

The Divine Descent

Part Five. Philippians 2.5-11: Jesus our Supreme Ruler

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In 1945, JRR Tolkien, the author of *The Lord of the Rings*, published a wonderful little allegorical story called *Leaf by Niggle*. It's the story of a painter named Niggle who has a vision of a whole forest he wants to paint, and he sets about seeking to capture it on a massive canvas in his studio.

But it never seems quite to come together in the way he would like, and he keeps getting pulled away from his painting because of the needs of his neighbor Parrish, who he often resents but nonetheless begrudgingly serves.

Finally his life nears its end, and he realizes that he has barely completed a single leaf to his satisfaction, let alone the whole forest, and many parts of his vision will have to be left undone.

But then, after his death, he is amazed to discover that the whole of his envisioned forest has been incorporated in the world to come – the little he managed to do, and the much that remained undone. Somehow, nothing has been lost, and all has been redeemed.

In a letter he wrote later in life about the story, he said it was a story about his own life and work, and the possibility that he would never finish *The Lord of the Rings*. He said, "The war had arisen to darken all horizons," and he was afraid that this massive life work into which he had poured so much of himself would never be finished – that it would forever remain undone.

Tolkien's experience was not unique to him.

So much of the human experience feels undone, doesn't it? We never have a sense of things being finished. From homework to chores to bills to taxes – there's always a sense that there is a something more that we have to do or could do, something more that needs to be done.

We live lives that feel undone.

The families we are part of
The friendships we have
The vocations we are called to
The things we want to accomplish
The places we want to learn about and discover

. . . there's always more that could be.

Which of us have ever laid down in bed at the end of a day and said, "Done. All finished. Did everything I wanted to do, everything I needed to do. Nothing left on my list."

Not one of us. It is one of the most enduring aches of the human experience. Everything feels undone.

Not only that but we live in a world that feels undone.

Speaking with his disciples the week before he died, Jesus in Matthew 24 describes the long waiting season following his death that we find ourselves in now. He said it would be a time of wars and rumors of wars. As in fact it has proven to be. Researchers tell us that there are more conflicts going on in the world right now than there have been at any other time since World War II.

Jesus also cautioned us that during this time of waiting, false messiahs would rise up and claim that they have come to save the world and put things right. New messiahs rise up with every new news cycle, only to see them overthrown and another "messiah" rise up.

It feels like things as they are now in the world are things as they will always be – human history feels like the story of endless undoneness as one generation comes and goes, followed by another, and another.

Life feels undone, the world feels undone.

And for many of us, in the midst of the pain and brokenness of this world, and the undoneness and difficulties of this life, we feel as though we are coming undone.

Anxiety and depression are at an all-time high. At the root of both is the sense that things are not as they should be.

Anxiety is the feeling that things are out of control so we feel like it's on us to try to get control, and depression is the feeling that things are out of control, and it is the response of despair to the realization that no matter what we do, we'll never get control.

The world feels undone. Life feels undone. We feel undone.

* * *

All of that is what makes the closing words of Philippians chapter two so hopeful and so life giving.

They remind us that there's more to the story, so much more. That the "once upon a time" that starts the story with Jesus coming to us as a child at Christmas leads eventually to a "happily ever after" when Jesus will return at the end of the age and put all things right and make all things new.

Things as they are now is not how things started out, when God first began human history, and things as they are now is not how things will end up, when God concludes human history.

But we can forget that. Caught up in the now, we can lose sight of it.

Think of one of the most familiar of all Christmas passages, one we hear almost every advent: the promise given to us in Isaiah 9. The opening lines are so familiar

Isaiah 9.2,6

For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given . . .

And so on, but we completely skip over the second part!

Isaiah 9.7

And there will be no limit to how great his authority is. The peace he brings will never end. He will rule on David's throne and over his kingdom. He will make the kingdom strong and secure. His rule will be based on what is fair and right. It will last forever. The Lord's great love will make sure that happens. He rules over all.
(NIRV)

* * *

Which brings us to the passage we're looking at tonight.

For the past four weeks during this Christmas season, we've been studying a passage from the second chapter of Paul's letter to the Philippian church.

We've been using that passage, as Rob said at the start of this series, to help us to see this Christ child whose birth we celebrate at Christmas – to see him in a new and deeper way, to see him not just in that moment two thousand years ago in the manger in Bethlehem, but to see him in the sweep of human history.

Up to this point, the passage has marked out what we've called the divine descent that Jesus followed, which has had us looking back into the past –

back at the unbroken fellowship of the Trinity before humanity was created,

back to the decision by God the Son to step down from the throne in order to serve the human beings that he co-created,
 back to the moment when he limited himself to a specific place and time and he came and stood in the dust, in the mud, in the ashes, with us, and took on human flesh,
 back to the time when Jesus offered up that human life in our place as a humble sacrifice.

Jesus plunged to earth on a rescue mission, laying aside his glory, offering up his life.

And now the passage turns and looks toward the future. Having successfully completed his work of redemption, the Father raises him up – up to the highest place, and will eventually gather together all of creation under his rule, so that every part of heaven and earth will perfectly reflect his will.

I love how CS Lewis tries to help us understand the cosmic significance of this turning point in his mission.

The story of the Incarnation [is] the story of a descent and resurrection. When I say “resurrection” here, I am not referring simply to the first few hours, or the first few weeks of the Resurrection. I am talking of this whole, huge pattern of descent, down, down, and then up again. What we ordinarily call the Resurrection being just, so to speak, the point at which it turns. . . .

One has the picture of a [pearl] diver, stripping off garment after garment, making himself naked, then flashing for a moment in the air, and down through the green and warm and sunlit water into the pitch black, cold, and freezing water, down into the mud and slime, then up again, his lungs almost bursting, back again to the green and warm and sunlit water, and then at last out into the sunshine, holding in his hand the dripping thing he went down to get. This thing is human nature, but associated with it, all nature, the new universe. . . .

God has . . . dived down into the bottom of creation, and has come up bringing the whole redeemed nature on his shoulders. (*God in the Docks*)

* * *

Now, we turn and look toward the future and where all of this is leading.

Philippians 2.9

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

“Therefore”: because of his faithfulness in carrying out this sacrificial rescue mission, Jesus is given a place higher than any other place and a name greater than any other name. Both are ways of saying that there is no rival to his rule anywhere in existence.

The one who lowered himself, who emptied himself, who plunged from heaven to earth on a rescue mission, driven by love, will be raised to the highest place, and given the highest name, and all other authority – including all human authority – will be under his.

Philippians 2.10-11

that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

This is the name given that is above every other name: Jesus, the Christ, the Lord. This is the earliest and most basic confession of faith from the days of the early church on.

Jesus is the Christ. Christ, you may remember, is the Greek version of the Jewish word Messiah, both of which mean the anointed one. In the ancient Near East, when a king was seated on the throne and given authority, he was anointed with oil rather than crowned with a crown. So, this title means the crowned one, that is, the King, the one who rightly sits on the throne and rules over the earth and its occupants. When we confess Jesus is king we acknowledge his rightful rule over us and joyfully place our lives under it.

And Jesus is the Lord, a word that means master, ruler, the one who is over all others. This was the title that was given to God himself all through the Old Testament. So this title means, the highest one, the greatest one, the one above all others. When we confess Jesus is Lord we acknowledge his rightful place as master over the whole of our existence and we gladly turn our lives over to him.

Listen to how those two titles weave together through the New Testament story of the birth and life and death and resurrection and ascension of Jesus.

At his birth - Luke 2.11

Today in the town of David a savior has been born to you. He is the [King],
the Lord.

After his death and resurrection - Acts 2.36

God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and [King].

And at the end of the age, in this passage - Philippians 2.11

Every tongue shall confess that Jesus, [the King], is Lord.

Earlier this fall Daaron and I got to visit the Coronation Cathedral in Alba-Iulia, Romania. Like in all Orthodox churches, the way that you encounter Jesus in the sanctuary is not on a cross in front of you, like in a Catholic church, but on a throne in the dome over your head, in an image called the *Christus Pantokrator*. Here's the painting of Christ, the Ruler of All, on the dome in the Coronation Cathedral.

Christ the Ruler of All, Coronation Cathedral in Alba-Iulia, Romania



Jesus, the King, the Lord, seated on the throne, surrounded by symbols of his glory and majesty and authority, looking us straight in the eye, raising his hand in blessing, and inviting our allegiance.

Scripture tells us that that moment in the future when Jesus is raised to the highest place and all of humanity bows before him is the decisive moment not just for the trajectory of human history, but for the trajectory of each individual human life. That moment will mark a final parting of ways.

At the close of the age, we're told, all will bow in acknowledgement that Jesus is rightfully called King and Lord.

But only some will bow in *worship*, those who in this life have recognized Jesus' authority and offered their lives back to him in faith. And those will be the ones who will enjoy eternity in his presence.

Jesus is the King. Jesus is the Lord. And our fitting response is to bow before him. To worship him. To entrust our lives to him. To give him our allegiance. To place ourselves under his loving rule. To live our lives for him – as together we look forward to the day when he will return and usher in the new heaven and the new earth, and all creation will acknowledge and reflect his rightful rule.

We had a first taste of what this endless moment at the end of the age will be like at the moment of Jesus' birth, when angels and shepherds and wise men – beings from above the earth and on the earth and from the far corners of the earth – gathered in worship before Jesus.

And every Sunday, when the church around the world gathers for worship, we are given again a glimpse of that moment to come when all creation will be gathered before the throne in acknowledgment that Jesus the King is Lord.

That's not a wishful dream. That is a future reality, as sure as anything that has ever happened in the past. He will reign, and every corner of creation will one day reflect his rule.

* * *

As you may know, Sharon and I went down to Charlotte over Thanksgiving, where our whole family gathered, including Margie, Sharon's mom, whom many of you know. At the end of those days together I drove her over to Nashville to spend some time with Sharon's brothers.

Now, you need to know that Margie is a very serious Purdue basketball fan, so on the way to Nashville she watched the replay of the November 30 Purdue/Mississippi game which we didn't get a chance to watch.

I'm sure some of you remember that game. It began with a massive dunk from Myles Colvin, and soon Purdue had a huge lead, outscoring Ole Miss 2 to 1.

But then in the second half Ole Miss not only caught up with Purdue but passed them, and Purdue was down by 7 with only three minutes left. Then they caught up again, and for the final few minutes the game went back and forth, right down to the wire, when Myles Colvin put in the game winning shot with *half a second* left on the clock.

Now, before she started watching the replay, Margie knew the final score. She knew how it was going to come out.

Even so, all through the replay she would say, "Now we're ahead." Or, "Uh oh, they're catching up with us." Or "Oh, they're ahead of us!"

At one point she cried out: "Agh! We're so far behind right now! I don't know how we'll ever catch up!"

Then she turned to me and said, "If I didn't know how this game ended I wouldn't be able to watch it."

Paul reminds us that we know how the game ends, which allows us to live in peace and hope, following the example of Jesus and giving our lives away, living a life of love, as we wait for that day.

* * *

At the end of the book of Revelation it describes that moment when human history will come to a close, and God will remake the world, and remake his people, and put all things right. It says

Revelation 21.1-5

Then I saw "a new heaven and a new earth," for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away . . . And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." He who is seated on the throne says, "I am making everything new!"

Everything that is undone will be completed.
 Everything that is wrong will be put right.
 Everything that is unfinished will be done.
 Everything that is broken will be made whole.

And the one who will make it so is the one whose birth we have gathered to celebrate tonight.

This one we welcome into the stable as a newborn child, that is the one whose rightful rule all of creation will one day acknowledge as King and Lord, and those who are his will enjoy everlasting life in a world in which nothing remains undone and all is made new.

Joy to the world, the Lord has come! Let earth receive her king.

Images shown during the Christmas Eve service . . .

**The Divine Descent
Christmas Eve Service Worship Elements**

First Candle

Philippians 2.5-6

Christ Jesus already existed in very nature as God.

Laurel Kane, Trinity



Second Candle

Philippians 2.6-7

But being in very nature God,
He did not consider equality with God
something to be used to his own advantage;
rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant.

Ford Madox Brown, Jesus Washing Peter's Feet



Third Candle

Philippians 2.7-8

Taking the very nature of a servant,
He was made in human likeness,
and was found in appearance as a man.

Kirk Richards, Mother and Child in Red

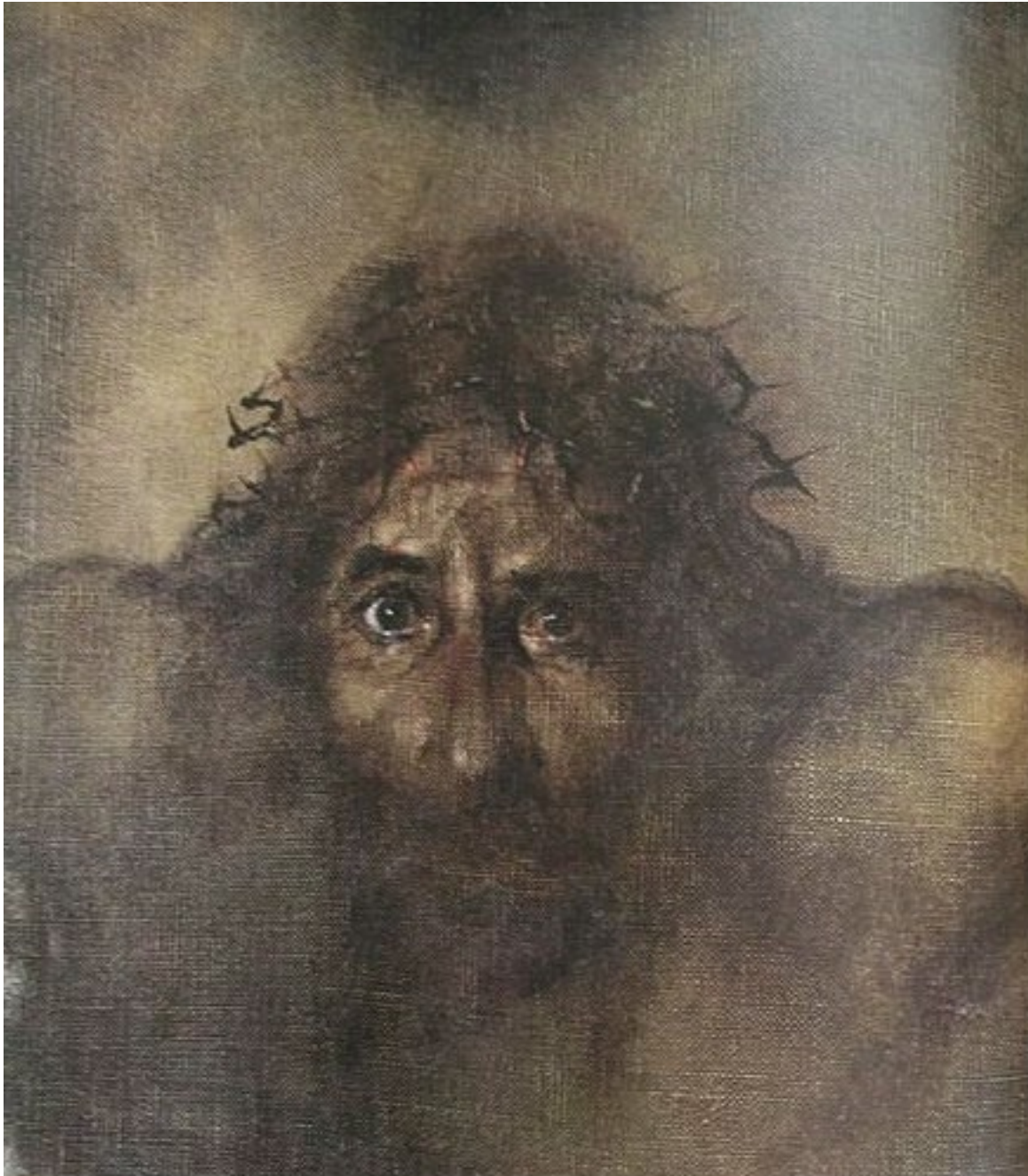


Fourth Candle

Philippians 2.8

And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!

Rien Poortvliet, Love Died



Christ Candle

Philippians 2.9-11

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 acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

Luca Giordano, Glory, Corsini Chapel

