning his Circumcision

We have the account of it, Luke 2:21 "And when eight days were completed for the circumcision of the Child, His name was called JESUS, the name given by the angel before He was conceived in the womb." We see here that it was done precisely on the day required by the Law. The smallest parts of God's Law, that are little regarded by most people, are important to the soul under grace. They were so to Christ. Concerning the circumcision of Christ, let these few remarks be made,

By being circumcised, Christ implied that he was the author of that ordinance. Although it was consecrated as a rite long before he came in the flesh, even in the days of Abraham, yet Christ gave that law to Abraham. It was he that appeared to Abraham and made the covenant with him, and now he has honoured it by his own example and placing his seal of approval upon it. It shows the importance that Christ put upon the ceremonial Law, that he conformed to it.

Christ further implied that this ordinance received its power and efficacy from him. It was Christ who made this sign to be spiritually effective, when those who lived long ago used it. Any who got any good by it, received it from Christ. The power of it depended on him, and they were led to him as the substance of the ceremony, and received from him that heart circumcision which it pointed to, Col 2:11 "In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ."

Circumcision being a type of Christ, he fulfilled it by applying the law to himself. For,

1. *He thereby declared that he was a child of Abraham.* Not only was he a man, but a man of a certain lineage. The covenant of circumcision was with Abraham and his descendants, and this distinguished them from all the other peoples in the world. This was how Christ determined to have himself identified, Heb. 2:16 "For

verily he took not on him the nature of angels: but he took on him the seed of Abraham." Otherwise the Jews might have wrangled with him and found a reason to reject him, because they were to have no communion with the uncircumcised. But in this way he was initiated into the Jewish religion and the ceremonial Law, which being part of the instituted worship of God, he could not pass by, but must observe in his life. Although he did not obey this in an active sense, being an infant, yet as God he ordered it to be so in order to determine his perfect obedience.

2. *He was circumcised to display the fulfilling of the Type and Figure in him.* This was required by the way in which Christ would remove the curse of the Law. Circumcision, and the ceremonial law, was a great burden on his people, which he removed by fulfilling it, Matt. 5:17. Although his primary work was to satisfy the things spiritually signified by that law, there was yet a great curse attached to the law for those who failed any part of it, Deut 27:26. Now the people never did keep the ceremonial law exactly, as the history of those times declares, and as may be gathered from Peter's testimony, Acts 15:10, "A yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear." Therefore he was circumcised, and so bound to it, as Gal 5:3 "And I testify again to every man who becomes circumcised that he is a debtor to keep the whole law." By obeying it, he took off that curse.

3. *Circumcision represented purity, while uncircumcision represented pollution or uncleanness.* Those who were circumcised were ceremonially cleansed from original sin; it was a type of the removal of the pollution that man's nature had contracted by the Fall. Christ was circumcised to show that the original sin that his redeemed labour under was imputed to him, that he was clean from pollution, and that we are to go to him for cleansing. His circumcision is therefore declared to be effective in helping us to put off the body of sin, Col 2:11: that is to say, the circumcision which he applies to us by his Spirit in purifying us, and is represented in his being circumcised.

4. *Circumcision foreshadowed and pointed to Christ.* It was only a sign to those before his coming, which helped them to look for him and wait for him; and therefore it was not to be used after he was revealed to the world. When the day broke, and the Son of Righteousness arose, the shadows were to fly away. He gave obedience to the requirement of circumcision, satisfied it, consummated it, and put an end to it, and to all the other legal ceremonies associated with it. Now there

was no more need of types, when the Antitype was come: the sun being risen, the candles were to be put out.

5. *Circumcision was a sign of the obligation to keep the entire Law of God.* Either the whole Law was to be obeyed, or the severe penalties for disobedience were to be suffered, Acts 15:10. Therefore circumcision is called *the covenant*, Gen. 17:10. Christ received this ordinance to show that he stood obligated to pay all our debts of active and passive obedience to the Covenant of Works, to take away the guilt and pollution of our sin, and purify us in himself. The benefit of circumcision is found in obedience, Rom 2:25 "For circumcision is indeed profitable if you keep the law; but if you are a breaker of the law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision." In this way, therefore, Christ stood obligated to God to take upon himself in our place, all that the Law required. His circumcision was the pledge of what he was to do for us in his subsequent life and death.

6. *The name he was given at his circumcision implies as much.* It was a custom to give each person a name by which they were enrolled in the visible church. Now the name given to Christ was the same name declared beforehand by the angel, indeed by the appointment of God-- JESUS. This name expressed and signified his special role, and represented the very purpose of his circumcision, his being consecrated to the great Redeemer and Saviour of his people, Matt. 1:21, "And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name JESUS, for He will save His people from their sins."

APPLICATION: *What great encouragement we have to go to Christ as our Guarantee and Covenant Worker.* Consider how this sinless Saviour became obligated under the Law by so solemn a sacrament. Consider how this was not for himself, because he had no sin that needed to be cut away. Rather, it was for his people: he became our Guarantee and bound himself to satisfy the Law for all who believe in him. Look upon him now, as having in his circumcision taken all the curse upon himself, in order to remove it from us. How may this serve to strengthen our faith in him, and enable us to rest the more quietly upon him, in a confident expectation of his performing all that is needed for our salvation.

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