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# THE HUMBLE GOD

The Majesty of the High God who Comes Low



**'HUMILITY IS MAGNETIC. WE ARE DRAWN TO THOSE WHO HONOR OTHERS AND PAY LITTLE ATTENTION TO THEMSELVES.'**

Nelson Mandela made his bed every morning; he carefully made it in his prison cell for 27 years and it was his first act every morning as president. Jessie Duarte, his personal assistant of many years, recalls staying in a fancy hotel in Shanghai. Cultural custom expected that guest rooms would be cleaned by the staff, doing it yourself could be regarded as an insult. Urged by his companions to not make his bed, Nelson refused.

Instead, he called the hotel manager and the cleaning staff to his room and thanked them for their excellent service while explaining to them why he had to make his own bed. Mandela desired to live "not only among his people, but like them," this conviction shaped his first act every day.

Reflecting on this experience and others like it, Jessie Duarte observed that Nelson Mandela "never really cared about what great big people think of him, but he did care about what small people thought of him."

Humility is magnetic; we know its beauty and feel the irony of its power. The higher the authority, the more compelling the humility. Why is this? Because, there is always the ability and freedom to do otherwise. And we know too well the "otherwise." It is stunning to learn that the God of the universe is the most humble person in existence.

## The God Who Has Always Been Humble

God persistently comes low to engage his creatures. He always chooses to meet us with humility. Whether he is walking in the garden with Adam and Eve, wrestling with Jacob in human form, or having a conversation with Moses face to face, God's interaction with us is marked by a lowly posture.

This is not surprising as humility is fundamental to the life of the Triune community. It is the warp and woof, the lifeblood, indeed, the cardinal principal that orders the very life of God. God the Father, Son, and Spirit are equally humble in their engagement with one another. Every exchange among the three persons is executed with genuine humility; God's life is a dance of three persons striving to outdo one another in honor. When the Triune God engages the world we would expect to see the same thing, and we do.

### The Unsurprising Incarnation

The way God shows up in the Old Testament prepares the reader for a humble Christ. The storyline of Scripture leads us to read the incarnation as "normative" divine activity. In many ways, the Son of God becoming a human is the logical next step in the way the humble God engages us.

Don't misunderstand me, the incarnation is astonishing and overwhelming. My point is that incarnation should not be considered "abnormal" activity for the humble Creator. It is consistent with who God is and how he has revealed himself throughout redemptive history.

The incarnation serves to reinforce and deepen our understanding of the humility of God. It serves as a link to all that God has shown us about himself in the past and also moves us drastically forward in understanding the nature of God. God the Son permanently takes to himself humanity; the life of God can never be the same! The more God shows us himself the more we will discern the depth of his humility.

The humility of the incarnation prepares the way for the humility of the cross. Whether we are talking about the birth, service or death of Christ, God is not showing us something new about himself, He is simply showing us who he has always been. N.T. Wright captures this dynamic skillfully on his discussion of the cross as the vehicle of God's self-disclosure.

**'WHETHER WE ARE TALKING ABOUT THE BIRTH, SERVICE, OR DEATH OF CHRIST, GOD IS NOT SHOWING US SOMETHING NEW ABOUT HIMSELF, HE IS SIMPLY SHOWING US WHO HE HAS ALWAYS BEEN.'**



“God became on the cross what God always was. I may have it in me, in ability and desire, to climb Mount Everest; but until I actually go into training and do it it remains latent. You may have it in you to be a brilliant concert pianist; but until you get down to practice and performance, all that brilliance remains latent. God always was the God of love—generous, spontaneous, free and cheerful self-giving love; but until God, if we dare put it like this, gets down to practice and performance, that love at its deepest level remains latent. On the cross God performs the score composed before the foundation of the world. On the cross God at last scales the highest peaks. It isn’t just that the cross reveals God’s love in its most striking way. It reveals it because it enacts it. It becomes part of, indeed the most central part of, the personal history of God...And now, to all eternity, the cross remains at the heart of God, stands as the truest symbol of God, offers the most exact and precise exposition of God” (N.T. Wright, *For All God’s Worth: True Worship and the Calling of the Church*, 1997).

### The Athanasian Creed and the Humble Trinity

We can clearly see the humility of the Son in the incarnation and the cross, but what about the humility of the Spirit and the Father? This is an important question as it may be tempting to think the Son is more humble than the Father or Spirit. The truth is, when we talk about the humility of God, we are talking about a humble Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Discussions on the attributes of God draw us into the mystery of the Trinity. The Athanasian creed, written in the 5th century, is one of the clearest expressions of Trinitarian theology. It provides some helpful categories for thinking about humility as it is connected to all three persons. Here is a relevant portion of the creed.

“But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit is all one, the glory equal, the majesty co-eternal. Such as the Father is, such is the Son and such is the Holy Spirit. The Father uncreate, the Son uncreate, and the Holy Spirit uncreate. The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, and the Holy Spirit incomprehensible. The Father eternal, the Son eternal, and the Holy Spirit eternal. And yet they are not three eternal, but one eternal. As also there are not three uncreated nor three incomprehensibles, but one uncreated and one incomprehensible....So the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God; And yet they are not three Gods, but one God....And in this Trinity none is afore, nor after another; none is greater, or less than another. But the whole three persons are co-eternal, and co-equal.”

The creed articulates the biblical principal of perfect equality among the three persons; eternity, incomprehensibility, and glory are equally shared by Father, Son, and Spirit. The deep equality among the Trinitarian community means that “none is afore, nor after another.” It removes the possibility of one person being “greater” or “less than” another. This principal of equality extends into every discussion of the attributes of God.

For our purposes, it means humility is a quality equally possessed by Father, Son, and Spirit. It is impossible to speak about a humble Son and Spirit without speaking of a humble Father. It is also erroneous to view one member of the Trinity as more or less humble than another. If God is humble then Father, Son, and Spirit are humble. If the Son and the Spirit are humble then it follows that the Father is humble.

I’ve suggested that Scripture progressively unfolds a vision of a humble God. I have connected us to an early theological formulation that affirms that humility is equally possessed by Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We now turn our attention to the further development of the humility of each of the three persons.

**'GOD BECAME ON THE CROSS WHAT GOD ALWAYS WAS...AND NOW TO ALL ETERNITY, THE CROSS REMAINS AT THE HEART OF GOD, STANDS AS THE TRUEST SYMBOL OF GOD, OFFERS THE MOST EXACT AND PRECISE EXPOSITION OF GOD.'**

**-N.T. WRIGHT**

## The Humble Father

The interaction of the Trinity precedes creation and has always been characterized by humility. John gives us a glimpse of this: "And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed" (John 17:5). This is a unique window into Trinitarian interaction.

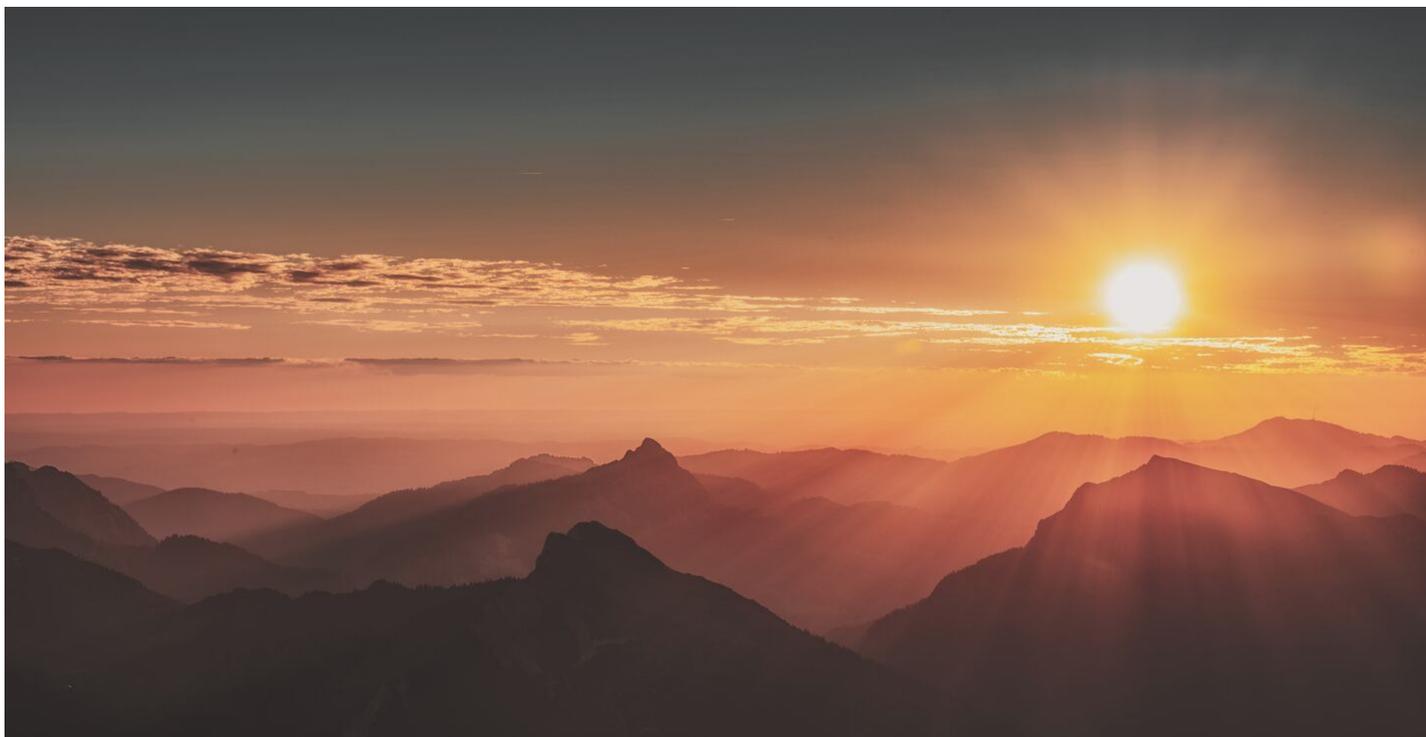
The sharing of glory and honor predates the world, this is so because the Father has always been passionate about exalting his Son. The way the Father interacts with the Son in his incarnate state is reflective of how he has always treated him.

### The Father's Passion for the Glory of the Son

When Scripture says that God is jealous for his glory we must remember that we are talking about a Triune God (Is 48:9-11). Giving glory happens in community. The Father, Son, and Spirit are equally passionate about extolling one another. In this sense, God is indeed passionate for his glory. The Father is adamant that the Son be lifted high. The Son is deeply concerned that the Father be honored. And the Spirit refuses to shine the light on himself, he wants Christ to be seen.

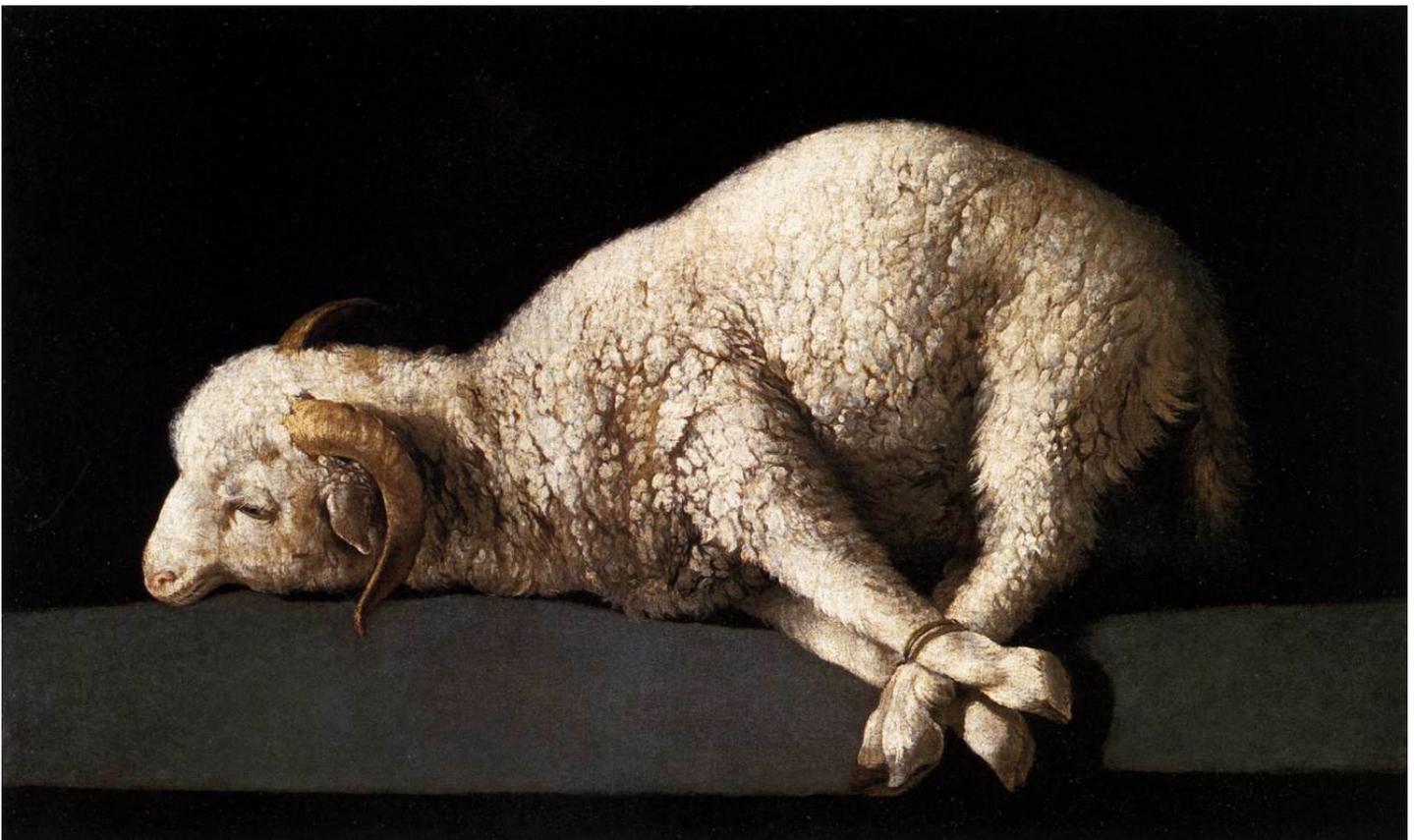
When viewed through this lens God's glory becomes a brilliant display of humility. Glory happens precisely when one selflessly lifts up another. In the divine economy, I would go as far as saying that God's glory is his humility. Tim Keller helps further capture this outward looking posture of the Trinity.

"Each of the divine persons centers upon the others. None demands that the others revolve around him. Each voluntarily circles the other two, pouring love, delight, and adoration into them. Each person of the Trinity loves, adores, defers to, and rejoices in the others. That creates a dynamic, pulsating dance of joy and love."





'In the person of Christ do meet together infinite glory and lowest humility. Infinite glory, and the virtue of humility, meet in no other person but Christ...he is thus above all, yet he is lowest of all in humility.' -Jonathan Edwards



**'IT IS AS TRULY DIVINE TO BE THE OBEДИENT SELF-GIVING SON AS IT IS TO BE THE FATHER WHO SENDS AND THE SPIRIT WHO RENEWS AND PERFECTS.'**

**-COLIN GUNTON**

**'CREATION WAS A TRIUNE PROJECT, ONE IN WHICH WE GLIMPSE AN OTHER-FOCUSED FATHER WORKING HAND-IN-HAND WITH THE SON AND THE SPIRIT.'**

## The Father's Humility in Creation

We have discussed the equality of the three persons as we looked at the Athanasian creed. It is important to take another step and explore the diversity within the Trinity. Bruce Ware gives us some helpful categories for understanding distinctions in the Triune community.

"For Trinitarian doctrine, distinction of personhood is as necessary to maintain as unity or equality of essence is also to maintain....It is clear that two categories seem to encompass the heart of their distinctiveness: relationship and role. Each is distinct in relationship within the Godhead such that each is who he is in part defined by the distinctive relationship each has with the others. The very identity of the first person of the Trinity is seen in and through his relationship as the Father of the Son. Likewise the very identity of the second person of the Trinity is seen precisely through and not apart from his being the Son of the Father. That the Spirit is subject to both Father and Son seems, then, to make it clear that his relationship is as one under the authority of the Father and the Son. Relationship, then, is a central category for understanding what distinguishes the three persons from each other" (*Father Son and Holy Spirit: Relationships, Roles, and Relevance*, 2005).

Colin Gunton further discusses the Father's relational authority over the Son and Spirit. "The priority of the Father is not ontological but economic. Such talk of the divine economy has indeed implications for what we may say about the being of God eternally, and would seem to suggest a subordination of taxis—of ordering within the divine life—but not one of deity or regard. It is as truly divine to be the obedient self-giving Son as it is to be the Father who sends and the Spirit who renews and perfects. Only by virtue of the particularity and relatedness of all three is God God" (*The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, 2003).

We are now positioned to discuss God's humility toward the Son and Spirit in creation. Scripture designates the Father as the one holding supreme authority. He is identified as the architect of creation. Yet, it is precisely in creation where we glimpse this King's humility.

He empowers the Son to speak the divine fiat that brings all things into existence (Jn 1:3). He tasks the Spirit with the honor of enlivening creation through the spoken word of the Son (Gen 1:2, Ps 33:6). The Father shared the glory of bringing all things into existence. He did not keep this to himself. In the New Testament the Father gladly takes the back seat along with the Spirit as they spotlight the Son as the Creator (Jn 1:3, 1 Cor 8:6, Col 1:16-17, Heb 1:2).

Creation was a Triune project, one in which we glimpse an other-focused Father working hand-in-hand with the Son and the Spirit.

## Battle Worn Soul Care

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## The Humility of the Father in Sending the Son and the Spirit

A humble God sounds strange to many ears. Paul Copan speaks about the novelty of a God marked by humility in his book *Is God a Moral Monster?: Making Sense of the Old Testament* (2010).

“Many Christians have the false impression that something resembling divine humility appears occasionally in the Bible—for example, in the incarnation of Christ—but that humility isn’t an enduring divine quality. Upon closer inspection, God—yes even in the Old Testament—is characteristically humble. The ‘high and exalted one’ dwells with the contrite and lowly of spirit’ (Is 57:15). Psalm 113:5-6 affirms a God who stoops to look upon us. In God’s interaction with Israel, we see an other-centered, patient endurance despite Israel’s rebellion, grumbling, and idolatry. The New Testament expands on this theme of divine humility; it does not invent it.”

Copan is spot on; God is characteristically humble in both testaments as his nature is consistent in all his activity. The New Testament is an expansion rather than a starting point for understanding the humility of God. Stooping low is no foreign posture for the God of the Bible.

We’ve explored humility in the equality of the three divine persons along with the economic ordering of the divine life. We have seen the humility of God the Father in his eternal relations with Son and Spirit along with his lowliness in sharing the glory of world making. We turn now to his humility in sending both Son and Spirit in the work of salvation.

Humility at heart is outward looking, it moves beyond self to others. It sacrifices for the sake of neighbor and is gracious, self-forgetting, and loving. This is the heart of the Father in the plan of redemption, it is also the Father’s posture toward Son and Spirit in the execution of his saving vision.

'THE TRIUNE GOD LIVES IN AN INCOMPARABLE CELEBRATION OF ETERNAL JOY. THE FATHER, SON AND SPIRIT HAVE A RICH AND OVERFLOWING LIFE WITH OR WITHOUT US...THE FATHER LIVES FOR THE SON AND THE SON LIVES FOR THE FATHER, AND THEY SHARE ALL THINGS TOGETHER IN THE SPIRIT. NOT SELF-CENTERED, BUT OTHER-CENTERED. TOTALLY OTHER-CENTERED--BECAUSE THAT IS THE ESSENTIAL MEANING OF 'GOD IS LOVE.' AND THIS IS WHAT THE TRINITY IS ALL ABOUT.'

-JURGEN SCHULZ

Perichoresis is a rich theological concept that will aid us in understanding the humility of God's sending activity. It is best defined as mutual indwelling (Jn 14:11). Rich Vincent gives a helpful description.

"Within the divine life there abides an eternal relationship of self-giving, mutual, and shared love. Father, Son, and Spirit deeply and intimately know one another. There is no fear, shame, or insecurity in their knowledge of one another. Father and Son dwell in a face-to-face relationship with the Spirit as the bond of love that unites them. This relationship is so profoundly complete and pure that there is no other way to describe it than that they are in one another [perichoresis]. This free, full, and overflowing love is the central quality of the home-life of God" (*The Dance of Love*, 2009).

Jurgen Schulz further describes the fulness of life in this intimate community. "The Triune God lives in an incomparable celebration of eternal joy. The Father, Son and Spirit have a rich and overflowing life with or without us... The Father lives for the Son and the Son lives for the Father, and they share all things together in the Spirit. Not self centered, but other centered. Totally other centered—because that is the essential meaning of 'God is love.' And this is what 'Trinity' is all about" (*What Jesus Wished People Knew About God*, 2017).

God's communal life sets the context for his creative and redemptive activity. Son and Spirit are sent forth out of this place of interdependence and loyal love. We discern humility from two different angles when considering this framework.

First, the Son and Spirit are sent into a war zone. As such, their coming is a tremendous act of humility and a willingness to face inevitable suffering. When we realize that God is both sending and coming, we discern a God humbly giving himself to us! Perichoresis means that God is in the Son and Spirit as they are sent. We must know that it

was costly for the Father to send. This sending and going activity provides a window into the shared sacrifice of the Triune community in the work of redemption.

Second, the humility of the Father is showcased in sharing the awesome task of redemption. In creation, the Father shares the honor of shaping the world. In salvation, the Father humbly invites Son and Spirit to play key roles in his greatest work yet. The honor due God the Savior is an honor for Father, Son, and Spirit. Humility lies underneath all of this.

### **The Humility of the Father at the Cross**

The cross is the pinnacle of humility (Phil 2:5-11). We know that the cross displays the heart and character of Christ, but what about the Father? Is there humility displayed in his role in Calvary? I believe so.

When we discuss the Trinity and the cross we must tread lightly. All too often, the three persons are polarized and misrepresented. Caricatures of a stern, distant father and an unwilling Son abound. In truth, the Triune God suffers at the cross; all three persons experience suffering and all three persons demonstrate sacrificial humility.

Jurgen Moltmann captures the unique suffering and humility of the Father. "The Son suffers dying, the Father suffers the death of his Son. The grief of the Father here is just as important as the death of the Son. The Fatherlessness of the Son is matched by the Sonlessness of the Father, and if God has constituted himself as the Father of Jesus Christ, then he also suffers the death of his Fatherhood in the death of the Son" (*Crucified God*, 1993).

A rarely explored dimension of the cross, this perspective shows us that humility characterizes the Father. In the gift of his beloved Son the Father is saying, "I am meek and humble in heart." If humility is outward looking, self-forgetting, sacrificial love then the the Father's gift of Christ is a profound expression of that quality.

Jurgen Schulz argues that the cross is the greatest display of the heart of God. Though he doesn't use the language of humility, he touches on the concept.

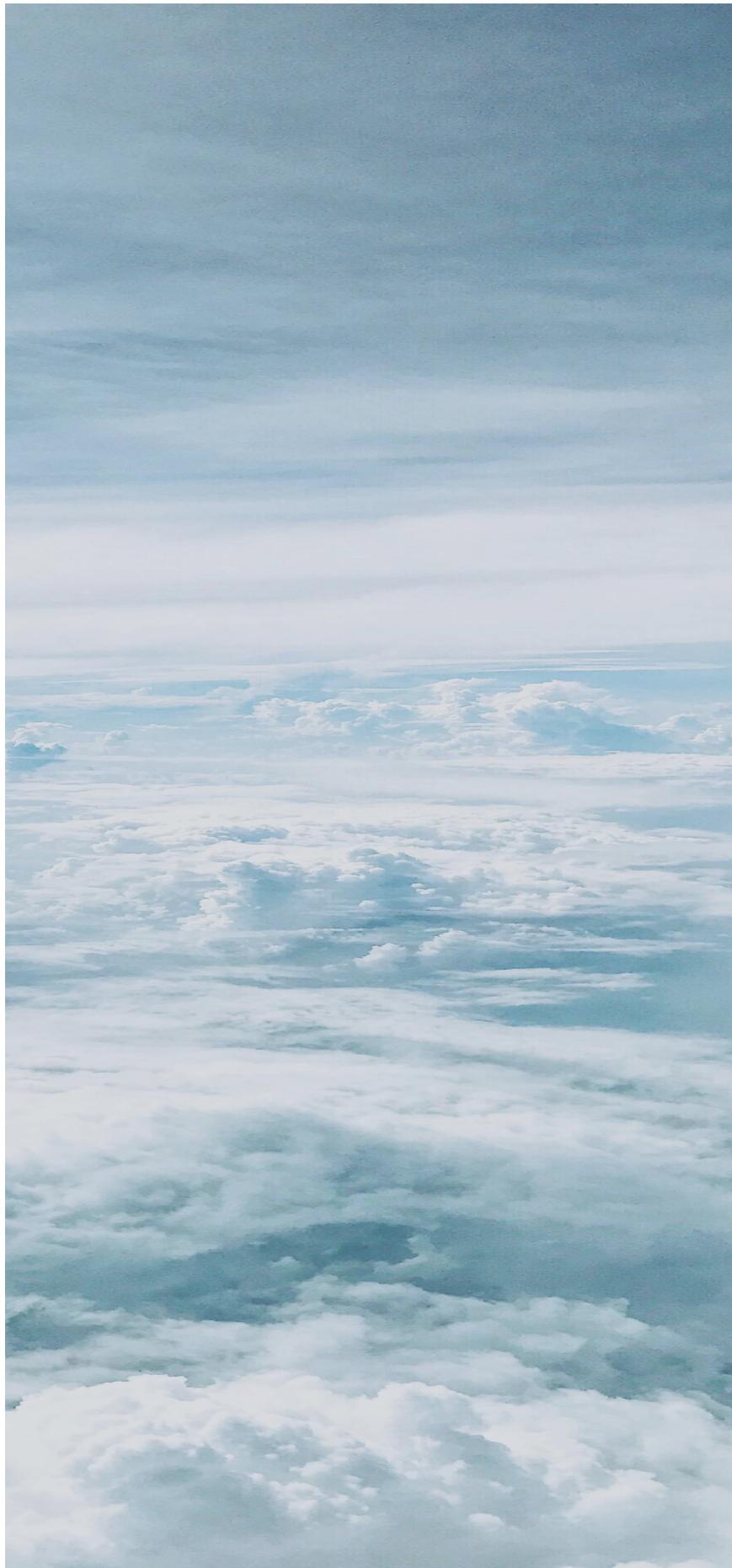
“The Triune God who lives in the Eternal Dance of glory, goodness and grace. The God of Calvary love. The God Christ came to reveal. There is one way of knowing what He is really like—look at Jesus. Look at the cross. Only the Son knows the Father, and those to whom the Son makes Him known. He is a God who lays down his life for others. That is what actually goes on inside the Trinity! Self-sacrificing love. One author described Him as a Supreme Being of ‘fathomless unselfishness.’ The cross was not an accident. It is what this Triune Community is all about. It is what the Bible means when it says, “God is love.” What an amazing Deity He turns out to be!” (*What Jesus Wished People Knew About God*, 2017).

### **The Father's Humility in the Ascension**

The Father's pleasure in the Son marks the beginning and end of his earthly ministry. At his baptism the Father's audible voice is heard: “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased” (Matt 3:17). When he has accomplished his saving task the Father is greatly pleased.

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

In this text, the language of exaltation describes what happens in the ascension and the seating of Jesus at the right hand of the Father. The physical movement of the Son into heaven is a tangible expression of the Father exalting him; he is literally and figuratively lifted up. It is the Father's passion that “all may honor the Son, just as they honor the Father” (Jn 5:22).



## The Humility of the Son

Jesus is true God and true man. As such, he reveals authentic humanity and authentic deity. Want to know about man? Go to Jesus. Want to know about God? Go to Jesus. The multi-faceted mission of Jesus included this crucial revelatory dimension; he came to explain God.

In Jesus, God comes walking, speaking, touching, teaching, serving, dying, and rising. A wonderful collision of creature and Creator, this is the Christ event. What you see in Christ's character is fundamentally true of God the Father. To put it another way, the story of Jesus is the biography of God. If were to put a title on that book, it would be appropriately called "The Humble God."

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### The Son's Perfect Reflection of the Father's Humility

The old adage "like father like son" is true of God. Here's how the author of Hebrews puts it: "He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power" (Heb 1:3).

The language is magnificent. Paul Ellingworth suggests that this passage describes the "essential unity and exact resemblance between God and his Son...in the present verse, God's 'nature' is his essential being, 'the reality of God'" (*The Epistle to the Hebrews NIGCT*, 1993).

The Son is a true representation of the Father as he shares an identical nature with him. It follows that the character of the Son is always consistent with the Father. Matthew's gospel shines light on this dynamic.

"All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him" (Matt 11:27).

The Son holds exclusive knowledge of God and has direct access to him. He makes it his mission of grace to bring us in on what he knows. In the verses that follow, Matthew provides an invitation to know about the heart of this God. "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Matt 11:28-29).

**'JESUS IS THE RADIANCE OF THE GLORY OF GOD AND THE EXACT IMPRINT OF HIS NATURE.'**

**-HEBREWS 1:3**

John Nolland helps us understand the broader context of this verse and how it applies to our discussion. "Matthew 11:25-27 has dealt with both the revealing and the concealing activity of the Father and the Son. Where the failure of response in verses 20-24 corresponds to the concealing activity, the fresh invitation in verses 28-30 is probably intended to correspond to the revealing activity" (*The Gospel of Matthew NIGCT*, 2005).

In other words, when Jesus speaks about his humble heart, he is talking about the Father's heart as well. He is doing exactly what he said he came to do in the previous verses---he is showing us the Father. This verse is important because God is speaking to us about what's in his heart; he is telling us about himself as plainly as he can---He is humble!

As Athan Smith says, "There and then, before creation, it was decided that the Son would cross every chasm between God and humanity and establish a real and abiding relationship—union. He was predestined to be the mediator, the one in and through whom the very life of the Triune God would enter human existence and human existence would be lifted up to share in the Trinitarian life" (*A Note on the Gospel*, 2008).



## The Biblical Definition of Humility

One of the most important passages of Scripture on this theme is found in Philippians 2:5-11. This text defines, illustrates, and explains humility. It's worth looking at the entire unit of Scripture.

"<sup>1</sup> So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, <sup>2</sup> complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. <sup>3</sup> Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. <sup>4</sup> Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. <sup>5</sup> Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, <sup>6</sup> who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, <sup>7</sup> but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. <sup>8</sup> And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. <sup>9</sup> Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, <sup>10</sup> so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, <sup>11</sup> and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

This text is phenomenal. Paul is showing us that humility is central to the character of God. Here we see a God who gets underneath his creatures to serve them, one who actually considers his creatures more important than himself, a King who genuinely looks out for our interests above his own. Stunning!

This text confirms what we have discussed to this point--if you want to know what God is like you must look to Jesus. "No one has ever seen God; the only God who is at the Father's side, he has made him known" (Jn 1:18). Jesus has explained God to the world, he has led him out from behind the curtain for all to see.

When you look at Jesus you see God. And when we do look at Jesus, what do we see? We see a selfless man serving us with great humility and sacrifice at every turn. The text maps out the humble journey of the Son of God. At each critical juncture, we see humility embodied and explained. I want to highlight three junctures in the journey of Jesus: the crib, the cross, and the crown. All three of this junctures are marked by selflessness.

### The Crib of Christ

In verses 3-4 the text reads, "in humility count others as more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests but also the interest of others." Paul tells us that this was precisely the mindset of Jesus when he agreed with the Father to come into this world and become a man.

As C.S. Lewis said, "Humility is not thinking less about yourself, but thinking about yourself less." It is the freedom of self-forgetfulness and the joy of throwing yourself into the service of others, the very thing that characterizes the life of God.

Verse 6 is astonishing, "although he was in the form of God, he did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped." Jesus was fully equal with God, but he did not use his divine status as an excuse to remove himself from our need. He did not cling to his exalted position, instead he used it for our good. "He emptied himself by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men."

One author explains the significance of this statement as follows: "The decision to become human, and to go all the way along the road of obedience, obedience to the divine plan of salvation, yes, all the way was

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**-C.S. LEWIS**

not a decision to stop being divine. It was a decision about what it really meant to be divine" (N.T. Wright, *Philippians*, 2009). In other words, the fact that Jesus refused to remain in heaven speaks volumes about God. This is a God who uses all of his divine resources to serve and save us!

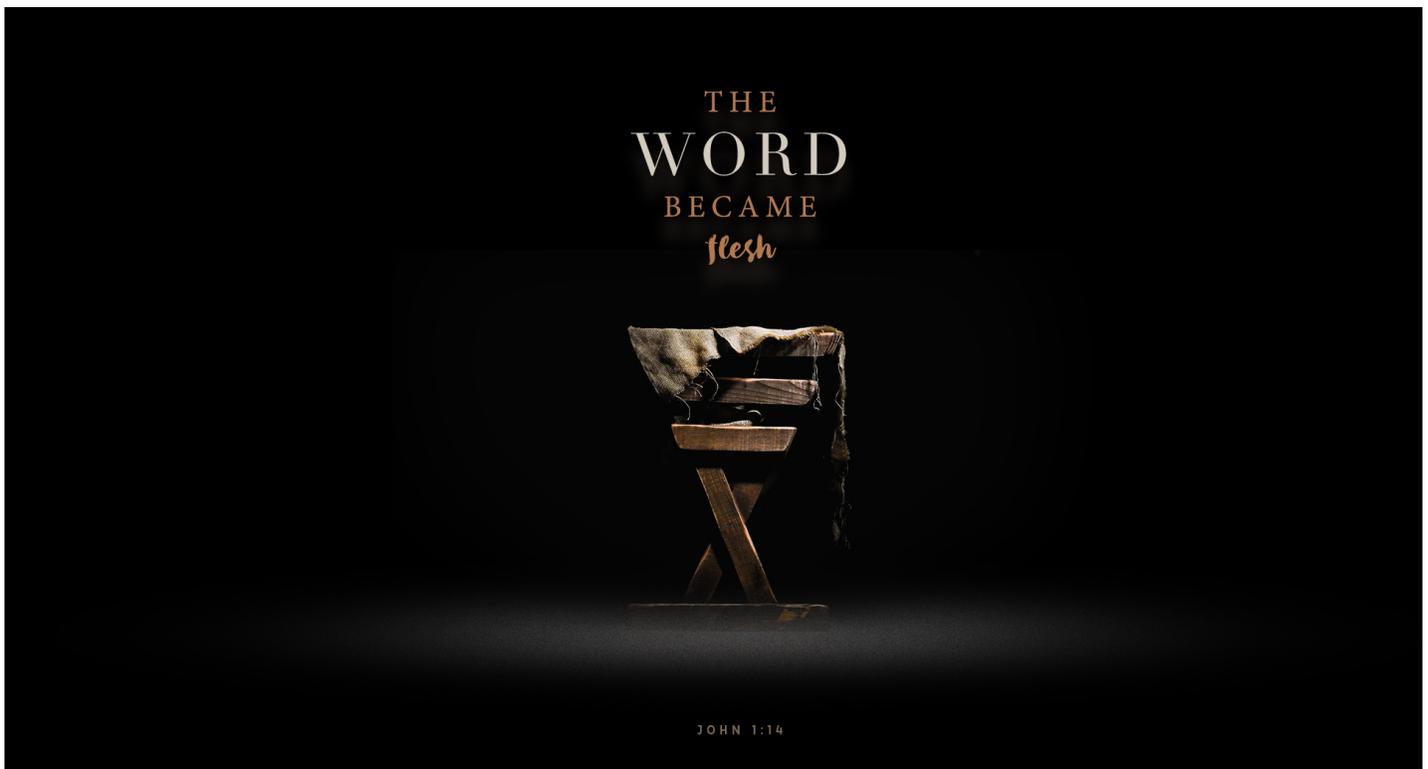
In Jesus, we behold God in a crib, one so humble that he was willing to become a child, to be clothed and fed by a mother, to learn to crawl, talk, and dress himself—so that one day he could put himself on a cross for all of us.

### The Cross of Christ

Paul tells us in verse 8 that Jesus “humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” This is the climax of humble service. Everything in the life of Jesus built to this moment. As Luther once said, “The cross and crib are cut from the same wood.” While the cross was the next stage in his humble service, it forever changed everything. The cross redefined humility and provided the clearest vision in Scripture of the high God who comes low.

Hearers of this message in Paul’s day would have been stunned, it was absurd for a deity to embrace humility and beyond imagination for a god to die on a cross. Humility was no virtue for the roman gods; it was weakness. Augustine was adamant that you would not find the quality of humility ever attributed to any other so called god, this was a virtue that belonged exclusively to the one true God, Jesus Christ.

Though scorned by the world, the cross is the greatest display of humble love and glory the world has ever known. Luther says, “Now it is not sufficient for anyone, and it does him no good to recognize God in his glory and majesty, unless he recognizes him in the humility and shame of the cross” (Timothy Lull, *Martin Luther: The Basic Theological Writings*, 2005). Why? Because this is his glory! The God who comes low, serves, bleeds, and dies—this is glory.



## The Cross and the Saving Humility of Christ

Of the early fathers, Augustine was the premier theologian of humility. Deborah Ruddy wrote a wonderful article titled, *The Humble God: Healer, Mediator, and Sacrifice* (2004). Of Augustine she states, "While many of the early Church Fathers spoke of humility as the Christian virtue, no one was more insistent about its primacy in the Christian life than St. Augustine."

Ruddy suggests that Augustine's teaching on humility views Christ's humility as more than a moral example to be imitated; rather it is the central way that our reconciliation with God occurs. There would have been no salvation for us, after all, if Christ had not been prepared to humble himself for our sake...Christ's humility is a "saving humility."

Ruddy captures the heart of the incarnation and cross when she urges that without losing what God is, God becomes what God is not. "In Jesus Christ, a new kind of sublimity is introduced, a new way of seeing is discovered—lowliness is inseparable from grandeur; humility is inextricably tied to exaltation...the humbling of the Word simultaneously reveals the desperate state of humanity and the immense worth of humanity."

In describing Christ's redemptive work Augustine draws on medical images of "cleansing," "purifying," and "healing." As the humble medic, Christ heals our particular infirmity and makes possible our return to God. If human beings had suffered from a different ailment, a different medicine would have been prescribed to counteract the symptoms; humility is the remedy because pride is the sickness.

In Christ, we find that remedy, in his life and death is a curative humility. Augustine shows us that without the high God coming low, salvation would be impossible.

## The Crown of Christ

Paul tells us that this humiliation takes a turn to exaltation. "God highly exalts him and gives him a name above all names. And it is at this name that every knee will bow and tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of the Father."

Even here the glory of humility is evident. It is the humility of God that brings us to our knees in adoration. When we behold the stunning and unexpected glory of humility, we ourselves are humbled. God crushes us with his kindness—a kindness that leads us to repentance. I believe this is just another angle on his humility.

When the Son is exalted what does he do in heaven as he sits at the right hand of God? The book of Hebrews and the book of Romans both tell us that he does not sit on his throne much—instead we find him on his knees interceding and praying for us! This is how he reigns from heaven—with sacrificial concern and service.

When we look at Jesus we behold a God on his knees; crawling as a baby, washing his disciples feet, embracing lepers, and falling on them as he carries the cross, and in prayer as our King. The glory of his humility is blinding.

He considers us more important than himself and proves it by giving his own life for our sake. Such humility beckons us to worship; it calls us to join God on our knees. If we serve a God who is comfortable on his knees then surely that is where we will meet with him.

**'THERE WOULD HAVE BEEN NO SALVATION FOR US, AFTER ALL, IF CHRIST HAD NOT BEEN PREPARED TO HUMBLE HIMSELF FOR OUR SAKE---CHRIST'S HUMILITY IS A SAVING HUMILITY.'**

**-DEBORAH RUDDY**

**'THE PERSON AND WORK OF THE SPIRIT ARE WINDOWS INTO THE MAJESTY OF DIVINE SELFLESSNESS.'**

**-GRAHAM COLE**

## The Humility of the Holy Spirit

We've spent a lot of time exploring the humility of the Father and Son, we now turn our attention to the third person of the Trinity. There is a strange glory that surrounds the Holy Spirit, a humble splendor. Graham Cole describes the person and work of the Spirit as windows into "the majesty of divine selflessness."

### The Majesty of Divine Selflessness

If being other-centered is the heart of humility, then the Holy Spirit is profoundly humble. Study his character and work, you will find a divine person of self-effacing service coupled with singular dedication to glorify the Father and Son. Apathy towards one's own interests, lack of concern for being recognized, the desire to work behind the scenes--these are the characteristics of the strange majesty radiating from the Holy Spirit.

This selfless mode of operating is discernible at the outset of the biblical story. The Spirit hovers over creation, invigorates it with his breath, and quietly sustains it with his power (Gen 1:2, Job 33:4, Ps 104:29-30). This creative activity sets the stage for all of the Spirit's work as the wind and breath of God--the vital, yet unseen power underneath all divine action.

The Spirit's muted presence can be traced through Israel's deliverance from Egypt, their journey in the wilderness, and their entrance into the promised land (Is 63:11, Ps 78:40-42). His subtle work is evident in the empowerment of prophets, priests, judges, kings, and sages (Neh 9:30, 1 Sam 16:13, Judges 14:5-6). It is unclear to most where Samson gets his strength, where Isaiah gets his words, and where Solomon gets his wisdom, but underneath these vocational capabilities is the work of the Holy Spirit.

If you've ever seen the effect of a black-light in a dark room, you know it exposes every fingerprint and trace of physical touch. Put a black-light to Scripture, not a single inch of the redemption story is untouched by the Holy Spirit--his invisible fingerprints are everywhere!

Accentuating his humility is the fact that he authored the Bible (2 Tim 3:16, Acts 1:16, 2 Pet 1:21)! With pen in hand, he refused to write about himself. Instead, he ensured his own activity was concealed while drawing the reader's attention to both Father and Son (Lk 24:44).

You see, the Spirit considers others more important than himself--with every opportunity to write an autobiography, he refused. The content of the Bible, or should we say the lack of certain content, testifies to the humility of the Holy Spirit.

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### Hey Chaplain

Hey Chaplain is a From the Fray article series that tackles common challenges and questions that compel people to come to chaplains for help. Some of these pastoral care areas include anxiety, depression, doubt and frustration.

You can check out the series by clicking this link: [Hey Chaplain Article Series](#).



## The Floodlight Ministry of the Spirit

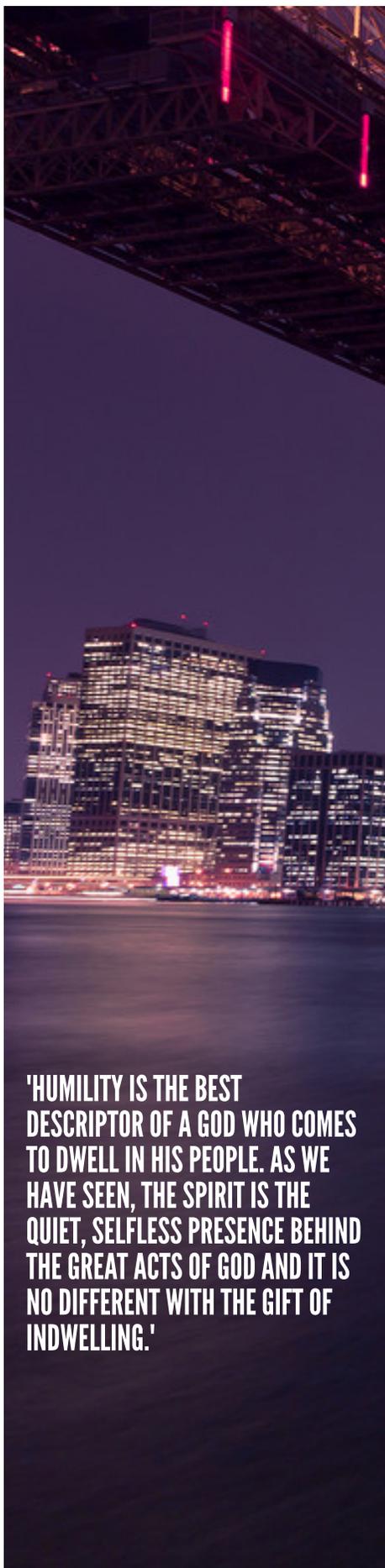
The Holy Spirit is fiercely committed to honoring the Son, his priority is that the world would see Jesus (Jn 16:14). J.I. Packer provides a helpful illustration of this truth in his book, *Keeping in Step with the Spirit* (2005).

The Holy Spirit's distinctive new covenant role is to fulfill what we may call a floodlight ministry in relation to the Lord Jesus Christ. So far as this role was concerned, the Spirit 'was not yet' (John 7:39, literal Greek) while Jesus was on earth; only when the Father had glorified him (see John 17:5) could the Spirit's work of making men aware of Jesus' glory begin.

I remember walking to a church one winter evening to preach on the words 'he shall glorify me,' seeing the building floodlit as I turned a corner, and realizing that this was exactly the illustration my message needed. When floodlighting is well done, the floodlights are so placed that you do not see them; you are not in fact supposed to see where the light is coming from; what you are meant to see is just the building on which the floodlights are trained.

The intended effect is to make it visible when otherwise it would not be seen for the darkness, and to maximize its dignity by throwing all its details into relief so that you see it properly. This perfectly illustrates the Spirit's new covenant role. He is, so to speak, the hidden floodlight shining on the Savior. Or think of it this way. It is as if the Spirit stands behind us, throwing light over our shoulder, on Jesus, who stands facing us.

The Spirit's message is never, 'Look at me; listen to me; come to me; get to know me,' but always 'Look at him, and see his glory; listen to him, and hear his word; go to him, and have life; get to know him, and taste his gift of joy and peace.'



**'HUMILITY IS THE BEST DESCRIPTOR OF A GOD WHO COMES TO DWELL IN HIS PEOPLE. AS WE HAVE SEEN, THE SPIRIT IS THE QUIET, SELFLESS PRESENCE BEHIND THE GREAT ACTS OF GOD AND IT IS NO DIFFERENT WITH THE GIFT OF INDWELLING.'**

## The Humble Power of Jesus

The Spirit shines the light on Christ at every stage of his life and ministry. Consider the shrouded Spirit in the birth of Jesus, without his miraculous presence there would be no incarnation (Lk 1:35).

At the baptism of Jesus, the Holy Spirit descends and rests on him to signify his empowering service (Matt 3:16). The Son of God relied on the Spirit at every turn—it was the Spirit's might behind his miracles, the Spirit's wisdom informing his preaching, and the Spirit's resources securing his endurance (Lk 4:18-19, Acts 10:38).

Jesus never operated independently from the Holy Spirit; every healing, every confrontation with the enemy, every impulse to pray, every temptation resisted were tethered to his faithful presence and work.

Even in Christ's most vulnerable moments, the Spirit never abandoned him. While Jesus endured the forsakenness of the cross, the Spirit's presence was thick. He upheld the Son through every agonizing moment.

In fact, it was "through the eternal Spirit" that Jesus "offered himself without blemish to God" (Heb 9:14).

One author asserts, "in all Three Persons, the total self-giving is so evident that, in this case, the Holy Spirit gives of himself fully to the Son in order to strengthen Him for what lays ahead—the cross. Thus, while the Spirit may be the bond of love between the Father, Son, and Spirit at the Cross, He also became the empowering presence within Jesus that enables his humanity to endure the cup of suffering and triumph faithfully" (John Johnson, *A Trinitarian View of the Cross* 2009).

Three days after the crucifixion, the Spirit that hovered over a lifeless creation did the same over the lifeless body of Jesus (Gen 1:2). The New Testament affirms it was his presence and life-giving breath that brought Jesus out of that tomb (Rom 8:11). Among the reasons that "death could not hold" Jesus is the

the humble commitment of the Holy Spirit to lift him up, no matter the obstacle (Acts 2:24). Theologians of old had it right, "the more you descend into the depths of the Spirit, the more you plumb the abyss of humility" (Nikitas Stithatos, *The Philokalia: Vol 4*, 1782).

## The Spirit's Humility and Us

The Spirit's condescension does not terminate in the ministry of Jesus, he merely shifts his energy toward us. Committed to our rescue, he works conviction for sin and creates repentance in our hearts (Jn 16:8).

He empowers gospel heralds and opens blind eyes through their message (Acts 1:8, 2 Cor 3:17-4:6). When we trust the gospel, the Holy Spirit showcases humility in a remarkable way: he indwells us.

The New Testament makes an absurd claim about God's residence. When we receive the gospel, God makes his home in us by his Spirit.

The completion of God's saving project is sealed by a change of the Triune address. In other words, indwelling means that God moves beyond being with us and shocks us with the grace of being in us (Jn 14:16-17).

The indwelling work of the Spirit is how he works obedience into our lives, ensures that we are becoming more like Christ, enables us to fight against our sin, assures us of our stance before God, and guarantees that we will one day rise from the dead (Ez 36:26-27, 2 Cor 3:18, Rom 8:13, Eph 1:13, Rom 8:11). It is no stretch to suggest that the Spirit's humility, like that of Jesus, is a saving humility.

Humility is the best descriptor of a God who comes to dwell in his people. As we have seen, the Spirit is the quiet, selfless presence behind the great acts of God and it is no different with the gift of indwelling.

The Spirit's willingness to live within fractured people, reside in uncomfortable spaces, and bear patiently with us through thick and thin is meekness at its best.

## The Good News of the Humble God

A Humble God is good news for you and me. Without divine humility, the incarnation and the cross would not have happened. Without humility, we would not know God's deliverance from sin or the hope of eternal joy.

Remove humility from the picture and not only are we talking about a very different situation for us, we are talking about a very different God. But thankfully, this is not the case. God is profoundly humble, and if we grasp what that really means it will take our breath away and change us.

### Theological Implications of the Humility of God

We have seen that God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit are equally and magnificently humble. Through viewing a variety of texts, exploring Trinitarian doctrine, and drawing from a number of resources, I have worked to show that humility is intrinsic to all three persons of the Trinity.

But what does it matter that God is humble? How does it change how we think, live, and operate? I want to spend a few moments teasing out the implications of the Humble God.

- Biblical humility is defined as “considering others more important than yourself” and “looking to the interest of others” (Phil 2:3-4). At heart, humility is an outward-looking posture, a commitment to the good of those around you, and a willingness to sacrifice for another.
- Inversely, a clear definition of humility instructs us on what pride is and how it shows up. In Luther's words, "Scripture describes man as so curved in upon himself that he uses not only physical but even spiritual goods for his own purposes and in all things seeks only himself" (*Commentary on Romans*, 2003). The inward curve shows up as selfishness, lack of concern for other people, and a deep commitment to one's own interests. In short, it's the antithesis of the Triune community.
- Humility is a Trinitarian attribute and dynamic. This means that humility occurs in community as it is fundamentally about being other-centered. Humility does not occur in a vacuum; it is birthed in interaction with others. This must inform all our thinking about the concept.
- Humility as a Trinitarian reality implies that this attribute can be explored from two angles. First, we can look at the oneness of God and search out divine humility. Second, we can look at the diversity in God as we discern humility in each of the three persons. Both perspectives will deepen our grasp on the God who comes low.
- If God is humble, it follows that all he does will be marked by humility. In other words, we will be able to discern humility in creation, in the way he reveals himself, how he engages with Israel and the nations, the incarnation, cross, and ascension--humility will be found in everything he does. We will hear humility in his words and see it in all his activity. A Humble God will always stay true to his character, humility will show up everywhere while it's opposite, pride, will never come out of him.

**'HUMILITY IS A TRINITARIAN ATTRIBUTE AND DYNAMIC. THIS MEANS THAT HUMILITY OCCURS IN COMMUNITY AS IT IS FUNDAMENTALLY ABOUT BEING OTHER-CENTERED.'**

**'THE HUMBLE GOD IS THE KEY TO UNDERSTANDING JOY AND FULLNESS. GOD IS THE HAPPIEST BEING IN EXISTENCE, HE EPITOMIZES WHOLENESS AND FLOURISHING. THIS IS A REALITY FOR MANY REASONS, BUT ONE OF THEM IS THAT GOD EXISTS IN A COMMUNITY DEVOTED TO LOOKING OUT FOR THE OTHER.'**

- The coming reign of God will be humble. Kings are rarely characterized by lowliness and service; the Triune God is quite the opposite. Yahweh is a humble sovereign, a sacrificing deity, an outward looking God. What a refreshing reality awaits those who will live under his kingship. Greg Haslam is right, "At the root of all present-day oppressive dictatorships, divided or monochrome societies, devaluation of certain individuals and the inability to cultivate loving community, is a denial of the Trinity" (*The Sermon on the Mount*, 2011).
- The Humble God is the key to understanding joy and fullness. God is the happiest being in existence, he epitomizes wholeness and flourishing. This is a reality for many reasons, but one of them is that God exists in a community devoted to looking out for the other. Happiness is always connected to other-centeredness, to serving, to placing others above ourselves, which means that humility is a key ingredient to thriving. Imagine a community where this happens continuously and flawlessly, that is the Trinity. This selfless posture within the Triune community is expressed outwardly toward us. Creation and salvation are the ways that God draws us into his flourishing community.
- Visions of a humble God invoke repentance and worship. Beholding a God who gets on his knees to wash his creature's feet will move us. Reflecting on a Creator who serves us has a way of shattering hardness in our hearts and stirring us to song. The more we view God's humility, the more we will be moved.
- Human beings are made in the image of a humble God, it follows that humility is a mark of genuine humanity. We are called to humility because we are called to reflect God. The saving humility of Christ makes this a possibility, the humble Spirit dwelling within makes it a reality. Further, our humility draws the attention of God and becomes the occasion of fellowship with him: "For thus says the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: 'I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite'" (Is 57:15). While grace, guidance, fellowship, and honor are in abundance for the humble, his resistance awaits the proud (Ps 25:9, Matt 23:12, James 4:6, 10).

These are just a view of the important ramifications of grasping the humility of God. Let me encourage you to look for the humble God on the pages of Scripture and in the chapters of your life. If you look closely, I am confident you will see his tireless concern and service to you at every turn.

### **Chaplain Kory M. Capps**

Chaplain Capps is currently stationed at MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, Florida where he serves as an Active Duty military chaplain. Prior to joining the military, he served as a chaplain in the correctional system. He is married to his wife of 20 years, Elizabeth and has four children. He holds a Doctorate of Ministry (DMin) in Military Chaplaincy, a Masters of Theology (ThM) in Practical Theology, and Masters of Divinity (MDiv) in Theology and Missions. He is the co-founder of From the Fray Ministries.





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