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 Philippians 2:5-11
 Bernard Bell
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THE VINDICATION OF OBEDIENCE

Since Wednesday morning the attention of the nation has been focused on Oklahoma City, that most unlikely of terrorist targets. Two aspects of this attack—the location and the perpetrators—have profoundly unsettled people. It was easier to come to terms with the work of presumed foreign terrorists than it has been to accept that this is the work of members of one's own nation. These two aspects of the case have produced the uneasy feeling that nowhere is safe. Terrorism, which first struck the World Trade Center last year, has now struck at the heart of the nation, both literally and metaphorically. What motivates a person to engage in terrorism? As the Japanese found out last month, terrorist acts leave one feeling at the mercy of random forces of evil completely outside our control.

It is my task today to direct your attention away from Oklahoma City, Tokyo, and Rwanda, to consider Jesus.

We come this morning to the third and final part of our little series shaped around Easter. On the past two Sundays, Brian Morgan has examined events concerning Palm Sunday and Easter Sunday. My assigned task today is to jump ahead forty days and examine the Ascension.

There are four events that lie at the center of history, four events that span fifty days. The first event is the Crucifixion on Passover, followed by the Resurrection on the third day, the Ascension on the fortieth day, and the gift of the Spirit on the fiftieth day. I term these fifty days the "hinge of history," for in them God changes the whole course of history. If pressed to narrow down on which of these four events were the defining moment, I would be unable to do so. The crucifixion is not more important than the resurrection, which in turn is not more important than the Ascension. Finally, the gift of the Spirit extends the significance of all three events to man on earth, so that there really should be a fourth part to this little series of addresses, examining the gift of the Spirit on Pentecost.

The topic of the Ascension was assigned me, but, free to select my own text, I have chosen Philippians 2:5-11, with which most of you are familiar. If you are following this text in the NASB, you have in front of you a piece of prose. Most translations, however, render these verses as poetry, among the most sublime words in the New Testament. Possibly it is a hymn, composed in the earliest years of the Church, which Paul has incorporated into his letter. We'll look first at the theology of the hymn, and then at why Paul might have included it in his letter to the church at Philippi.

The passage is readily divided into two stanzas: verses 5-8 describe what Christ Jesus has done; verses 9-11 describe what God the Father has done in response.

I. The Obedience of the Son

...Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. vv. 5b-8

1. Jesus the True Man

A striking feature of this first stanza is the use of the word "form" and its synonyms "likeness" and "appearance." We read that Christ Jesus was in the form of God, but took on the form of a servant and the likeness and appearance of man.

We first read of the image in Genesis 1:26-27:

Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." And God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.

Throughout Genesis 1 we read the repeated refrain, "after their kind." God created the plants after their kind, the sea creatures after their kind, the birds after their kind, the land animals after their kind, but when we come to the creation of man it is different. Man is created not after its kind but after God's kind, in God's image. This is what marks out man as radically different from the animals, what places him closer to God than to the other creatures. It is this that moved David to write,

What is man, that Thou dost take thought of him? And the son of man, that Thou dost care for him? Yet Thou hast made him a little lower than God, And dost crown him with glory and majesty! Thou dost make him to rule over the works of Thy hands; Thou hast put all things under his feet, All sheep and oxen, And also the beasts of the field, The birds of the heavens, and the fish of the sea, Whatever passes through the paths of the seas. O Lord, our Lord, How majestic is Thy name in all the earth! (Psalm 8:4-9)

This image was badly marred at the Fall, and it might seem that we read no more of the image in the Old Testament. However, if we take a lateral jump in our thinking we find that the theology of the image does indeed permeate the Old Testament, for the image is inherent in the idea of father and son. Indeed, we use metaphors today that express that connection: "like father, like son," and "a chip off the old block."

Since Adam is in the image of God, he is the son of God. Luke explicitly identifies him as such in his genealogy of Jesus (Luke 3:37). Through the Fall and the subsequent curse and banishment from the garden, this son was estranged from his Father. Like the father of the prodigal son, it has been God's desire ever since to restore the rebellious son back into fellowship with Himself. Therefore, when God called Israel out of Egypt, he described it as, "Out of Israel I called my son" (Hosea 11:1). Having brought the son out, God brought the nation to Mount Sinai to meet with Him. There He told the people of His intention concerning them: "I will also walk among you and be your God, and you shall be My people" (Lev 26:12). This desire has remained the heart of God's covenant intentions, the best description of God's plan. After the Lord had installed David as king in Zion, He narrowed down the concept

of the son to describe an individual not a nation:

"When your days are complete and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your descendant after you, who will come forth from you, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be a father to him and he will be a son to Me" (2 Sam 7:12-14).

It was God's intention to put on earth one who was both son of man and son of God.

The more I study Scripture the more I see that many things on earth are a copy of what is in heaven. For example, the tabernacle constructed in the wilderness was assembled by Moses according to the heavenly pattern that God showed him. The temple was built according to the heavenly pattern revealed to David which he passed on to his son Solomon. The ark of the covenant was a copy of the true ark in heaven. When one sees this pattern it is no surprise to find the same with the image and the son. Adam was made in the image of God as His son, but the true image and son was already in heaven. This makes Jesus uniquely qualified to be a man. Since Jesus is the exact image of God, when Jesus became man there was at last a true man on the earth, for the first time since Adam. But this man is far more of a man than was Adam, for His image is the exact representation of the Father.

One of the reasons the incarnation was necessary was to restore true humanity. Jesus is the new Adam. This is not the first time that God has appointed a new Adam upon the earth. After the Flood, which God used to wipe the earth clean, He commissioned Noah as a new Adam to inaugurate a new beginning upon the earth. But in the very next episode we read of Noah's drunkenness, and the subsequent curse upon Canaan. The call of Abraham marked a new beginning. The Exodus from Egypt marked a new beginning. But by the end of the Old Testament it has become painfully obvious that man is inadequate to be the new Adam. To restore true humanity to the world it takes nothing less than God Himself entering space and time as True Man, as the perfect image.

Understanding Jesus to be True Man we can interpret many of his miracles as being not so much signs of his divinity as signs of his true manhood. Thus, when Jesus stilled the storm, that is what man who rules over creation is supposed to do. When Jesus overrules Satan, that is what true man is supposed to do, what the first man failed to do when the serpent spoke.

2. Jesus the True Servant

When God restored true humanity to the world in the person of Jesus the God-man, we might have expected that this True Man would have immediately commenced the reign over creation to which the first Adam was appointed in Genesis 1. But we read here that Jesus took upon Himself not the form of a king but that of a servant; furthermore He was an obedient servant. This, too, is no surprise when we understand the Old Testament background.

God commissioned Adam to be not only a king, ruling His creation as his viceroy on earth, but also a servant, tending His garden (Gen 2:15). The servant is called to be faithful and obedient, occupied with the affairs of his master, and available to his every bidding. Man quickly failed to be obedient, but the disobedience of which we read in Genesis 3 was not the first act of disobedience, for rebellion had already entered through Satan. God tells us very little about Satan, but we do know that Satan's downfall was the rebellious grasping for what was God's alone. In Isaiah 14 we read a taunt song against the king of Babylon, which includes this passage:

How you have fallen from heaven, O star of the morning, son of the dawn! You have been cut down to the earth, You

who have weakened the nations! But you said in your heart, 'I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God, And I will sit on the mount of assembly In the recesses of the north. I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High.' Nevertheless you will be thrust down to Sheol, To the recesses of the pit. (Isaiah 14:12-15).

While this refers in the first instance to a particular king of Babylon (one can see the similarity to Nebuchadnezzar, Daniel 4), by the sort of extension common in Biblical thinking, it refers to all the kings of Babylon of whom this one king is representative; by further extension it refers to all pagan kingdoms which set themselves against God, of which Babylon is the archetypical kingdom; by ultimate extension it refers to Satan who lies behind all these kingdoms and kings.

Satan, who it seems had been made as one of the highest angels, even the highest, grasped after what was not his, when he aspired to be like God. As a result he was thrown out of heaven, out of God's presence. Notice how similar this is to the events of Genesis 3, where we are told in far greater detail of man's first act of disobedience. Satan failed in his attempt to be like God, but ever since he has been trying to persuade men and women that they can succeed in this quest. Man's fate was the same as that of Satan: expulsion from God's presence as Adam and Eve were driven out of the garden.

Notice how the actions of Jesus are just the opposite of both Satan and man. Satan and man both grasped after what was not theirs, namely equality with God, and suffered expulsion from God's presence. Jesus already possessed that equality with God, but he voluntarily let it go and voluntarily left God's presence in heaven. This departure from heaven is described as an emptying of self and a loosening of the grasp upon what He had by right. We see this in the temptation of Jesus. Whereas Satan tempted man to grasp after something he did not have, he tempted Jesus to use for his own selfish purposes powers that He did already have, but had voluntarily renounced.

Man had failed to be the obedient servant in the garden. Throughout the Old Testament God has been calling man back to the office of servant. The highest honor that can be given in the Old Testament is to be called the servant of God, a title given to Moses, Joshua and David. The goal of the deliverance from slavery in Egypt was that Israel might worship and serve God. Neither Hebrew nor Greek distinguishes between work and worship, using the same word for what we consider very different concepts. The Biblical mindset is that work is worship, that all of life is the service of God, and that there is no differentiation between sacred and secular activity. When God brought Israel to meet with Him at Sinai, He announced His intention that the whole nation be to him a kingdom of priests (Exodus 19:6). The job description of the priest is to be the servant of his god, wholly occupied with the affairs of that god. So Israel was to be wholly occupied with the affairs of her God. That did not prevent the people going about making a living, but it did mean that that living was to be made in accordance with God's designs. The law or Torah was given to show Israel how to live as God's servants, not how to earn a place as His servants.

Through her repeated disobedience Israel failed to be God's servant, but God showed the prophet Isaiah that He remained committed to the idea of bringing forth an obedient servant. In the four Servant Songs of Isaiah (42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12), the servant of whom the Lord is talking is still Israel, but it gradually becomes apparent that this Servant is a single individual in distinction to the nation. When the Son came to earth in the form of a servant he was fulfilling the roles of both

Adam and Israel. Our text is emphatic that, unlike Adam and Israel, Jesus was obedient to His commission.

To what was Jesus obedient? Theologians talk of both the active and the passive obedience of Christ. He was actively obedient in living out his life on earth in full conformity to the will of God, never once rebelling. He was passively obedient in patiently accepting the full measure of all that God put upon Him on the cross, even to death. The path of obedience was not an easy one. During his lifetime it meant rejection. In his trial and death, it meant much suffering and humiliation, for the death he died was by crucifixion, the excruciatingly painful and shameful method of execution the Romans used for rebels.

The death of Jesus meant that at last there had been a true servant on earth. What Adam had failed to do, Jesus did. What Israel had failed to do, Jesus did. Jesus therefore acted in the stead of both Adam and Israel, not only in being the true man, the true image, the true son, but in being also the true servant.

Fifty years ago this month, another obedient servant was put to death. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was hanged by the Nazis just one week before the Allies liberated his prison camp. The message for which he is best known is that of costly obedience, as developed in his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*.

Obedience is not a popular concept today. Mention of it quickly attracts the charge of legalism. For several years Wayne Hodges and John MacArthur have fought a battle of words in the so-called "Lordship Controversy," Hodges arguing that to preach obedience is a denial of salvation by faith alone, and MacArthur responding that recognition of Jesus as Savior without recognition of Jesus as Lord to whom one is to be obedient is a nonsense. Although salvation is all of grace through faith, obedience runs throughout the Bible, both Old and New Testaments. Adam was called to be obedient. Israel was called to be obedient, but not before she had already been saved by grace. God's people are called to be obedient, but not before they have been saved by grace. Salvation has to be of grace, for the message of the Bible is that it is impossible for natural man to be obedient. That's why the obedient servant had to come from heaven. But having been saved by grace, we are called to be God's priests and servants, devoted to His affairs. In Biblical thinking there is no difference between the priest and the servant.

II. The Response of the Father

The True Son and Obedient Servant died the shameful death of a rebel, a death full of irony as he was the only non-rebel ever to walk upon earth. In the second stanza of our hymn we read of God's response to the obedient service of the Son:

Therefore also God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those who are in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. vv. 9-11.

The servant's obedience did not go unnoticed: God the Father vindicated His Son for His obedience. This vindication was a two-stage process: the resurrection and the Ascension. In raising Jesus from the dead, God showed that by the act of obedience and by the shedding of the sacrificial blood, the physical and spiritual death that had entered the world at the Fall had been removed. What happened forty days later on the day we now commemorate as Ascension day?

1. Man in heaven

First, the Ascension marked the return of the Son to heaven,

His rightful home. The writer to the Hebrews describes this as His entry into the true tabernacle. The tabernacle and later the temple were the dwelling place of God, but Solomon realized that God did not really dwell on earth (1 Kings 8). His true dwelling place, and therefore the site of the true tabernacle and temple, has always been in heaven. When Jesus returned to heaven, He did so not just as the Son of God, but now also as a man. The great significance of this is that there was now a man in heaven. We have seen that it has always been God's desire to dwell with His people. Coming down to earth to dwell with them in their dwelling place was only a second-best interim measure. His ultimate desire has been to bring His people to His dwelling place. Jesus entered heaven as the first man to enter God's dwelling place. Furthermore, since He is the first-fruits of them that rise from the dead, other men will follow.

2. The True King

The Ascension also marked the installation of the True King. We've seen that Adam was called to rule in God's stead on earth, but through man's rebellion, this office was lost. In the person of David, God reinstated the office of king, and declared that David would have a son who would be installed on David's throne forever. The site of this throne was Zion, the center of God's kingdom on earth. In the Ascension, God installed the true Son of David as true King on the true throne of David in the true Zion, thus inaugurating the Kingdom of God as foreseen in Daniel 7. Psalm 2:6, used at the coronation of Judah's kings, had now come truly true: "I have installed My King upon Zion, My holy mountain."

3. Jesus is Lord

At His investiture God gave His King the name above every other name. What was this name? From the end of verse 11, it is the name LORD, a name fraught with significance in the Old Testament. By giving this name, God made it clear that this Jesus was God Himself.

Verse 10 contains a quotation from Isaiah 45:24:

"Turn to Me, and be saved, all the ends of the earth; For I am God, and there is no other. I have sworn by Myself, The word has gone forth from My mouth in righteousness And will not turn back, That to Me every knee will bow, every tongue will swear allegiance. They will say of Me, 'Only in the Lord are righteousness and strength.' Men will come to Him, And all who were angry at Him shall be put to shame. In the Lord all the offspring of Israel Will be justified, and will glory." (Isaiah 45:22-25)

In this passage, the Lord emphasizes that He alone is God. While remaining committed to monotheism the early church ascribed to Jesus honor that was due God alone.

This King is now reigning in history. Many do not see that reign but this King is bringing all things under subjection to Himself, so that all will eventually acknowledge His Lordship. Those in heaven will bow at the name of Jesus. Presumably these are the angels who have long been waiting in eager expectation to see how God would restore order to a world gone wrong. In Revelation we read of the multitudes of angels acknowledging the King.

Those on the earth will acknowledge Jesus as Lord and King. There are those for whom that acknowledgment is a thing of delight, but there are those for whom it is a thing of terror. The former are those who are bow before the throne and confess their rebellion. The latter are those who continue in their rebellion until it is too late; they, at last, will be forced to bow on the fearful judgment day.

The third group to acknowledge the King are those under

the earth. Presumably these are the satanic forces who will finally realize that Satan has been an impostor all along, for at the last Satan himself will be crushed.

The stanza closes by telling us that the ultimate result of all this is that God the Father will be glorified. By the third chapter of the Bible, God's perfect world that was "very good" had gone far wrong. Two of his principle creatures, Satan and man, had gone bad, putting God's glory and honor at stake. God does all things to restore His glory and honor. God has acted not primarily to restore man, but to restore His name. It is a matter of wonder that this restoration of glory, while it works out to no advantage to Satan, it is to the tremendous advantage of man. In the process of restoring His honor, God restores order to a disordered world, and restores man to His presence.

III. Paul's Mind Set On Christ

We turn finally to examine why Paul might have incorporated this hymn in his letter to the church at Philippi. First, though, we must consider the change in thought that must have been necessary for Paul to even write these words. Paul was trained as a rabbi, proving himself beyond his peers. The two most distinctive beliefs of first century Pharisaic Judaism, out of which grew rabbinic Judaism, were monotheism and election. As evidenced later at Masada, Jews were willing to die rather than compromise their monotheism, their belief that Yahweh, the God of Israel, was the only God. Their belief in election was that God had chosen Israel to be His people. From this followed the corollary that if God was God and Israel was His people, then God would vindicate Israel. Luke's portrayal of the pre-Christian Saul, and Paul's own description of himself, show that he was most zealous about these doctrines. But, as a result of meeting the risen and exalted Christ on the Damascus road, Paul's theology was turned upside down. He did not abandon his belief in monotheism or election, but it was radically transformed. While continuing to acknowledge that, through Abraham, God had chosen Israel, he saw that God had already brought vindication, not to the nation Israel, but to the man Jesus who was the only member of the remnant that was true Israel. Moreover, this Jesus was equal with God, yet God was still one.

Paul's view of the whole history of the world was turned upside down. This new understanding could not help but permeate his letters. He wrote this letter around 61 AD from house arrest in Rome, the confinement with which Luke closes his book of Acts. The Christians in Philippi had heard of this imprisonment and it did not fit their picture of the successful Christian ministry. They sent their faithful brother Epaphroditus to Paul to express their concern. Paul wrote back to thank them for their thoughtfulness, to respond to their concerns, and to address some concerns he had about life in Philippi as

narrated to him by Epaphroditus.

After a year spent studying this letter, I adopted the working title of "Godly responses to difficult circumstances." Life for Paul in Rome was not easy. Life for the Christians in Philippi was not easy. Paul tells the Philippians of how he has responded to his difficult circumstances, and gives them advice on how to face their difficult circumstances. The key word in the letter is the Greek word *phroneo*, which has no exact one-word English equivalent. Even as literal a translation as the NASB renders this one Greek word into several English words. The nearest I can come to it is the expression, "to have a mindset." Used eleven times in the letter, it is the word used in verse 5 where Paul tells the Philippians to "have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus," and in verse 2 where he tells them to be of the same mind, followed by a description thereof.

A list of instructions might seem the most effective way to motivate people to a particular behavior or course of action. Indeed, such instructions do motivate, but the motivation quickly runs out of steam. Conversely, telling a story or holding up a role model seems theoretical, remote and impracticable. But that story works subversively within the individual and ultimately produces revolutionary changes in life. What was it that turned the Serbs against the Bosnians against the Croats? It was the retelling of stories from long ago: stories from World War II, stories from the days of the Ottoman Empire. In the 'tyranny of the practical' we are too quick to want handy instruction and too slow to reflect upon history. Paul calls the Philippians to consider the story of Jesus. By refreshing their memory with the story of Jesus, they will find the right mindset for their difficult circumstances.

In his book *The New Testament and the People of God* (Fortress, 1992), in a chapter entitled "Literature, story and the articulation of worldviews," Tom Wright argues for a chain of causality from worldview to mindset to life-aims to actions. Paul's worldview, that is his understanding of the history and functioning of the world, had been radically changed. This produced a dramatic change in his mindset; henceforth his mind was set upon Christ, upon heaven, upon the new Israel, the new man, the new creation. His life aims then included being an obedient servant, helping to build this new human race, proclaiming the gospel that Gentiles might enter into this new people. That determined his every action.

It appears that the attack on the Federal Building in Oklahoma City is the work of right-wing extremists. Their actions are determined by their mindset of resistance to government intrusion into private life, which in turn is determined by their worldview.

What is your world view? What is your mind set upon? What are your life aims? May this passage help shape your understanding of the world, and hence affect your daily actions. Yes, evil is rampant in the world, but God has installed His King in Zion. Let all the world be silent before Him.