

The Great Descent¹

Anecdote: My bike ride and pride.

I had just witnessed two profound symptoms of that besetting sin in my own heart.

The first was the feeling of intimidation

The second symptom was even worse. It was the condescending attitude that welled up in my heart as I passed the two overweight cyclists.

Pride is a problem. We are born with Original Sin. Its source is Adam. Pride is the heart, core, and soul of this sin. It affects us constantly. Most of the time we are not aware of it's presence.

The Serpent told Eve that when she ate of the forbidden fruit she would "*be like God knowing good and evil*" (Gen 3:5).

God judged Adam by giving him up to that delusion. We have inherited Adam's sin.

Pride, the corruption at the heart of Original Sin, is the deceit that we really are god.

Pride is the root of all the other sins. (Impatience, selfishness, boasting, critical speech, adultery, murder, etc.)?

Pride is also responsible for most of our emotional pain and sorrow. As we saw in my story, pride is the root of insecurity, restlessness, and unhappiness.

¹ Given to Indian Trail Church, Oct 2018. See PowerPoint slide "The Great Descent"

Here is the Good News: **the incarnation saves proud people. It atones for the arrogance of people like you and me.**

We celebrate the Incarnation at Christmas.

A. *BACKGROUND*

The Incarnation is not a doctrine that anyone would dream up.

Many men have claimed to be God, but the incarnation is the truth that God descended to become man.

To appreciate the Incarnation, we must think in terms of God's infinity. Psalm 145:3 "God's *"greatness is unsearchable"* (Vs. 3).

In the words of the prophet, Isaiah—

"Behold, the nations are like a drop from a bucket, and are accounted as the dust on the scales; behold, he takes up the coastlands like fine dust...All the nations are as nothing before him, they are accounted by him as less than nothing and emptiness"(Isaiah 40:15–17).

But we are not emptiness. We are flesh and blood, all seven billion of us. So why did Isaiah write this? He knows we are finite, and he knows that God is infinite. He also knows that anything finite is almost meaningless compared to something infinite.

"To the degree that sin becomes bitter grace will become sweet," the Puritans used to say. To the degree that we see ourselves for who we really are, the Incarnation becomes utterly sweet, i.e. astounding. It is because we think so highly of ourselves that the Incarnation has so little impact on us.

It follows from the above that his descent was an *infinite* emptying. That is why Paul calls it "*love...that surpasses knowledge*" (Eph. 3:19).

Here is how John Flavel, one of the great seventeenth century Puritan preachers, grappled with this truth—

“For the sun to fall from its sphere and be degraded into a wandering atom; for an angel to be turned out of heaven, and be converted into a silly fly or worm, had been no such great abasement; for they were but creatures before, and so they would abide still, though in an inferior order or species of creatures. The distance betwixt the highest and lowest species of creatures is but a finite distance. The angel and the worm dwell not so far apart. But for the infinite_glorious Creator of all things, to become a creature, is a mystery exceeding all human understanding. The distance between God and the highest order of creatures is an *infinite* distance.”²

Why did Christ descend an infinite distance? He descended an *infinite* distance to atone for our sins because they were *infinitely* serious in God’s sight.

Main Point: Christ took the humbling that we deserve so that we could get the exaltation that he deserves.

B. SEVEN STEPS DOWN

**"Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped,
But emptied himself,
By 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**

² John Flavel, *Works*, Vol.1, (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1820, reprint 1968) pg. 226

To the point of death,
Even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:5–8).

1. Did Not Grasp for Equality

First, verse 6 tells us that although Jesus was equal with God, he did not grasp for equality with God. That is how I related to the fit cyclist that helped with my flat tire. In my heart I grasped for equality.

But, Jesus did the opposite.

To a rights-infatuated culture this is almost incomprehensible.

2. Jesus Emptied Himself

Verse 7 tells us that he “emptied himself.”

By taking a human nature he emptied himself of the benefits and rewards of divinity. So, for example, in his humanity

- he emptied himself of omnipotence (all power) and strengthened himself with weakness (2 Cor. 13:4).
- His human nature emptied itself of divine omniscience, which is absolute knowledge. When asked about the timing of his second coming he responded, “Concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, *nor the Son*, but the Father only.” (Matt. 24:36).
- His human nature emptied itself of immortality, and put on mortality.

3. He became his Father’s Slave

Verse 7 tells us he took a third step down. He became the Father’s slave. “Taking the form of a servant.” The word translated “servant” by the ESV is the Greek word “doulos,” the word for a common slave.

Our culture despises slavery.

But Jesus volunteered for slavery. “The Son can do nothing of his own accord,” Jesus said, “but only what he sees the Father doing” (Jn. 5:19).

And, this was not a burden. Rather, Jesus delighted to have it this way. “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work” (Jn. 4:34).

4. Became Human

Then Jesus took a fourth step down. Verse 7 tells us that he was “*born in the likeness of men.*” The Creator of all things took a part of his creation, a human body, to himself.

“In the creation,” wrote the Puritan Thomas Watson (1620-86) “man was made in God’s image; in the incarnation God was made in man’s image.”³

This was no small humbling. Why? The Infinite condescended to take to himself a finite, physical human body, not temporarily, but *forever*.

5. Humbled Himself by Obeying

Fifth, Jesus humbled himself by obeying. Like slavery, obedience is an unpopular word in the Western World. We value freedom, autonomy, independence, and self-fulfillment. “Nobody tells me what to do.”

But Jesus’ valued obedience. It was a voluntary slavery motivated by joy.

Pride motivates Disobedience.

Humility motivates Obedience.

³ Thomas Watson, *A Body of Divinity*, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1958 reprinting from the 1692 original) pg 192

Obedience says to whomever you are obeying, “*you and your plans are more important than mine.*”

6. Submitted to Death

Jesus “humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death.” God the Father asked him to die. Because Jesus had taken the posture of a slave, he unhesitatingly said, “*I delight to do your will*” (Ps. 40:8).

“What’s the big deal?” you ask. “Doesn’t everybody die?”

We die because we are sinners. That was God’s threat. “*On the day you eat of it you will die*” (Gen. 2:17). “*The wages of sin are death*” (Rom. 6:23). However, Jesus was (and is) the *sinless* Son of God. Therefore, he was born immortal.

To die, he had to agree to take our sin upon himself.

7. Death on a Cross

Last, Jesus didn’t just die. He submitted to the most horrible form of capital punishment ever invented by humanity. He submitted to death on a cross.

Jesus’ seven steps down was an *infinite* humbling. As we have noted the distance between something infinite and something finite is by definition infinite. It is immeasurable. Jesus’ status, glory, and majesty were and are infinite. He left all this to enter our finite world. It was an infinite humbling.

So far we have said that we need a great salvation, one that will atone for the pride that saturates every cell of our being. I made it my ambition to be equal to or better than the fit cyclist that came to my rescue. Then I looked down on the slow, overweight cyclist.

The Incarnation was the exact opposite. God's Son made it his ambition to travel an infinite distance down. He renounced his equality with God. He became a man. Jesus descended into almost nothingness in order to make God the Father, and you and me, more important than himself.

He voluntarily surrendered greatness and made us more important than himself.

C. So WHAT?

The Incarnation expresses a pride-conquering humility, and it lays bare—exposes—the heart of the divine nature. It reveals the mind of Christ.

By contrast, we aren't too concerned with the sin of pride. We are much more concerned with the sins of adultery, murder, sexual perversion, or drug addiction. But, to God PRIDE IS THE BIG SIN. It *motivates* adultery, murder and drug addiction. The Incarnation gives us God's perspective on this sin.

The Bible constantly repeats this unchanging principle. He that exalts himself will be humbled, but he that humbles himself will be exalted.

Pride motivates all disobedience to God, just as humility motivates all obedience. This means we have all exalted ourselves. God is infinitely just, and his justice demands a suitable punishment—that we be humbled in Hell forever.

1. We deserve an infinite humbling

Humility is the great virtue God seeks, and pride is the great sin that he hates. Here is some biblical proof?

Who does God lift up? (Ps 147:6) *"The Lord lifts up the humble."*

What does the Lord require of us? (Micah 6:8) *“To walk humbly with your God.”*

To whom does the Lord look? (Isa 66:2) The one who is *“humble, contrite and trembles at his word.”*

Where does God dwell? (Isa 57) With the one who is *“contrite and lowly of spirit.”*

Who does God save? (Ps 18:27) *“God saves a humble people, but the haughty eye he brings down.”*

Who does the Lord avoid? (Ps. 138:6) *“The haughty he knows from afar.”*

Who does God oppose? (James 4:6) *“God opposes the proud.”*

Who does the Lord punish? (Pr 16:5) *“The arrogant in heart God will punish.”*

What will God judge on the last day? (Isa. 2) *“The haughty looks of man shall be brought low, and the lofty pride of men shall be humbled, and the Lord alone will be exalted in that day.”*

How will the proud respond on the day of final judgment? (Isa. 2) *“And the people shall enter the caves of the rocks and the holes of the ground, from before the terror of the Lord, and from the splendor of his majesty, when he rises to terrify the earth.”*

Therefore, an *infinite* descent by Jesus was necessary to atone for our *infinitely* serious pride.

2. God saves by uniting us with Christ in his humbling

When an individual believes the gospel, their faith unites them with Christ in his life, death, and resurrection.

Only those who model Phil 2 get into heaven. Christ earned heaven. His virtue becomes yours.

Christ's willingness to deny his equality with his Father becomes yours; Christ's self-emptying becomes yours; Christ's perfect slavery to the Father becomes yours; and Christ's obedience unto death, even death on a cross becomes yours.

In short, God imputes his perfect humility to you and me. On that basis we are saved.

3. The Incarnation unites us with Christ in his exaltation.

Now the principle, "he that humbles himself will be exalted, and he that exalts himself will be humbled" works in our favor. Because Jesus went so low, God raised him to the highest place.

(Philippians 2:9–11) "9 Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, 10 so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

Because our faith unites us with Christ, his humiliation becomes ours.

Because our faith unites us with Christ, the exaltation that his humility deserves also becomes ours.

In other words, Christ's Incarnation was part of the suffering that he voluntary undertook to atone for our arrogance. He embraced the humiliation that proud, rebellious sinners deserve so that we could get the exaltation that he deserves.

This should stun and astound us.

4. The Incarnation motivates Humility

Those who really see this long to be humble. They want to imitate Christ. They repent of their sins and failings. All virtue flows from seeing virtue in Christ first. "We love because he first loved us." (1 John).

The first place to apply this is in your Family. Consider your spouse more important than yourself. Consider your parents more important than yourself.

Let's bow our heads in worship...

"Father, we are an arrogant, self-centered people. We deserve to be humbled forever in Hell. But the measure of your love for us is this. Your Son made an infinite descent into humiliation. He did this to atone for our pride which is infinitely serious in your sight.

Now you have imputed Christ's humility to us. On the basis of the humility, someday you will exalt us.

Oh Father, thank you, thank you, thank you. We are and will be forever eternally grateful for your Son's incarnation, and our participation in it through faith."