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A Strange Way to Save the World

A Reason to Sing Series

Philippians 2:1-11

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You know, I think we're just so familiar with the story, and so busy at Christmas time, that so often we fail to slow down and to ponder the absolute wonder of the story we celebrate at Christmas. Joseph was an ordinary tradesman in an insignificant village of Nazareth. He was told by an angel that his betrothed would become pregnant having never had relations with a man, and that the Son in her womb would be the Savior of the world. They made the long difficult trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem, homeless in Bethlehem, with no place for them but a stable. And there Joseph sees his Son lying in an ordinary feeding trough. Certainly he must have thought, "This is such a strange way to save the world." But I would suggest to you, in that moment, Joseph had no idea how strange and wondrous the story would be.

If you have a Bible, turn with us to Philippians, Chapter 2. Paul is in the midst of a discussion that actually starts in chapter 1, verse 27. He's talking about conduct worthy of the gospel. In other words, if the message of the gospel is true, then we should actually live like it. Down in verse 29 he says, ***For to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake.***

When we read something like that, we tend to think to ourselves: Someday…someday, if things got so bad that they would throw me in prison for the sake of the gospel, then I'll do that. But let's be honest. It's pretty easy to be so courageous about something in the future that may or may not ever happen. So how about we talk about today, and perhaps suffering for us would simply be stepping aside from that which divides us, from that which distracts us, and to pay the cost necessary to represent Jesus to the world now.

Chapter 2, verse 1, is a bit of a review of things already talked about in Philippians. If these things are true, and we know that they are…

> **Therefore if there is any encouragement in Christ, if there's any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion,** (Then what?) **make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose.** (*NASB, Philippians 2:1-2)

If the message of the gospel is true, there is nothing in your life more important. Not your opinion…not your politics…nothing! The message of the gospel is a call to move beyond what divides us and what distracts us, to be part of something bigger than ourselves, to change the world, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. But for that to happen, verse 3:

> **Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit…**

The Greek word translated **selfishness** is an interesting word. It's often translated *selfish ambition*. As a matter of fact, it's translated that way in chapter one. The word literally meant *to canvass for votes*. It was a word used to describe a politician—that everything in life is about me. Notice me! See me! Vote for me! **Empty conceit**. Conceit, of course, is *arrogance*. It's *pride*. But what makes it empty is, if the gospel is true, there is nothing for me to be arrogant about. I didn't save myself. I didn't somehow perform in order to experience God's salvation. Jesus did it all. I'm the recipient. So whatever arrogance I have is empty. There's no reason for it. It's not true. So, to conduct ourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel, is to understand there's got to be something more than **selfish ambition**. There's got to be something more than **empty conceit**. So he goes on:

> **…but** (rather) **with humility of mind, regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not *merely* look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.** (Vs. 3b-4)

In other words, to put this in simple terms, it is a call to be utterly *other than* the rest of the culture. In a culture that is so selfish, so self-absorbed, a culture that is so judgmental, it's so angry, it's so intolerant, a culture where everyone is offended by everything—and you can't hardly say a sentence without it creating conflict with someone—the message of the gospel is a call to be *other than* that, and to see the people around us as people made in the image of God…people worthy to be treated with dignity and with value, people whom Jesus loves and Jesus died for, that need to know what Jesus has done for them, and to come together as the people of God, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. As a matter of fact, in verse 5, he says in order to do this, we need to:

> **Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God…** (Vs. 5-6a)

This is actually a very complex text. And these specific words matter. So what does he mean **existed**? He's talking about what we refer to as the preexistence of Christ…to remember on that first Christmas night, that wasn't the beginning of Christ. This is the eternal Son of God, the Creator of the universe, who existed long before that first Christmas night. Last week, Ryan did a beautiful job of explaining Psalm 98, and he talked about Yahweh, the ultimate King Jesus in the Old Testament. Jesus preexisted His birth **in the form of God**.

Now, what does that mean? When we hear the word **form**, we think of shape and size, but that doesn't make sense with God, and it's certainly not what the word means. It's a rather complicated word, but the best definition I know is, it's describing an external environment that is appropriate for an internal essence. In other words, He existed in an environment that was appropriate for who He is as God. This raises an interesting question. What would that environment be like?

It's mind blowing to try to even consider an environment appropriate for the eternal God of the universe. Perhaps one of the ways we can at least think about glimpses, is to look at the handiwork of God. So, for example, think about the universe. The universe is unbelievably vast. We can't even begin to comprehend the size of the universe. As a matter of fact, the most common way to measure the universe is through what is called a light year—the distance light travels in one year. The speed of light travels 186,282 miles per second…per second! If I were to shoot a gun this

morning, and that bullet were to travel at the speed of light around planet Earth and back, traveling at the speed of light, it would go through me seven times in one second. That's the speed of light. Now imagine how far that bullet would travel in an entire year. That's a light year!

Scientists today are saying: As far as the observable universe is concerned, and what they mean by that is we don't even know how big this is. But as far as what we've been able to observe, the estimate is it's about 93 billion light years in diameter. Unbelievable! But for our purposes, it isn't just the vastness of the universe. It's the beauty. It's the wonder. It's the mystery. It's the majesty. Through the Hubble telescope, we have been able to see images, breathtaking images of the universe. The internet is full of these images and they are absolutely spectacular. What's interesting about that is, up until modern times, no one in the history of humanity has ever seen that beauty. Which raises an interesting question. If that is true, why would God create such wonder, such beauty, such mystery, if no one can see it? And the answer is: because He sees it, and He likes it. He delights in it! He finds joy in it! And I find myself wondering, "Is that but a glimpse of how majestic that environment must have been?"

I think about the ocean floor. Seventy percent of the Earth's surface is under water. And to date 80% of it is still undiscovered. Eighty percent! It's full of wonder and beauty and mystery. And again, in the history of humanity, no one has seen 80% of the ocean floor. So why would God create something with such beauty, such majesty, such wonder, such mystery, if no one can see it? The answer is because He sees it and He likes it. He delights in it! It brings Him joy! And I wonder, "Is that but a glimpse of the majesty of that environment?"

Moses wanted to see the glory of God. He said, "God, show me your glory." And God said, "Moses, if you saw it, it would kill you. So here's what we're going to do. We're going to put you in the cleft of the rock. I'm going to put my hand over the rock, and I'm going to pass over. And at the very last second, I'm going to pull my hand back, and all you get is a glimpse—literally the Hebrew is *of my hindquarters.* And that's all you can see and live."

Isaiah, in chapter six, had that magnificent vision of God. And he said, "Woe is me, I am unraveled." John, in Revelation chapter one, sees this vision of God and he falls on the ground as a dead man. All of those give us just little glimpses of what must that environment have been like. That's appropriate for the God of the universe. But He didn't stay there.

> **…who, although He existed in the form of God, He did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped,** (Vs. 6)

That word **grasp** means to hold on or exploit for personal gain. Think of it this way. Often I hear people say that Satan's great sin was he wanted to be like God. But I don't believe that's correct. What he wanted was God's glory. What he wanted was God's power. What he wanted was God's position. But he wanted to exploit it for personal gain. That's not like God at all. As a matter of fact, if God was like that, there would be no Christmas, and there would be no salvation. It was not something to grasp, hold on to, to exploit for personal gain. But…verse 7:

> **…but He emptied Himself**,

Now, what does that mean? It's the Greek word *kenosis*. As a matter of fact, this text in Philippians chapter two is referred to as the *kenosis passage* after this word. So what does it mean that **He emptied himself?** Certainly He didn't empty Himself of His deity. He was fully God, and fully man: Emmanuel, God with us. Again, I think the best definition I'm aware of, is Jesus chose to set aside the independent access to His attributes when He took on human flesh. In other words, while He was still omnipotent, all powerful, He grew weary, and tired. While He was still omniscient, all knowing, and when asked a question, He said, "I don't know; only the Father knows." Somehow, in this mysterious union between God and human flesh, Jesus humbled Himself under the Father, choosing not to independently access those attributes, but He… verse 7:

> **emptied Himself, taking the form of a bondservant** (or slave)**.**

Again, this is our same word **form**, an external environment conducive to an internal essence. So just to be clear about this, I want you to try to imagine how mysterious, how wondrous, how breathtakingly beautiful that environment must have been like. Yet He willingly chose to give that up in order to come to earth, to take on human flesh, to be homeless in Bethlehem, with nowhere to dwell but a feeding trough in a stable…an environment fitting for a slave. That's what He did. That's the journey of Christmas. From the magnificent glories of heaven to a Bethlehem stable. Of course, we know the story doesn't end there.

> **. . . and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death,** (Vs. 7b-8a)

How does God in the flesh die? I don't know. It's part of the mystery of all this. Fully human in every way, all the way to the point of death. But Paul doesn't end it there,

> **. . . even death on a cross.** (Vs 8b)

When we hear **cross**, we think religious symbol. That's not what they heard. They heard *execution*. The Romans reserved crucifixion for the worst of the worst, the lowest of the low. It was an absolutely horrific way to die. As a matter of fact, it was not uncommon that after someone died on a cross, the Romans would walk away and leave the bodies for the animals to tear down and consume. It was their way of saying, "You are so worthless, it isn't even worth our time to take the body down." Everything about a crucifixion was meant for the utmost shame and humiliation.

I think of this through the perspective of the angels who had seen the eternal God in all of His glory. They saw Him leave this utterly magnificent place, to enter into the world in a stable in Bethlehem. As a matter of fact, they were called on to be part of this celebration. But I'm quite certain that in that moment, when the God of the universe who had taken on human flesh died on that cross, they were utterly stunned. I am quite certain there was an eerie, deathly silence in the heavens as they looked on the scene of the eternal God, who had taken on human flesh, hanging dead on cross. And He did that for you! He did it for me!

One of the things I think we've often failed to think about, is from the moment the eternal God of the universe took on human flesh, there would never be another moment for the rest of eternity, where He would ever cease to be the God Man. It was not a 33-year commitment, get the job done,

go back to business as usual. From the moment He took on human flesh, for the rest of eternity, there will never again be a moment where He isn't the God Man. Unbelievable! For you! For me!

Of course, we know the story doesn't end there. Three days later, He rose from the dead, having conquered sin and death, once for all time. He ascended to the right hand of the Father and sits above all rule and power and authority and dominion. Paul describes it this way, verse 9:

> **For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus, EVERY KNEE WILL BOW, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.** (Vs. 9-11)

There is this moment in history that had to have been unimaginable to Joseph, where the eternal God of the universe hung on a cross, having taken on human flesh, and there He died…because there was no other way. Jesus asked the Father in the Garden of Gethsemane, "Is there any other way?" And the answer was, "No!" This is why it's so offensive when people say all roads lead to God. No, they don't. If there was another road, there was no need for this moment. This is the only way that the God of the universe would take on human flesh and die for the sins of the world. But as a result of that, He is exalted in the heavenlies and one day **every knee will bow** and **every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God…**a complete and total victory!

This will not be a nice Christian moment where the only ones who will know this are the believers. The text is clear, **those in heaven, those on earth, those under the earth.** There will come a moment when **every knee will bow**, **every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God**. A complete and total victory! And that's why there's every reason for hope. That is why there is a reason to sing…no matter how dark the moment may feel!

Whether this Christmas season you're going through your own personal darkness, or whether it's simply the darkness and despair of the culture, there is every reason for hope, because at the end of the story, Jesus wins and the future is glorious. If that's true, there is nothing in your life more important than that. Not your opinion! Not your politics! Nothing that divides us and distracts us is more important than that. The message of the gospel is a call to put aside what divides us, to put aside what distracts us, and to give our lives to something bigger than ourselves…to be a light in a dark and needy world! Not a life of **selfish ambition**! Not a life of **empty conceit**! But to actually think of others as more important than ourselves! How many people around us don't know this? Again, how many people around us, they don't know this? They don't know this is what Jesus did for them. Perhaps this morning, they're in despair. They're feeling hopeless. They don't know where to turn. They have no idea this is what Jesus did "for you". Every person is a person made in the image of God. Every person is a person that deserves to be treated with dignity and value. Every person is a person that Jesus loves and died for. And our assignment as His Church is to tell them, and there is nothing in our lives more important than that!

Across the country as a result of the COVID season, there are thousands and thousands and thousands of Christians that have gotten themselves into some really bad habits. And one of those is, they have concluded it's just asking too much to ask me to get up once a week, put on clothes, leave the house, and gather with the people of God to worship Jesus…to encourage one another, and to be about the mission. If that's where you find yourself this Christmas season, let me just

remind you, Jesus left the glories of heaven for you. Is it really asking too much that once a week you leave the safety of your home and you gather with the people of God, to worship Him, to encourage one another, and to be about the mission? Church is not a television show. It's the "called out" gathered people of God, united in spirit, intent on one purpose, called to be a light in the darkness to change the world. May we be that church!

Our Father we celebrate this morning this great truth…the story of what was necessary for us to experience salvation! God, may we lay aside what divides and distracts, and may we be united in spirit and intent on one purpose. Lord, may we be Your Church. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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