

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia, on Sunday, December 23, 1990, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

### **PHILIPPIANS 2:5-11**

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross!

Therefore, God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, 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.

### **WHAT'S SO SPECIAL ABOUT CHRISTMAS?**

This week the whole world will focus on one event — Christmas. Offices will close down and everything else will become secondary for one 24-hour period while we celebrate Christmas. It always amazes me that an event that happened nearly 2,000 years ago can still cause traffic jams and crowded airports and can influence the very economy of our country.

Now, what's so special about Christmas anyway? Why all the big hoopla? I'll tell you -- it is the centerpiece of our history. Even our calendar reminds us of Jesus. "A.D. 1990" – "in the year of our Lord 1990." The reference point is Jesus Christ. God split history with the event of Christmas; and since that birth at Bethlehem everything has been either "B.C." – "before Christ," or "A.D." – "in the year of our Lord."

What is so special about Christmas? I think that Philippians 2:5-11 answers that question. We have in this passage, I believe, the most persuasive explanation in all of the Bible of Who Jesus Christ is, and of what He came to do.

So, we're going to look today at the bedrock foundation of all that we believe as Christians. And I want you to see four things concerning the importance of Christmas:

1. The Relevance of Christmas - why is it important?
2. The Reality of Christmas - what actually happened?
3. The Reason for Christmas - why did it happen?
4. The Result of Christmas - so what?

**1. The Relevance of Christmas.** In verses 5 and 6 Paul says that the relevance of Christmas is this: God came to earth. When the allies landed on the beaches of Normandy on D-day, that

was big news. But that was nothing compared to the news that God invaded earth and established a beachhead at Bethlehem. It was big news when Neil Armstrong set foot on the moon. President Nixon made the utterly blasphemous statement that it was the greatest day in the history of mankind. Had he forgotten about that starlit night at Bethlehem? That's what Christmas is all about.

But someone says, "I thought you were talking about Jesus coming at Christmas." That is true. And the Bible says that Jesus is God. That's what this whole passage is about: it is saying that Jesus Christ is God Himself in human form and flesh. It was God Who came to earth.

Notice what Paul says in verses 5 and 6: "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus, Who, being in very nature (what?) GOD... Phillips translation says, "He has always been God by nature." Jesus is God. This is the relevance of Christmas — that God invaded earth.

Now I know a lot of people say, "Yes, Jesus was a great man, probably the greatest man who ever lived. He was a great prophet." There's only one problem with that. Jesus never claimed to be a prophet. Time and time again He claimed to be God. I stand at this pulpit week by week and in essence say, "I've got something from God to say to you," and I think you believe that; and you listen. But the moment I would start calling myself God, all of you would make for the exits, or call for a padded wagon to take me to you-know-where!

And Jesus said, "I am God. If you have seen Me, you have seen the Father" (John 14:9). On another occasion He said, "Before Abraham was, I AM" -- using the present tense (John 8:58). Notice that our text says, "He has always been God by nature." I think it surprises many people that Jesus' life didn't begin in a stable. He has existed from even before the creation of the universe. The theologians call this the preexistence of Christ.

Look at Colossians 1:15,16 (Living Bible): "Christ is the exact likeness of the unseen God. He existed before God made anything at all, and, in fact, Christ Himself is the Creator Who made everything in heaven and earth..." Now I have difficulty in relating to a God Who is away out there among the millions of galaxies in unending space; but when I see God in human flesh, when I see God in Jesus Christ, I can relate to that. And the Bible says, "If you have seen Jesus, you have seen God!" So, if Jesus really is God, and God came to earth, then Christmas is the most relevant event in all of human history.

**2. The Reality of Christmas.** The reality is that God became a man. Now that is even more difficult to understand. If you were God, would you choose to come to earth as a Baby, as a human being? Look at verses 7 and 8: "He made Himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself..."

What is the reality of Christmas? It is that Jesus Christ was not a myth or a specter, He was a real man with flesh and blood. In the Encyclopedia Britannica there are more pages devoted to Jesus Christ than to anyone else.

Why did God become a real man? Why didn't He just write His message in the sky?

Because He wanted us to see what He is really like, and He could do that only by becoming one of us! So, He became a human person; and that is what we call the Incarnation -- God in human flesh.

How is Jesus like us? In four ways:

a. He was born like us. He came into the world like billions of other babies, and the whole history of the world rested in that one little fragile Infant, delivered without even the help of a midwife. It must have blown the minds of the angels. "What is God doing? He just has reached earth in the middle of the night in a stable in Bethlehem!" And He did not stop being God when He became a Man. He was both. He was 100% God and 100% Man. But He was born like us.

b. He grew like us. Look at Luke 2:52: Even after He was 12 years of age He continued to "grow in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and man." He grew and developed. He had growth spurts. Can you imagine what it would have been like to have gone to school with Jesus? You would sense that He was a little bit different. He never did anything that was wrong! But would you believe that He was God? You see, Jesus didn't parade the fact that He was God. He didn't say when they were out playing in the schoolyard, "Now wait a minute, fellows. Remember, I'm God - let Me win!" He was a human being, and He grew like us. He looked every inch a Carpenter. He didn't walk around with a halo on His head, picking flowers and talking about peace and love. He was a Palestinian Jew — a real man.

c. He was tempted like us. Hebrews 4:15 (Good News Bible) says, "He was tempted in every way that we are but did not sin." He experienced the same pressures that you and I do, the same temptations, the same desires and needs and drives. He experienced the same temptations to lie and steal and cheat. But He never gave in to them. Why is that important? Because He can relate to us when we're struggling. He says, "I know; I've been there."

d. He suffered like us. He felt pain and disappointment and loneliness. He got tired, He grieved, He cried. He was a human. In Matthew 26: 38 He says, "The sorrow in My heart is so great that it almost crushes Me" (Good News Bible). The point is, He can relate to your pain, your problems, to your pressures; because, although He was God, He came and became a Man. Jesus became what we are so that we can become what He is! That is the reality of Christmas.

**3. The Reason for Christmas**. Why did He come to earth? Why did He bother? This is even more difficult to understand because Jesus came to die. That's the reason for Christmas. Look at verse 8: "He humbled Himself and became obedient to death - even death on a Cross!" Jesus didn't stay in a crib. He went to the Cross. And He voluntarily laid down His life for us. Now why did He do that? He didn't have to. He was God. He could have called 10,000 angels with flaming swords to rescue Him even while He climbed the slopes of Calvary. He did not have to go to the Cross. Nobody put Him there without His permission. The Bible says He went to the Cross for two reasons:

a. To demonstrate God's love. Look at Romans 5:8 (Living Bible): "God showed His great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners." The motivation was

love. People say, "How much does God love me?" Do you really want to know? Well, go and look at the Cross! That's how much God loves you. Jesus, with His hands outstretched, nailed to that Cross, is saying to you, "I love you this much."

Oh 'twas love, 'twas wondrous love,  
The love of God to me,  
That brought my Savior from above  
To die on Calvary.

Some of you would be willing to lay down your life for a loved one if the occasion ever arose. But the Bible says that God gave His life for us when we were rejecting Him. Romans 5:8 tells us that "While we were still sinners (that is, rebels against God), Christ died for us." That is love! And that's the reason for Christmas.

b. To pay for my sins. What do I mean when I say that? Just this -- when you break a law, you've got to pay a penalty. If I speed and get stopped, I get a ticket! When you break man's laws, you pay man's penalties. When you break God's laws, you pay God's penalties. And the Bible says (Romans 6:23), "The wages of sin is (what?) DEATH." Now that's the bad news. However, the rest of that verse says, "But (and I'm so grateful for that "but") the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." He came to pay for my sins. Look at 1 Peter 2:24 (Living Bible): "He personally carried the load of our sins in His own body when He died on the Cross, so that we can be finished with sin and live a good life." I don't understand it all, folks, but I do know this - the Bible says that what He did for me 2,000 years ago can make a difference in my life right now! And I can be forgiven for everything I've ever done wrong or will ever do. And that's the reason for Christmas.

Remember what the angels said? "For unto you is born this day (what?) a SAVIOR, Who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:11). What does it mean to be a Savior? We talk about "salvation." Someone says, "I got saved." What does that mean?

I am told that one of the things they teach you if you're training to be a lifeguard is this: when you swim out to a person who is drowning, usually you will not grab him right away. You will tread water and let him flail around, because he's in a panic; and if you grab him immediately he will grab on to you and pull you down. So, you wait until he's worn out and ready to go down for the third time, and then you simply take hold of him and start swimming back to shore. The point is - so long as a person is trying to save himself, you cannot save him.

Jesus came to be your Savior, but as long as you think, "I'm OK; I'm not that bad; my good works outnumber my bad deeds, and I'm expecting God to grade on the curve, so I'll probably make it" - you are the person in the most danger. The person who realizes he needs a Savior is much more open to receiving a Savior. If you say, "Well, I don't think I need a Savior," you've got a serious problem. You see, if you didn't need a Savior, God would not have wasted all the effort to provide one. But the very fact that Jesus Christ did come to earth, having given up all the glory of heaven, to become a human being and be born as a little Child, and then grow up and endure pain and temptation, and finally die on a Cross, and be raised again on Easter morning, means that you need what He has to offer.

He came to show how much God loves you, and to pay for your sins by dying on the Cross to purchase your salvation. And what is salvation? When we sincerely repent of our sins God gives us freedom from guilt, from worry, from fear, from purposelessness in life; freedom to know that your eternity is settled. It is freedom to live the way God wants you to live. That's what salvation is, and that's what the reason for Christmas is.

**4. The Result of Christmas.** All this has happened. So what? The result of Christmas is this — Jesus Christ is Lord! Jesus is Lord. Now let me explain. Look at verses 9-11: “Therefore God exalted Him to the highest place and gave Him the Name that is above every name, 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.” The Cross was not the end, folks! He's alive. He's very much alive! That's what Easter is all about.

But Jesus humbled Himself by coming to earth for our salvation, so God has exalted Him. God has done two things:

- a. He has given our Lord the place of supreme honor in the universe; and
- b. He has given Him a new name. In New Testament times the name “Jesus” was a very common name. It was like “John” or “Tom” today. “Jesus” means “salvation is of the Lord.” And that's why they had to refer to our Lord as “Jesus of Nazareth” to distinguish Him from others of the same name.

So, what is the name Jesus has been given as a result of His going to the Cross for us? Listen again: “Every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is (what?) LORD.” The new name that Jesus has been given is L-O-R-D. Jesus is Lord!

“Lord” in Greek is the word “kurios” — it means “master,” “ruler,” “sovereign,” “king.” And over 600 times in the New Testament Jesus is called “Lord.” Now you've got to understand what that means. In New Testament times “Lord” was the word used for the Roman emperor, the “Caesar”; and in the Roman Empire the emperor was treated as God. They worshipped him as a divine being. So, the Romans would say, “Kurios Caesar” - “Caesar is Lord” or “Caesar is God.” And it became a test of loyalty in the Roman Empire. As a loyal citizen you were obliged, once a year, to go to a shrine, burn a pinch of incense, and say “Kurios Caesar.” And when Christians refused to do that, they were thrown to the lions, or dumped into vats of boiling oil. Many of them lost their lives simply because they would utter only one phrase, “Kurios Iesus” — “Jesus is Lord,” not Caesar.

So what does it mean today when I say, “Jesus is Lord”? It means three things:

- a. It means that I acknowledge that He is really God. He is more than a man, more than a prophet. He really is God. He is the Lord. After all, only the infinite God could pay the price for an infinite number of sins committed by an infinite number of people.
- b. It means that I believe He has everything under control. Since Jesus is God, and God

has everything under control, therefore Jesus has everything under control. And to say, “Jesus is Lord” is a statement of comfort and encouragement. Although everything may look bleak, I know Jesus has it all under control because He is Lord. I may not understand what is happening, but Jesus is Lord, and I know that nothing escapes His care and concern. I don’t know what 1991 will hold in store and neither do you. I don’t know what the future holds, but I know Who holds the future!

c. It means that I must commit all of my life to Him. He calls the shots, Because He has come to earth and died for me, He has the right to determine how I should live my life.

What does it mean to be a Christian? It means that you say with all sincerity, “Jesus is my Lord. I acknowledge the fact that He is God; I believe He has everything under control; and in repentance and faith I commit everything I am, or ever hope to be, to Him.”

Now notice verses 10 and 11. When people say, “What is this world coming to?” you can tell them! One day “every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord”; and at last He will be given His rightful glory and honor; can you imagine the awesome scene on Judgment Day? Those on the right, who are bound for heaven, and those on the left, whose destination is hell, will all bow before that “Great White throne” (Revelation 20:11) on which sits the exalted Christ, and confess that He is Lord. Every nationality, every age group, every religion will say, “Jesus is Lord.” All the politicians will be there, and they will say, “Jesus is Lord.” Look at Marx and Lenin, Stalin and Hitler, Muammar Khadafi and Saddam Hussein and the IRA terrorists, on their way to the lake of fire, bowing and saying “Jesus Christ is Lord.” And all the rock stars are going to be there: Bruce Springsteen and all the heavy metal boys, and Elvis Presley, and Madonna -- they’re all going to bow and say, “Jesus is Lord,” And all the film stars and entertainers and atheists will be there -- Hugh Hefner with his Playboy magazine tucked under his arm, and Phil Donahue and Geraldo and Madalyn Murray, and Clark Gable and Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton and Jane Fonda -- they’ll all be there, bowing down and saying, “Jesus Christ is Lord.” And all the scientists and all the business tycoons -- Henry Ford and John D. Rockefeller and Lee Iacocca will be there, along with all the homemakers, and they will all be crying out — “Jesus is Lord.” And all the abortionists and pornographers and drug traffickers will be there saying “Jesus Christ is Lord.”

You see, the issue is not — Will you admit that Jesus Christ is Lord? You will one day. The issue is simply “When?” You will either admit it now in faith and love, in honor and respect; or, on Judgment Day you will admit it when it is too late to repent.

Give your life to Christ right now, my friend. Confess your sins to Him, truly repent of them, and open the door and invite the Savior into your life. He is knocking at the door, waiting for you to open it. And when He comes in, He will cleanse you, and fill you with His Spirit, and prepare you to face anything and everything that life holds in store for you. Make Him your Savior and your Lord!

It may look like the other side is winning right now, but Jesus is Lord! You may think, “I just can’t cope any more; I’m under too much pressure; circumstances are piled up against me.” But Jesus is Lord. People may frustrate you, disappoint you, even betray you, but Jesus is Lord.

So, you say that phrase when you are discouraged, and you say it when you are tired and worried and afraid and at your wits' end -- Jesus is Lord. And you say it when you're told you have a terminal illness; and you say it when you don't know why a loved one has died and your heart is broken -- Jesus is Lord! And you say it when you're lonely, and you say it at Christmas, and you make it the theme of your life. And that's what it means to be a believer!

“If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.” That's what God says (Romans 10:9), and that's the result of Christmas!

**AMEN.**