

DOWN FROM HIS GLORY



By Joe Crews

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ONE**CHRIST'S PERFECT OBEDIENCE**

Christ's substitutionary death on the cross stands at the heart of all other salvation truths revealed in the Bible. He took our place in suffering the penalty for sin. The demands of the law against the transgressor were fully satisfied by His voluntary acceptance of our punishment. To distort this great central fact about the plan of salvation would weaken the entire foundation of Christianity. It is this tremendous Bible truth concerning the imputed merits of Christ's atoning death that lends assurance to every born-again believer.

It has always been Satan's purpose to obscure the simplicity of the cross in its application to our sin problem. In various ages of history, he has raised

confusing questions about the nature of Christ's sacrifice on the cross. Early Christian records reveal that certain groups did not believe in the full deity of our Lord. The Arians, for example, taught that Jesus was only a created being. Another school of theology believed that Christ's death was only an appearance that did not constitute a real cutting off by death. Many conflicting theories have raised questions about the ethics of the atonement. How could He assume our guilt and accept our punishment in such a way that we can be declared righteous and uncondemned?

The Bible teaches that Christ was "manifest in the flesh" in order to accomplish certain things for the redemption of the human race. First of all, He would have to live a life of perfect obedience to redeem man's failure. Secondly, He

would need to assume man's guilt for breaking the law and suffer the penalty of death demanded by the law. Those two things—His atoning death and perfect obedience—could then be credited to all who would accept Jesus as their divine Substitute. Through faith, the sinner could be counted as having paid the penalty of death and of living a life of perfect obedience. That experience, called justification by faith, is the center of all Protestant teaching about salvation. According to this beautiful Bible doctrine, the repentant sinner now stands before God as though he himself has satisfied the penalty. At the same time, his past record of failure and disobedience is covered by the imputed merits of Christ's perfect obedience, so that he can be counted as justified—as though he had never sinned.

Any teaching that takes away from the effectiveness of this marvelous transaction must be considered a most dangerous heresy. Any doctrine that would make it impossible for Christ to live a perfect life in the flesh, or to die as a substitute for man, must be considered an enemy of righteousness.

I'd like to suggest that millions of Christians today have unwittingly accepted a theological position that does this very thing. Most of those who are deceived on this matter actually believe that they are honoring Christ by holding their view.

TWO

WHAT KIND OF HUMANITY WAS REQUIRED?

To understand the problem, we must look closely at the subject of

the Incarnation. It was the Saviour's entrance into the human family that laid the foundation for the entire redemptive process. According to the Scriptures, He had to be born of a virgin, live a sinless life, and die for our sins. In what manner and form did He fulfill those requirements? To assume human nature, He had to choose between the only two kinds available—the holy, unfallen nature of Adam, or the fallen nature of all Adam's descendants. If He had taken any other kind, it would not have been human nature at all.

The religious world today is divided over this matter of which nature Jesus chose for His incarnate life. Those who believe He took Adam's unfallen nature, before the lapse into sin, are called *Prelapsarians*. Those who believe that Jesus assumed the nature

of fallen man are called *Postlapsarians*. Whichever position one chooses to accept of these two groups, he is locked into the limitations of that choice.

Let us consider first the implications of believing that Jesus came in the nature of unfallen Adam. It is mind-boggling to discover where this position leads us. First of all, let's ask what kind of nature Adam had before the fall. Of course, it was a perfect, obedient nature for which sin had no appeal. But it was more than that. Adam's pre-fall nature was also one of conditional immortality, which means that he could not die except by choosing to sin.

The truth is that there was no way for unfallen Adam to ever experience death except through disobedience. THE UNFALLEN NATURE OF ADAM COULD NOT DIE. It only

became subject to death after Adam sinned. If he had never sinned, Adam would have continued to have access to the tree of life. "Obedience, perfect and perpetual, was the condition of eternal happiness. On this condition he was to have access to the tree of life" (*Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 49).

When God created man, He set up the condition by which he could live forever. "In the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die" (Genesis 2:17). Death and separation from the tree of life was decreed for man only on the condition of his sinning. As long as Adam and Eve obeyed God, they could eat of the tree and were immune to death. "Just as prior to his fall Adam could be certain of immortality, vouchsafed to him by the tree of life, so now, subsequent to that catastrophe, his mortality was just

as certain” (*SDA Bible Commentary Volume 1*, p. 225).

It is very important for us to understand the reason for Jesus taking on a body of flesh when He came into this world. The Bible says, “But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels *for the suffering of death ... that he by the grace of God should taste death for every man*” (Hebrews 2:9).

Jesus had to come as a man in order to experience death and pay the penalty for sin. He could not die as God. He had to put on a nature that was capable of dying. But here is the startling truth: If He had taken Adam’s unfallen nature, He could never have died **UNLESS HE HAD SINNED!** That nature was not subject to death until after it was weakened by sin. Jesus could taste death only by being born into the fallen family of Adam’s descendants. As

one writer has put it, “Christ did in reality unite the offending nature of man with His own sinless nature, because by this act of condescension, He would be able to pour out His blood in behalf of the fallen race” (Ellen G. White, *Manuscript 166*, 1898).

THREE

HIS HUMANITY SUBJECT TO DEATH

Paul emphasized this point when he described how Jesus “was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross” (Philippians 2:8). Notice that it was only after He was made in fashion as a man that He could become “obedient to death.” His divinity was not subject to death, therefore He could not live

here and die as God. He had to assume a nature that could die. The atonement for sin would have been totally impossible had He not been born with the only nature that could be “obedient unto death,” Adam’s fallen nature. This is why the Scriptures also teach, “For verily he took not on him the nature of angels; but he took on him the seed of Abraham” (Hebrews 2: 16).

Why did He not come with the nature of angels? Because they, like Adam, had been created with a conditional immortality, and were not subject to death unless or until they sinned. Christ could not have paid the price for sin as an angel because He could not have died. Neither could He make atonement as an unfallen Adam, because He could not have died in that nature either. He had to come as the “seed of Abraham.”

The seed of Abraham consisted only and entirely of those who were subject to death because of Adam's sin. Had Christ taken the pre-fall nature of Adam, He could never have suffered the required death for our sins unless He had first sinned, and sin would have disqualified Him from being our Saviour.

Again, I say we are locked into the limitations that the pre-fall nature requires. Jesus made it very clear that He was submitting to live in this world as a man and not as God. But limiting Himself to the condition of humanity, Jesus could draw from His Father only those powers and advantages which are available to others living in the flesh. Repeatedly Christ stated that He could say nothing and do nothing that was not given Him by the Father.

In other words, Jesus did not capriciously shift back and forth between

His divine and human natures in order to escape the exigencies of this earthly life. He accepted the dangers, rebuffs and sufferings imposed by His living as a man. Satan constantly sought to goad Him into using His divinity to deliver Himself from certain situations, and it must have been the Master's strongest test not to call upon His own omnipotence during those excruciating final hours of His life on earth. Had He done so, the plan of salvation would have failed. Even in His death, he had to submit to the conditions imposed by His human nature.

FOUR

THE PRE-FALL NATURE COULD NOT DIE

Now we are brought to a dilemma. If Jesus possessed Adam's unfallen

nature, it was not possible for Him to die except by sinning or by changing those rules under which He had submitted to live His earthly life. By doing either, the plan of salvation would have been thwarted. Some might suggest that by assuming man's guilt and being made sin for us, Jesus' nature was also changed so that it could experience death. But this is not the case. The vicarious assumption of our guilt for sin would not have changed His human nature. Sin did not enter His life to corrupt or defile. He only received those sins vicariously, which means He took them AS THOUGH they were His own, even though they were not.

But please mark this important distinction: When He assumed human nature, He did not do it vicariously. He did not live here AS THOUGH He

were a man. He actually took human nature. He became one of us in reality.

Therefore, the vicarious assumption of man's guilt did not enter His life to corrupt that nature with actual sin. Whatever human nature He had experienced for 33 years was still with Him, and He carried it to the cross with Him. He was just as holy after assuming our guilt as He was before. The only change was in the way God looked on Him and dealt with Him judicially.

According to God's creation edict, man's conditional immortality could be lost **ONLY** by **COMMITTING** sin. It could not be lost through some vicarious **ACCOUNTING** of guilt. Only the defiling influence of sin entering the heart could bring a change of nature that would make man subject to death. This never happened to Jesus.

His being accounted as guilty did not make Him guilty. But His human nature was not just *accounted* to Him: It was real. And He had to accept that reality through His entire life, even in the experience of death on the cross. The fact that He submitted to that death is proof positive that He was not acting in harmony with the requirements of a pre-fall nature.

Some claim that it does not matter what we believe on this question of Christ's incarnate nature, but the truth is that tremendous issues hinge on this question. If I choose to believe that Jesus came in the unfallen nature, there is no way for me to avoid one of the following conclusions:

1. He could not die to pay the penalty for my sin, or

2. He Himself sinned in order to become subject to death, or

3. He had to exercise His divine power to change the human nature He had assumed, in order to escape the limitations it imposed. Only thus could He be made subject to the death required for the atonement. The unfallen nature could not die.

Anyone of those three things would have thwarted His ability to fulfill His substitutionary role as our Redeemer.

It has been claimed that those who follow the post-fall doctrine of Christ's nature thereby make Him guilty of sin. I'd like to suggest that only those who believe in the pre-fall nature project such a distorted view. In fact, theirs is the only position that makes it

necessary for Christ to sin in order to accomplish the plan of salvation.

The *Prelapsarians* sincerely believe that to be born with Adam's fallen nature would make Jesus guilty of sin. Consequently, in an abortive attempt to remove Him from being subject to sin, they remove Him from being subject to death!

FIVE

ORIGINAL SIN NOT BIBLICAL

Why then have those who believe in the post-fall nature been charged with making Christ a sinner? Simply because those who make the charge believe in the doctrine of original sin. *Postlapsarians* do not believe that sin is imparted by nature, but rather by choice. They hold that Jesus did not assume any guilt when He was

born as a man. He inherited the same weakened nature that sin imposed upon all of Adam's descendants, but He never yielded to those weaknesses in a single instance. His life was absolutely holy and sinless. Filled with the Holy Spirit from His mother's womb and trusting the daily impartation of heavenly power, He lived a life of uninterrupted victory over every sin.

That same life of continual victory is available to every other descendant of Adam through the process of conversion and sanctification. Jesus simply chose something before His birth that we are only able to choose after our birth. He chose to submit His human life totally to His Father from the moment of conception. We make that decision at the time of conversion and begin to partake of the divine nature of God—the same nature

that sustained Jesus for 33 years of holy living.

We are brought to the undeniable conclusion that this subject is not one on which we can be neutral. In the doctrine of the pre-fall nature of Christ, we not only lose the encouragement of having even one example of victory over sin in the flesh, but we abolish all possibility of Christ being our divine sin-bearer. God forbid that we should dishonor His name by holding such a limited, erroneous view of His substitutionary atoning death for our sins.

Some have subscribed to the idea that Jesus did not assume either the pre-fall or post-fall nature of man, but an entirely unique nature that has never been possessed by other human beings. They propose that He had the spiritual nature of unfallen Adam and the physical nature of post-fall Adam.

They feel it is necessary to do this in order to account for Jesus' sinless experience in His years of infancy and youth. But is it necessary to give Him a different nature because He had a different experience from other children? How different was His experience? It was a life of full surrender and obedience to His father. Is this accessible to other children? It is indeed, just as soon as they are old enough to make a total commitment to Christ. Because of His preexistence, Christ was able to make that commitment before He was born. If other human beings are able to appropriate the power of victory over sin at a later age, even with a fallen nature, then why couldn't Jesus do the same at an earlier age—with the same nature? We are talking only about a difference of time, not a difference of nature.

Someone might say, "Well, that gives Jesus an advantage over us." But wait a moment. What kind of advantage is it? If you accepted Christ two years before I did, then you had an advantage over me DURING THAT TWO YEARS. The truth is that Christ only had the same kind of advantage over us that we have over all others who enter the conversion experience later than we do. It is not a difference in nature except that which is common to every soul who surrenders the life unreservedly to Christ. By this I am not saying that Jesus needed or experienced conversion after His birth. He was filled with the Holy Ghost from His mother's womb, so His sinless experience was based on something that we can only experience at the time we are born again.

What are the objections to believing that Jesus had the spiritual nature of unfallen Adam and the physical nature of post-fall Adam? Three serious flaws seem to make it irreconcilable with biblical theology:

1. It conflicts with the wholistic Bible view of man's nature.

Where does the Bible teach that there is a dichotomy between body and spirit? Scriptural truth has always been in favor of a unified understanding of human nature, with body and spirit interacting together to produce total mental and physical health. But when we come to the nature of Christ, this wholistic concept is abandoned and some begin to talk in dualistic terms, with part of Christ's nature being sinful and part being sinless.

How could there be such a combination within Him as the unfallen spiritual nature of Adam and, at the same time, the fallen physical nature of sinful men? Are we trying to say that Christ's physical weaknesses had no impact on His spiritual nature? Would it not be true that Christ would be most prone to discouragement or irritation when His body was physically tired? If this is true, then Christ would have tendencies to sin in His moral or spiritual nature.

2. It suggests a hybrid nature possessed neither by Adam nor those who lived after him.

With no such combination known among human kind, this totally different nature could not be designated as "human nature" at all. It would be

hopelessly at odds with the Bible requirement that Christ “also himself likewise took part of the same ... in all things ... made like unto his brethren” (Hebrews 2: 17). No one would contend that such a blend of unfallen and fallen natures would be in “all things” like his brethren! It would be unlike “His brethren” before the fall if He had a fallen physical nature, and it would be unlike “His brethren” after the fall if He had a sinless spiritual nature. What other “brethren” are left? Logic compels us to finally confess that if His nature was “in all things ... the same” as His brethren, then it would be required that some brethren be produced who had an unfallen spiritual nature and a fallen physical nature. If no such brother could be found, then Jesus would, by necessity, have to possess a human nature “in all

things ... the same” as pre-fall Adam or “in all things ... the same” as post-fall Adam. To do otherwise is to either deny the plain words of Scripture or deny simple logic.

3. It would nullify the possibility for Christ to be “in all points tempted like we are” (Hebrews 4: 15).

It seems inconceivable that Adam’s holy, unfallen nature could be tempted in every way that we are tempted. He had no inward response to temptation whatsoever, and surely there is no one who will assert that our fallen natures are not strongly tempted from within. Good theology does not defy rationality. Whatever we believe on this point, it must be consistent with clear statements of the Bible. If Jesus was tempted in all points “like as we are,” it could

not have taken place in the physical arena alone.

Most of our temptations arise from a weakened spiritual and moral nature. If this source of our strongest temptations was absent in Jesus, then He never could have been tempted in all points “like as we are.” It would be a self-contradiction to even suggest such a thing.

Now let us look briefly at the biblical evidence for the post-fall view. The second chapter of Hebrews contains an abundance of material on this subject. Consider these words: “As the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he [Christ] also himself likewise took part of the same ... Wherefore in all things it behoved him to be made like unto his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest” (Hebrews 2:14-17).

This verse is one of the most emphatic and definitive to be found in the Bible. A combination of words is used that leaves absolutely no doubt about what is being said. Any one of the words would express the clear thought being presented.

For example:

- He took part of the same
- He *also* took part of the same
- He *Himself* took part of the same
- He *likewise* took part of the same
- In *all things* made like His brethren

Why did God choose to give a fivefold impact by putting all those expressions together in one Scripture setting? It almost sounds repetitive.

“He also himself likewise took part of the same.” Surely the reason lies in the extraordinary importance of the truth being expressed. God wanted to leave no lingering question about the nature of the Lamb who was slain. Any misunderstanding here could cast a shadow over the entire plan of salvation. It could challenge the validity of Christ’s substitutionary death on the cross and the adequacy of His imputed righteousness.

How is it possible for anyone to misconstrue the precise language used in these verses? The answer is obvious. Satan hates this truth. It is a dramatic illustration of his deceptive cunning that he is able to take the most unambiguous verse in the Bible and cloud its meaning. It is also an amazing example of the power of the mind to believe what it wants to believe.

I submit that if God had used ten or twenty ways of saying the same thing, it would still be rejected and denied by those who do not want to believe it. Would it be any more convincing by adding extra words and phrases? For example, "He also himself verily likewise in the same manner truly in all things exactly took part of the same." It would be useless to multiply adjectives and more rhetoric, for it could not make the matter any more clear than it is.

Look at that phrase carefully: "Took part of the same." What does it mean? The same as what? The previous verse gives the answer. The same as the children who are born of flesh and blood. By this illustration, the Bible writer closes every possibility for speculating about the human nature of Jesus. Nothing could be more

convincing. Since no children were born into the world before Adam and Eve sinned, it is beyond question that every child who has partaken of flesh and blood by necessity partook of Adam's fallen nature. So when the author of Hebrews wrote that Jesus "took part of the same" and was "in all things ... made like unto his brethren," it is an unanswerable assertion. Only by proving that some children were born of flesh and blood without a fallen nature could anyone rationally challenge the post-fall human nature of Christ. The very same verse declares that He took the same nature as all other children born in order that "he might be a merciful and faithful high priest ... to make reconciliation for the sins of the people." Only thus could He have been qualified as a suitable representative of the human family before the Father.

Someone might argue that Christ could do anything He wanted to do without limitations of any kind. Indeed He could have. He could have chosen to sin, but He didn't! He could have saved Himself from the pain of the thorns and the nails, but He didn't! He could have come in a nature that could not suffer death, but He didn't! Thank God that He did none of those things, but "humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross." What a Saviour!



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