THE POWER OF THE CROSS
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INTRODUCTION:

THE CENTERPIECE

AS A BOY GROWING UP in Baltimore, I had a regular Saturday routine. First, I would finish the home chores that my mom had assigned me. Then, when all those duties were done—usually by noon—I would head down to the diamond. The diamond was a large field located just a few minutes from my house where the guys gathered every Saturday to play football.

It was my passion. Even though I played in school during the week as a halfback, and even if there was a Friday night game the evening before, you could still locate me every single Saturday afternoon at the diamond.

On one occasion, we had all gathered at the diamond for our Saturday afternoon games. As we always did, we had chosen sides, and it was time for the game to commence. However, when we started to line up across from each other, we began to look around for the football. We looked for a while, because on this particular Saturday no one had brought a football.

THE CROSS IS THE GREATEST AFFIRMATION AND DEMONSTRATION OF PURE LOVE.
We had taken the time to go to the diamond and had been proactive to choose up teams, yet everything came to an abrupt end simply because the football was not there. We were not able to do what we had gathered to do because the main thing was missing.

Isn’t it amazing how something so small can carry so much weight? We couldn’t play football without the football.

You see, in the game of football the ball determines everything. First downs are measured by where the ball is placed. Touchdowns are measured by whether the ball crosses the goal line. Fumbles are determined by who grabs the ball. Field goals are measured by whether the ball goes through the goalposts. Men fight over it, rejoice over it, and strive to possess it. The game has spawned a multibillion dollar business enterprise, the National Football League (NFL), that elicits the focus, attention, and adoration of millions of fans each weekend. But if the football is missing, there is no game. Without the football, everything else that goes on in a stadium or on a field is a waste of time.

The Cross: The Main Thing

In Christianity, the cross is the main thing—the centerpiece of the Christian life.

What Jesus gained at the cross is the main thing. Without the crucifixion of Christ on the cross there is no power, no freedom, no forgiveness, no authority, no strength, no victory—nothing at all. The cross is the main thing.

Every year around Easter time, people will typically focus on the cross. We remember that Christ’s death paid the penalty for our sins. The cross led to an empty tomb three days later. Resurrection—life everlasting—came because of Christ’s sacrificial death. We meditate on how the reality of the cross enables those who believe and trust in Jesus
to spend eternity in heaven. However, once Easter passes, we frequently go back to doing our own thing and trying to live our lives without the cross as the central focus.

This makes about as much sense as if the NFL decided to have a football available for the Super Bowl only, and not use any footballs for the other weeks of the season leading up to it. Without a football every week, a football at the Super Bowl isn't going to do you much good, for there would be no Super Bowl.

In the same way it isn’t enough to gather together at the right place each Sunday—the church—or with the right people in our lives—fellow believers. And it isn’t enough that there is a program or that there are books, seminars, and worship celebrations on Sunday and throughout the week. All of that is good and helpful. But all of that means nothing without the centrality of the main thing—the cross. If we leave out the cross, we are only left with the empty shell called religion.

We are left with an empty set of rules, requirements, and judgments to try and legislate spirituality leaving behind the intimacy, grace, and power to live spiritually victorious lives. As a result, believer after believer finds themselves in perpetual defeat—never measuring up, never fully overcoming their struggles, never rising above their circumstances. They are unable to fulfill their destinies and achieve their own significance because they are operating without the power and deliverance of the cross. They are trying to live the Christian life without the main thing—which makes as much sense as trying to play a football game without a football.
THE POWER OF THE CROSS

Often we will wear the cross around our necks, dangle it from our ears, or hang pictures, banners, and replicas of it within our homes and churches. Yet in doing so we run the risk of detaching the cross from its true meaning and power. We run the risk of belittling its authentic strength. We may turn it into a good luck charm or decoration. Essentially, we can make the cross nothing more than a replica to induce guilt rather than announce what it is: the single most greatest affirmation and demonstration of pure love.

The problem in our personal lives, homes, churches, and communities today is not a lack of knowledge or skills. It is not even entirely a problem of a lack of motivation. In our contemporary Christian culture the problem is that we have forgotten the purpose, preeminence, and the power of the cross. We view it as an icon that has little relevance to us today other than at communion or Easter.

Rather than viewing the cross as an icon reflecting something that happened thousands of years ago, we ought to view it as an historical event that will take us to heaven—a current event containing everything we need to bring heaven to bear on earth.

Paul: Remember Christ and the Cross

In writing to his audience at Galatia, the apostle Paul urged them over and over, in one form or another, to remember Christ and the cross. As Paul concluded his letter to those in the Galatian church, he did what we will often do today through the use of italics, underlining, or bolding; he emphasized his point by writing largely. It says that Paul wrote in “large letters . . . with [his] own hand” (Galatians 6:11). In essence Paul said, “I don’t want you to miss this part. I know that everything I’ve said up until now has been important, but this part is the most important part.”

He reminded them of the cross, his only hope of achievement: “But
may it never be that I would boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.”

Paul had been saved for some time, yet he was still saying, “I’m only going to brag on the cross.” He did not let the historical reality of the cross lose its contemporary relevance. Paul’s only point of reference for his life was the cross. The cross was central to his very existence. It was the power to overcome his weaknesses. It was his identity and his hope.

**Religion or Relationship?**

The reason Paul spent so much effort focusing on the cross in his letter to the Galatians was because they had become confused about what true spirituality and power meant. They were no longer looking to the power provided them through Christ’s death on the cross and the sending of the Holy Spirit; rather, they were looking to themselves, to what they could do instead of what Christ already did. Paul was keenly aware of how this mind-set had crept into the hearts of the Galatians. Thus he wrote a few chapters later, “Those who desire to make a good showing in the flesh try to compel you to be circumcised, simply so that they will not be persecuted for the cross of Christ” (Gal. 6:12).

Paul was saying that what was keeping the Christians in Galatia from experiencing the fullness of Jesus Christ, as well as living out the abundance of the Christian experience, was religion. Religion had gotten in the way of the cross.

In that day, circumcision was the external symbol of religious commitment and involvement. In fact, a specific group of people would follow Paul around, and whenever he would start a church they would try to change the belief structure of the church. Known as the “Judaizers” (from the Greek verb *ioudaizō* that means “live according to Jewish
customs”), they were still attached to the religious rules of the Old Testament. Those Judaizers would try to convince the new Christians to conform to external religious observances, of which circumcision was the chief observance. They were trying to subvert the message of the cross. They had religion. They just didn’t have a relationship with Jesus Christ.

Yet whenever religious activity, however sincere, trumps relationship, the power of Jesus Christ is no longer experienced in the believer’s life.

One of the greatest dangers in our churches today is for religion to replace an intimate relationship with the Savior. Religion is the external adherence to exercises, codes, or standards in the name of God yet apart from God. For example, if you go to church because it is the religious, or spiritual, thing to do rather than because you are motivated to spend time worshiping God, learning about Him and experiencing Him, then that is religion. Religion is anything you do for God that does not stem out of a heart connected to God.

I remember one particular research paper I prepared in seminary. When I turned it in I was very proud of the work I had put into it. I had done my due diligence. I had controlled the material and analyzed all of the possible idiosyncratic elements of the arguments. I felt great about my paper.

However, when I got my paper back from my professor, there was a big, fat, red zero at the top, along with a smaller note at the bottom. In a hurried hand, my professor had scrawled, “Tony, great work. Great preparation. Wrong assignment.”

Legalism measures your spirituality by your activity. You must always do more, be better, and strive harder.
INTRODUCTION: THE CENTERPIECE

It wasn't that I hadn't done great work; it was that I had done my great work on the wrong assignment. I had researched the wrong topic. As a result, I didn't get credit for what I had done. Christianity is no different. It’s not that there aren’t a lot of people doing a lot of excellent things. It’s not that a lot of these same people attend church, help the hurting, or say all the correct spiritual platitudes. It’s just in their good activities they’ve missed the cross. They’ve missed Jesus Christ. And then they wonder why they aren’t experiencing any victory, power, hope, and authority.

The reason is that external observances—the rules of religion—can actually get in the way of a relationship. Often these religious rules are termed legalism. What legalism does is measures your spirituality by your activity. Within legalism, you must always do more, be better, go further, pray longer, and strive harder. The list goes on and on. One of the problems with legalism is that you never know when you get to the end of the list because there is always something else to add to it.

Paul wrote stern words to those contemplating following the Judaizers’ path of religion in Galatians 5: “It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery... If you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no benefit to you. . . . You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace” (vv. 1–2, 4).

Paul uses the terms “severed from Christ” and “fallen from grace” to indicate that Jesus Christ is no longer of any benefit to you on earth. His strength, intimacy, power and all that He has to offer has been removed from you if you are counting on yourself to be religious. The profundity of this truth is serious: Paul is saying that religious activity can actually keep Christians from experiencing the Lord. Church activity can actually keep us from Christ. Self-righteousness can keep us from true righteousness.
For example, a married woman checking off a list of things to do in her home because she is under pressure, seeking approval, or is intimidated by her husband reflects a far different relationship than a married woman who does the same list because she is motivated by love. The activity may be the same; in fact, it could be identical. But the motivation changes both the enjoyment and rewards of the activity.

God doesn’t want us serving Him only because we are supposed to. He also wants us serving Him because we want to, pure and simple. He wants our heart. He wants our morality, prayer life, dedication for Him and all else to be predicated on your relationship with Him rather than on religious duty. Instead of being defined by what you do, He wants you to be defined by who you belong to—Jesus Christ.

Two Crucifixions

The apostle Paul describes two crucifixions that must occur on the cross in order to live a victorious Christian life—Jesus’ and your own. He writes of himself, “But may it never be that I would boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.” (Galatians 6:14)

In other words, on the cross, Paul was crucified to all things that belong to this world. Being “crucified” with Christ, Paul had (1) a resulting disconnect from this world’s order and (2) a subsequent attachment and alignment with Christ. These are the two crucifixions.

The word “world” in the Greek is kosmos. It simply refers to an organized world system or arrangement designed to promote a specific emphasis or philosophy. For example, we will often talk about the “world of sports,” the “world of finance,” or the “world of politics.” These phrases are not referencing a location or a place. They are referencing
an organized system inclusive of certain definitions, regulations, and philosophical worldviews.

When Paul states that he has been crucified with Christ, he is saying that he is no longer alive to this world’s system that wants to leave God out, sometimes known as “worldliness.” The apostle writes that he has been crucified to the strategies and rules that are set up to try and make humanity acceptable to God independently of God.

This world really does not mind religion. The world not only tolerates religion, it frequently will even embrace it. Religions dominate much of humanity’s systems all across the globe. What the world will not tolerate, however, is the cross of Jesus Christ. As soon as you introduce Jesus into the equation, you have become too specific. Staying with God is okay because that is generic and vague.

The Cross as Our Central Focus

Remember, the cross is not about religion. It is an expression of an undying love and the payment for all of mankind’s sin – past, present, and future. Including yours.

If something happens to the hub of a wheel, the spokes become disconnected. Similarly, if you fail to make the cross the central focus of your life—your identity in Christ—you run the risk of experiencing extreme disconnection in the various areas of what you do. Don’t allow the world system that leaves God out to define you. Be cautious not to be duped into believing that you can make it dipping in and out of both.

Have you ever gone swimming in a lake or in the ocean that was very deep? If you chose to swim one hundred feet below the surface, you wouldn’t survive, simply because your body was not made for that environment. Without the proper equipment, you might last two minutes. Friend, the cross is your equipment in this world. It is your oxygen
tank. It is your identity. It is your point of reference. It is your life. It is all of that.

Why do so many believers struggle to live victorious lives? Because they accept the cross but then leave the cross behind. Jesus said, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Matthew 16:24). He didn’t say that you are to pick up your cross and then set it back down. He said you are to carry it with you.

This is an ongoing identification as Paul pointed out in his letter to the Corinthians where he said, “I affirm, brethren, by the boasting in you which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, *I die daily*” (1 Corinthians 15:31, italics added). The cross represents the moment-by-moment connection to and identification with Jesus Christ and the purpose of His life, death, burial and resurrection. It is acknowledgment of complete and total dependency on Christ and His sufficiency, along with a recognition of personal sin.

Jesus wants to be more important to you than your own comforts. He told the curious crowd, “Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple” (Luke 14:27). You must carry your cross, not Jesus’ cross. He took care of His own. You need to carry your cross.

**Carrying Your Cross**

We have some messed-up ideas about what it means to carry our crosses. Some say when they have a physical problem, bad in-laws, or noisy neighbors, “Well, I have to bear my cross. None of those situations is a cross.

In Roman times, a convict made to carry his cross to the place of execution was saying to the public he was guilty of a great crime. To carry your cross today means to bear the reproach of Jesus Christ. It
is to be so identified with Him that when they accuse you of being a Christian, you are found guilty. When someone accuses you of being His disciple, you say, “You got me.” To carry your own cross is to admit publicly that you are committed to Christ, guilty of placing Him first.

Carrying your cross is when a girl tells her boyfriend, “I can’t sleep with you because I am a Christian.” It’s when a businessman says, “I can’t do that unethical thing, because I am Christ’s disciple. I am living by a different agenda.” Carrying your cross is dying to yourself and what you want and putting Jesus first. It’s not comfortable to carry a cross.

Religion and religious titles mean nothing. What matters is your identification with Jesus Christ and the newness of the life within you. The apostle Paul told the Corinthian believers, “Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.” (2 Corinthians 5:17)

Victory in your daily life, decisions, emotions, finances, and in all things hinges on your attachment to Jesus Christ and what He did at the cross. It rests on His work, not on your own. It is tied to the new creation within you, not to the flesh.

Paul concludes his letter to the believers in Galatia with this final thought reflecting on the fruit of living a life connected to the cross: “Those who will walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them” (Gal. 6:16) Why do so many people lack peace in their lives today? Because they are failing to align themselves under the perfect power of the cross.

Paul says that if you walk according to the rule of the cross, that is, if you align your frame of thinking and operating with the centrality of the cross, you will experience the benefits of God, which include peace and mercy. However, when you are merely satisfied with religion or religious activity—or even when you have placed your trust in your religious activity to earn favor with God—you have been severed from Christ, and fallen from grace.
Fallen from grace is a fairly drastic occurrence. Grace is the provision of all that you need in order to live a life of abundance and peace. To best understand what it means to be “severed from Christ” or to be “fallen from grace,” I need to compare it to electricity. Electricity is the flow of power that makes everything work in your home. Virtually everything in your house operates because of electricity. Your appliances, lights, heat, air conditioning, computers, and television all work because they are receiving electricity. If you are severed from electricity, the flow of the power stops even though you have those appliances and lights.

To be severed from Christ or to fall from grace means that the flow of what God wants to do in you and through you has stopped. You have essentially been unplugged, or disconnected, from the power of Jesus even though you still have all of the paraphernalia of religion. Therefore, you lose hope, you lack peace, your courage wanes and your faith shakes.

Yet those who function by the rule of the cross will experience a peace that passes understanding. The Spirit of God will permeate all that you do so much so that you begin to think differently, live differently, and love differently. This is because the flow of the Spirit, the electricity that comes to each of us by way of the accomplishment of the cross, will empower you. God will be at work in you.

Never let religion get in the way of your relationship with Jesus Christ. Rather, take the cross off from around your neck and carry it instead. You have been crucified with Christ in order to live like the new creation you truly are.

Looking Ahead

To help you on this path of new discovery in incorporating the person, purpose, and power of the cross in your life, in parts 1–3 we will dig deep into each of these topics. We will begin by looking at
the person of Jesus Christ—what makes Him unique, how He was announced ahead of time through both prophecy and typology, as well as how His humiliation, death, and resurrection sets Him apart as Lord over all.

Then we’ll move into a look at the purpose of the cross—what was accomplished on it for us, how it is designed to be positioned as the centerpiece of our lives, and the authority it not only is to have but offers to us as well.

Finally, we will study the power of the cross in your everyday life, including the stability it provides, the deliverance it offers, and the power of its ongoing remembrance. I congratulate you for choosing this path of study in order to acquaint yourself with everything God has done and thus offers through His Son and His death on the cross.
PART 1

THE PERSON OF THE CROSS
JESUS CHRIST IS the one-of-a-kind person in all of history. Jesus of Nazareth, the unique One, has undoubtedly been the subject of more books, more songs, and more devotion than anyone who has ever lived. His appearance on earth was so monumental that history divided around His life, before Christ (B.C.) and in the year of our Lord (anno Domini, or A.D.). Time has meaning to us as it is defined by the presence of Jesus Christ in history.

On one occasion Jesus’ disciples voiced the question that people have continued to ask about Him for almost two thousand years. Having witnessed His miraculous calming of the sea, the Twelve looked at each other and asked, “What kind of a man is this?” (Matthew 8:27). In other words, who is this Jesus? The Gospels and the rest of the New Testament were written to answer that question and explain its implications for our lives.

In part 2 we will explore this greatest of all subjects, considering the uniqueness and authority of Jesus and then looking more deeply at His death and resurrection.
His Unique Identity

Jesus is unique because He is the only person who existed before He was born (see John 1:1, 14) and who is today what He has always been (Heb. 13:8). That makes him Deity. But He is more than Deity. He is the only person whose earthly conception had no relationship to His origin. By virtue of His birth as a man, Jesus Christ is now both Son of God and Son of Man. He is Deity and He is humanity. He is the God-man—Deity incarnated, given flesh.

His nature is “very God of very God,” to use a phrase theologians coined to try to declare Christ’s divine nature. A lot of people respect Jesus Christ as a great person, an inspiring teacher, and a great leader, but reject His deity.

This is heresy. You cannot hold Jesus in high regard while denying He is the eternal God, a point Jesus Himself made clear to the religious rulers, the crowds, and his closest disciples (for example, John 8:23–24, 28–29; 10:30–37).

Jesus Christ clearly and directly claimed to be God when He said, “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30). This statement is significant because the word “one” is neuter in form, meaning that He and the Father are one, perfect in nature and unified in essence. This was a personal claim of total equality with the Father. Those who heard this statement clearly understood it is to be a claim to deity, for they immediately tried to stone Him for blasphemy because He made Himself equal to God (v. 33).

Four Proofs of His Deity

We could use a number of lines of argument to demonstrate Jesus’ deity but I want to consider four of them, beginning with His preexistence. We have already said that Christ existed before His birth. The
THE UNIQUENESS

prophet Micah stated Christ’s preexistence this way: “As for you, Bethle-
hem Ephrathah, too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from
long ago, from the days of eternity” (5:2).

This is a significant verse for several reasons, beginning with Mi-
cah’s accuracy in prophesying Jesus’ birthplace. I have visited Bethle-
hem, and even today it’s a small town. Yet it was even smaller and more
insignificant in Jesus’ day, so for Micah to predict Bethlehem as Messi-
ah’s birthplace was more surprising, like telling readers where to find a
needle in a haystack. But notice what the prophet said about this One
who would be born in Bethlehem. He had no beginning; His existence
reaches back into eternity past.

Likewise, the prophet Isaiah gave Jesus Christ the title “Eternal
Father” (9:6), or “Father of eternity,” in his prophecy of Jesus’ first and
second comings. Since Jesus is the Father of eternity, He is also the
Father or initiator of time. But the only way Jesus could be the initiator
of time is if He existed before time. This verse speaks of His preexis-
tence and tells us that Christ is of a different nature than anyone who
has ever lived.

The prophets were not the only ones who taught Jesus’ preexistence.
Jesus declared it Himself in an exchange that stunned and infuriated
His Jewish detractors. They had accused Jesus of having a demon (John
8:52) because He claimed that anyone who believed in Him would not
see death. They reviled Him and asked this question: “Whom do You
make Yourself out to be?” (v. 53). That’s a great question, but they didn’t
like Jesus’ answer, especially when He said, “Your father Abraham re-
joiced to see My day” (v. 56).

The Jewish leaders replied, “You are not yet fifty years old, and have
You seen Abraham?” (v. 57). They were getting upset because Jesus was
making claims no man had ever made before. Then Jesus made this
crucial statement: “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I am” (v. 58).

Don’t miss the importance of the verb tenses Jesus used here. He was making a crucial claim. He did not say, “Before Abraham was born, I was” but “I am.” This is significant because “I AM” is the name God gave Himself when He sent Moses to redeem Israel from Egypt.

“God said to Moses . . . ‘Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, “I AM has sent me to you” ’” (Exodus 3:14). This is the term we transliterate as “Yahweh,” the self-existing God. This name describes God’s personal, self-sufficient, and eternal nature. The eternal God has no past, so He cannot say “I was.” He has no future, so He cannot say “I will be.” God exists in an eternal now.

Time is only meaningful to us because we are not independently self-sufficient and eternal. When Jesus told the Jews that He predated Abraham, He was claiming not only preexistence but Deity.

The second proof of Jesus’ deity was He made Himself equal to God. By taking to Himself the most personal and hallowed name of God, “I am” in John 8:58, Jesus claimed equality with God. His hearers understood this perfectly, for on this occasion as well they picked up stones intending to stone Jesus for blasphemy (v. 59).

Jesus’ claim is even stronger in John 5:17–18. “‘My Father is working until now, and I Myself am working.’ For this cause therefore the Jews were seeking all the more to kill Him, because He not only was breaking the Sabbath, but also was calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God.” Those around Him understood Jesus to mean that He
was placing Himself on equal standing with God because He was claiming to be of the same essence as God.

The Bible elsewhere equates Jesus with God. Genesis 1:1 says that God created the world. But Colossians 1:16 says that by Jesus Christ, “All things were created.” Either we have two Creators, or the God of Genesis 1 is the God of Colossians 1.

The apostle John made the identical claim for Jesus when he began his Gospel by declaring, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). So the Word is distinct from God, yet the Word is equal with God.

John doesn’t leave us in doubt about the identity of the Word. “And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). Then he added, “No man has seen God at any time; the only begotten God, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him” (v. 18).

When you put these three verses together, you get quite a picture of Jesus Christ. He is distinct from God, yet equal with God. He took on human flesh for the purpose of making the invisible God visible to human beings. The writer of Hebrews said that Jesus “is the radiance of [God’s] glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power” (Hebrews 1:3).

In Hebrews 1:8 God the Father calls His Son “God.” Nothing could be clearer than that.

So don’t let anyone tell you that Jesus is just a great Man or merely a son of God. He is God, the Son. There is even stronger language in Hebrews 1:8, because here God Himself is the speaker. “Of the Son He
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says, “Thy throne, O God, is forever and ever.” God the Father is calling His Son “God.” Nothing could be clearer or more direct than that. No wonder Paul wrote that in Jesus, “All the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form” (Col. 2:9).

This cannot be said about anyone else. Jesus claimed equality with God, and the writers of Scripture consistently support that claim.

A third proof for Jesus’ deity is that Jesus readily accepted the worship of His disciples and others. For a mere human being to do that would be blasphemy. But Jesus’ disciples came to recognize Him as God, and after Jesus’ resurrection and ascension they had no hesitation in making that known.

One example of this worship is that great scene in John 20 when Jesus appeared to the disciples after His resurrection. Thomas had been absent during an earlier visit, and he said he would not believe unless he saw with his own eyes (v. 25). So Jesus came to the disciples and invited Thomas to touch His hands and side and to believe (v. 27). Thomas responded, “My Lord and my God!” (v. 28).

Not only did Jesus accept Thomas’s declaration of worship, but He said that all those who believe in Him are “blessed” (v. 29). Notice that when Thomas said, “My Lord and my God,” Jesus said in effect, “Yes, I am He.” He accepted the worship that is due to Deity alone. We can see worship being offered to Jesus throughout the Gospels. Earlier in Jesus’ ministry, the disciples worshiped Him after He calmed a storm (Matt.14:33). Even demons acknowledged His deity, although Jesus silenced them (Mark 1:23–25). But Jesus Himself offered the strongest proof of His deity. He answered Satan’s temptation with the statement, “Be gone, Satan! For it is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only’ “ (Matt. 4:10).

Jesus said worship belongs to God alone, yet He received that worship. Only God could say what Jesus said.

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A fourth proof of Jesus’ deity is his membership in the Trinity. Titus 2:13 tells us that Jesus Christ is “our great God and Savior.” The Bible teaches that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and yet He is fully God. It also teaches that God the Father is God. The question the early church grappled with was how Jesus could be God yet also be distinct from the Father as the Son.

A child at our church once asked me, “Pastor, if Jesus is God, then who was He talking to on the cross when He said, ‘My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?’ Was He talking to Himself?”

That’s a very perceptive question. Jesus was not talking to Himself on the cross but to the Father. We can say this with confidence because the Bible teaches that the Godhead is composed of three distinct, yet coequal persons who share the same divine substance: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The term “trinity” is used for this foundational truth.

So when we talk about God, we could be talking about either the Godhead corporately or about any one of the three persons who make up the Godhead. God’s Word teaches Jesus’ deity because it presents Him as a member of the Godhead, the divine Trinity. Jesus identified Himself as distinct from the Father when Jesus called Himself “the Son of God” (John 10:36). Yet, just a few minutes before He said that He also said, “I and the Father are one” (v. 30).

The unity of the Trinity and yet the distinction of its three members is evident in Jesus’ commission to His disciples. He told us to baptize people “in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28:19). Normally we would expect to read the plural form “names” here, because Jesus mentioned three names. But He used the singular “name.” So we must conclude either that Jesus was mistaken, or that He used the singular on purpose because the three members of the Godhead make up one entity.

There’s no question which of these conclusions is correct. The name
of God is singular because the triune God is one God. This is the consistent teaching of Scripture. Paul closed one of his letters with this benediction: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all” (2 Cor. 13:14). Paul integrated the three persons of the Godhead because they are one.

The Trinity is not an easy concept to grasp because there is nothing like it in the universe. Without the Bible we would have no knowledge of this kind of existence. It is outside our realm of understanding to think of one God existing in three equal persons who are distinct personalities while sharing the same essence. There have been a number of illustrations suggested for the Trinity, but they all fall short of the mark because the Trinity is unique.

For example, someone has suggested the illustration of water, ice, and steam. All are made up of the same essence, yet they are distinct forms of that essence. The problem with this is that if we apply it to the Godhead, it makes it appear that God appears sometimes as Father, sometimes as Son, and sometimes as Spirit. But that is a heresy because the fullness of the Godhead is always present in each member of the Trinity.

Another common illustration of the Trinity is the egg. An egg has three parts—the shell, the yolk, and the white (albumen). The problem with this illustration is that none of these three parts by itself can be defined as an egg. They are just part of the egg. But the fullness of Deity resides in each individual member of the Godhead. Jesus Christ isn’t part God; He is fully God. The same can be said of the Father and the Holy Spirit.

The best illustration I have come up with for the Trinity is a pretzel. A typical pretzel has three circles or holes formed by the dough. These holes are distinct from one another, and each hole is complete within itself. Yet the three holes are interconnected because they belong to the
same piece of dough. They have the same character. There is only one pretzel, not three. This is not a perfect illustration, but I think it gets closer to the point. The biblical doctrine of the Trinity establishes the full deity of Jesus Christ. He is God.

**The Human God**

Yet Jesus is also man. He partakes of the nature of Deity because He is the Son of God. He also partakes of the nature of humanity because He is the “Son of Man.” In fact, this was Jesus’ favorite title for Himself. Jesus left heaven to take on human flesh, which is what we mean by the term *incarnation*. Jesus became flesh and blood, an event that was prophesied in Scripture hundreds of years before Jesus was born. Two prophecies from the book of Isaiah and their fulfillment in the New Testament give us a picture of Jesus’ human nature. He was fully human yet unique in several important ways.

The most important distinctive of Jesus’ human nature is that He was born of a virgin. In Isaiah 7:14 the prophet wrote, “The Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel.” Two chapters later comes a second prophecy: “A child will be born to us, a son will be given to us” (9:6).

Notice how careful the Holy Spirit is with the language here. The Son is “given,” not born. Why? Because as the Son of God, Jesus already existed. But the child is “born,” a reference to Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem. God the Father gave the Son to us through a supernaturally wrought conception in human flesh through the process of a human birth. Paul brought these prophecies from Isaiah together when he wrote, “When the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law” (Galatians 4:4).
God “sent forth” the Son because the Son is given (Isaiah 9:6). Jesus was “born of a woman” because a child was to be born. This is the incarnation of Jesus Christ. The story of Jesus’ birth confirms His distinctiveness as God in the flesh. Matthew says that the events of Jesus’ birth happened “that what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet [that is, Isaiah] might be fulfilled” (Matthew 1:22). Matthew preceded this statement with the specific reason for Christ’s birth, “You shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21).

Essentially, Jesus was a baby who was born to die. Mary knew this. Joseph knew this. Even the wise men who came to worship the child in the cradle who had created them knew this. That’s why the gifts they gave Him were gold, frankincense and myrrh. The myrrh, in particular, is an expensive resin used as a perfume yet also used in burying the dead (John 19:39). The wise men gave Jesus this burial fragrance for the same reason Mary wrapped her newborn in swaddling clothes. Swaddling clothes kept a newborn’s arms straight during his or her early days. The strips of cloth were not unlike the bandages used to wrap the dead. The meaning of both the swaddling clothes and the myrrh was not lost on Matthew, who had let us know that this baby had come to take away the sins of the world.

Significantly, the gospel writer earlier gave another testimony to the distinctiveness of Jesus’ human nature. Matthew concluded the Lord’s genealogy, writing, “To Jacob was born Joseph the husband of Mary, by whom was born Jesus, who is called the Messiah” (Matt. 1:16). The phrase “by whom” is critical here, because it is a feminine singular relative pronoun. That is very important because the Bible is saying that Jesus was conceived through Mary, but not by Joseph.

This, in other words, is a careful witness to His virgin birth. Joseph is important in Jesus’ genealogy, because Matthew is showing that Joseph was descended from David. Since Joseph was Jesus’ legal—though not
biological—father, Jesus had a rightful claim to the throne of David. Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:35), and not by Joseph, in order that His human nature might be sinless. This is why He would be called “the Son of God” at His birth.

Jesus’ humanity had both a heavenly origin through the power of the Holy Spirit and an earthly origin through Mary. Because Jesus’ nature is different from ours in terms of being sinless and born of a virgin, some people in church history denied His humanity was real. They believed He just appeared to be human. But that is another heresy that denies the reality of His life and His death for sin.

Make no mistake; Jesus was fully human. The Gospels demonstrate this again and again. He was the God who made everything, the God who never becomes weary or needs to sleep. Yet in His humanity He could be tired and thirsty (John 4:6–7). We know Jesus had human emotions because He wept at Lazarus’s grave (John 11:35) and felt compassion for people (Matthew 9:36). He also loved us with an everlasting love. And He had a human soul and spirit (Matthew 26:38; Luke 23:46), which all human beings have.

Some people have a problem with Jesus’ human nature because they assume if He was human, He had to be sinful. Not when the Holy Spirit oversees the birth process. We have already noted that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit, bypassing the sinful human nature of Joseph as the father. The same objection is raised about the Bible. If human beings wrote the Bible, the argument goes, it must have errors in it. That might be true except for one thing: The Holy Spirit oversaw the writing

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**Jesus was fully human. He could be tired and thirsty, had human emotions, and felt compassion for people.**
of Scripture to preserve it from error (2 Peter 1:21).

What the Spirit did with the written Word of God, He did with the incarnate Word of God, Jesus Christ. The Spirit superintended the conception of both the written and the incarnate Word so that there was no human contamination in either. Paul wrote that Jesus “knew no sin,” a perfect sacrifice to become “sin on our behalf” so we might partake of God’s righteousness (2 Cor. 5:21).

If Jesus were just a sinful human being, His death would have done nothing to save us. According to Hebrews 4:15, Jesus’ present ministry in heaven as our Great High Priest depends upon His sinlessness. He could not help us in our weakness if He were as sinful and weak as we are.

**Jesus’ Deity and Humanity**

The two natures of Jesus Christ form what theologians call the **hypostatic union**. This is a big term that simply means undiminished Deity and perfect humanity united yet unmixed forever in one person. In other words, Jesus was no less God when He became a perfect Man. He was fully human, but without sin. It’s important that we understand Jesus is one person, not two. He is the God-man, not sometimes God and sometimes man. He is one person with two natures. Jesus has a perfect human and divine nature, which makes Him unique. Nobody else is God become a man—God in the flesh.

One Scripture passage puts all of this together: Philippians 2:5–11. We will deal with this phenomenal passage in greater detail later, but we conclude this chapter with the highlights of this union to show that this passage teaches us how we should live in response to what Jesus did in taking on human nature. Significantly in verses 3–4 the apostle Paul prefaced this passage by calling believers to be humble rather than prideful, to be concerned about the interests of others rather than just
their own interests—which is the way Jesus lived when He came to earth. Then he wrote, “Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped” (vv. 5–6). This is a tremendous statement of Jesus’ deity. He existed as God prior to His birth in Bethlehem. He was equal with the Father in divine essence. Here is a succinct statement of what the Bible says about Jesus’ deity.

Then we come to Jesus’ humanity. He “emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men” (v. 7). Does this mean that Jesus emptied Himself of His deity? Not at all. It was impossible that Jesus Christ could cease being God. This verse is not talking about what Jesus emptied Himself of but what He emptied Himself into. It’s like pouring something from one pitcher into another. Jesus took all of His deity and poured it into another vessel, the “form of a bond-servant.”

He didn’t stop being who He is, but He changed the form of who He is. When He came to earth, Jesus moved from His preexistent, glorified form and poured the fullness of His deity into a human form. Simply becoming a human being was enough of a step down for the Son of God. But Jesus became a “bond-servant,” a slave, the lowest possible position on the social ladder in that day.

We could say that He who is very God of very God became “very slave of very slave.” That’s why most of the people in Jesus’ day missed His birth. They were looking for a king, not a servant. They expected a king to be born in a palace to rich parents, not in a stable to the poorest of the poor.
Jesus came as a lowly servant, which is good news for us because that means there is no one with whom Jesus cannot identify. If you are not very high on the social ladder, Jesus understands because He has been there. And no matter how high you may be, Jesus has been higher because He is the Son of God.

When Jesus took on flesh, He was “made in the likeness of men” (Phil. 2:7). Even though Jesus was much more than just a man, those who saw Him regarded him as just a man. Jesus didn’t go around with a halo around His head. He looked like a man.

Luke 2:52 says Jesus grew in the same ways as other people: physically, spiritually, emotionally, and socially. Isaiah said Jesus had “no stately form or majesty” in His human appearance that would make people stop and look twice (53:2). Jesus was not only born in humble circumstances, but “He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:8).

In His sacrifice for our sins, Jesus humbly accepted the most painful, humiliating form of death the Romans could inflict. In Jesus’ crucifixion we get an idea of what is meant when the Bible says He emptied Himself. Jesus chose to lay aside the independent use of His divine attributes, submitting Himself completely to His Father’s will. How do we know this? Because when Peter attacked the high priest’s servant, Jesus told Peter He could call more than twelve legions of angels to his defense if He desired (Matthew 26:53). But Jesus did not do that, knowing an effective sacrifice for sin meant that He must suffer and die. He could not simply call on His divine power to wipe out Satan but had to submit Himself to death.

Of course Philippians 2 does not end with verse 8. Because Jesus was obedient to death, “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 . . . and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is
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Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (vv. 9–11).

The honor Jesus Christ commands is intrinsic honor, for Jesus is King of the universe, the unique God-man to whom every knee will someday bow. In truly understanding and knowing who He is we are best able to comprehend all that has been accomplished for us on the cross. The cross was not something that just happened at a point in history. Rather, by looking at the prophetic Word we can see how the event of the cross had been established long before Christ was ever even born. Both prophecy and typology pointed forward to it in the Old Testament, which is the subject of our next chapter.