

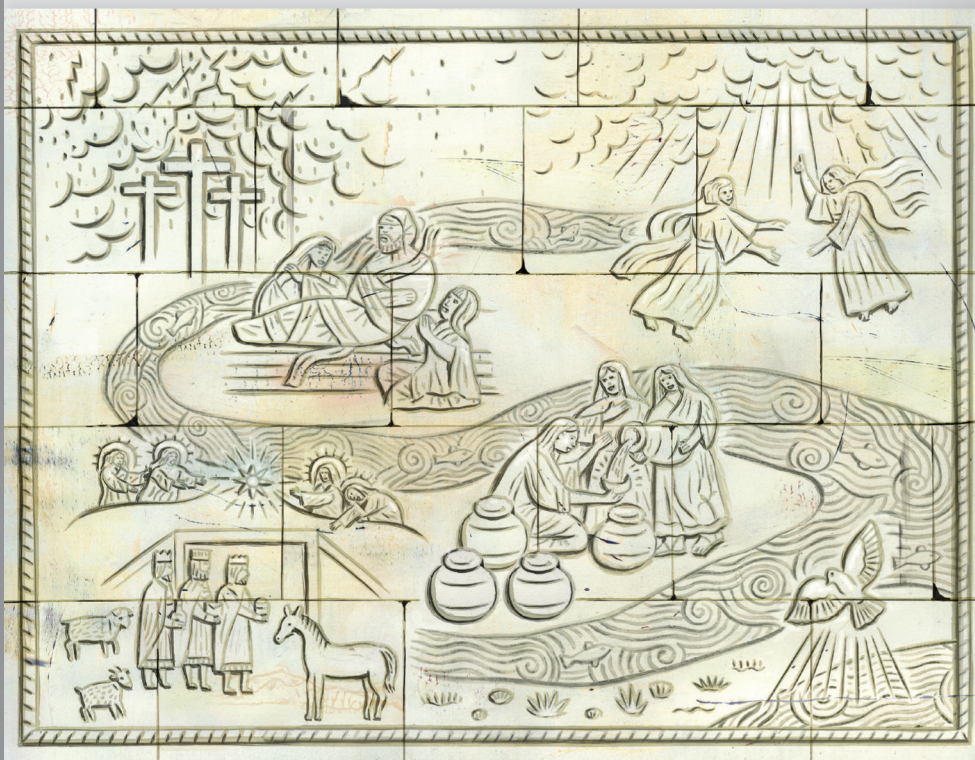
S T U D Y G U I D E



What Did Jesus Do?

UNDERSTANDING THE WORK OF CHRIST

by R.C. Sproul



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Understanding the Work of Christ

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Incarnation

MESSAGE INTRODUCTION

So often, we think of the work of Christ as something that began when He was baptized in the Jordan River around the age of thirty. In reality, however, the work of Christ began in eternity past in the covenant of redemption. In this lecture, Dr. Sproul explains how the humiliation of Christ in His incarnation and crucifixion and the exaltation of Christ in His resurrection and ascension are both grounded in the eternal covenant among the persons of the Trinity.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. To be able to state the relation of each of the persons of the Trinity to the covenant of redemption.
2. To be able to summarize the pattern of humiliation and exaltation in the work of Christ.

QUOTATIONS

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so 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.

—Philippians 2:5–11

The pact of salvation makes known to us the relationships and life of the three persons in the Divine Being as a covenantal life, a life of consummate self-consciousness and freedom. Here, within the Divine Being, the covenant flourishes to the full. . . . The greatest freedom and the most perfect agreement coincide. The work of salvation is an undertaking of three persons in which all cooperate and each performs a special task.

—Herman Bavinck

LECTURE OUTLINE

I. Introduction

- a. In theology, we make a distinction between the person of Christ and the work of Christ.
- b. Although the distinction is important, we must never let it become a separation.
- c. We understand the work in light of the person doing the work, and the work itself reveals a great deal about the person.

II. The Covenant of Redemption

- a. The work of Christ begins in eternity past in the “covenant of redemption.”
- b. Although most Christians are familiar with the Abrahamic covenant, the Mosaic covenant, the Davidic covenant, and so on, not as many are familiar with the covenant of redemption.
- c. The covenant of redemption refers to a pact or an agreement that takes place in eternity within the Godhead.
- d. Not only is creation a Trinitarian work, redemption is also a Trinitarian work.
- e. The Father designs the plan of redemption.
- f. The Son is assigned to accomplish that redemption.
- g. The Holy Spirit is tasked with applying that redemption to us.

III. The Incarnation

- a. During His earthly ministry, Jesus said, “No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven” (John 3:13).
- b. With respect to the ministry of Jesus in this world, it begins with His descent.
- c. Jesus was born of the seed of David according to the flesh.
- d. In His birth we have the incarnation of God Himself.
- e. John tells us that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:14).
- f. In this “enfleshment,” God does not undergo metamorphosis into a man.
- g. The incarnation is not so much a subtraction as it is an addition.
- h. The eternal second person of the Trinity takes upon Himself a human nature for the purpose of redemption.

IV. The Pattern of Humiliation and Exaltation

- a. The Apostle Paul, in his letter to the Philippians writes: “Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so 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” (2:5–11).
- b. In scholarly circles, this passage is known as the “kenotic hymn.”
- c. The Greek word *kenosis*, which is found in this passage, means “an emptying.”
- d. The emphasis of the passage is the transition that Jesus underwent by leaving His exalted state and becoming incarnate.
- e. The pattern found in this passage is the pattern of humiliation and exaltation.
- f. He begins exalted in heaven, but He condescends to join us in our predicament in order to redeem us.
- g. By entering into human flesh, He undergoes profound humiliation.
- h. Throughout His life, the humiliation becomes worse and worse until it reaches its nadir in the cross.
- i. After the crucifixion, He is resurrected and exalted to glory once again.

V. The Kenosis

- a. In Philippians 2, Paul tells Christians that unless we are willing to identify with the humiliation of Jesus, we will never share in His exaltation.
- b. The Son was willing to empty Himself and make Himself of no reputation.
- c. In the 19th century, liberal scholars proposed the Kenotic Theory of the incarnation, saying that the Son’s incarnation resulted in the laying aside of His divine attributes such as omniscience and omnipotence.
- d. But the divine nature does not lose its attributes in the incarnation.
- e. The human nature is truly human, and the divine nature remains fully and completely divine.
- f. What is emptied is glory, privilege, and exaltation.

VI. Exaltation to Former Glory

- a. After His humiliation, Jesus is again highly exalted.
- b. In His high priestly prayer, Jesus asked the Father to restore to Him the glory that He had from the beginning (John 17:5).
- c. This is exactly what the Father does once Jesus has completed His work.

- d. In Philippians 2:9, Paul writes: “Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name.”
- e. Many assume that the name referred to here is “Jesus.”
- f. In fact, the name above every name is the title belonging only to God, namely, *Adonai*.
- g. The name *Adonai* is given to Jesus.

BIBLE STUDY

1. Was the plan of redemption included in the eternal decree or counsel of God? What do each of the following texts indicate?
 - a. Ephesians 1:4–11
 - b. Ephesians 3:11
 - c. 2 Thessalonians 2:13
 - d. 2 Timothy 1:9
 - e. James 2:5
 - f. 1 Peter 1:2
2. Did the plan of salvation have the nature of a covenant? What do each of the following texts teach us?
 - a. John 5:30, 43
 - b. John 6:38–40
 - c. John 17:4–12
3. How do Romans 5:12–21 and 1 Corinthians 15:22 support the idea that the eternal plan of redemption is a covenant?
4. What do each of the following texts have in common?
 - a. John 6:38, 39
 - b. John 10:18
 - c. John 17:4
 - d. Luke 22:29
5. John 1:1–14 is one of the most significant New Testament texts dealing directly with the incarnation. Read these verses and outline the main points that are made in each section.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What was the role of the Father in the covenant of redemption? The Son? The Holy Spirit?
2. Regarding whether the parties to the covenant of grace are the Father and Christ or the Father and His people, Charles Hodge says, “The Westminster standards seem to adopt sometimes the one and sometimes the other mode of expression.” He argues that in the Confession (7:3), “the implication is that God and his people are the parties.” In the Larger Catechism, however, it is said that the covenant of grace “was made with Christ as the second Adam, and in Him with all the elect as his seed” (Q. 31). Are the two ideas contradictory? Inconsistent? Why or why not?
3. Louis Berkhof argues that it is better to say that the Word became flesh rather than saying that God became man. It is better, he says, because it was the second person of the Trinity that assumed human nature, not the Triune God. Do you agree? Why or why not?

APPLICATION

1. Reflect on the fact that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit planned your redemption from all eternity. Give praise to God for His amazing grace toward you.
2. The nadir of Christ’s humiliation was the cross on which He cried out as He was made sin who knew no sin, and the wrath of God was poured out on Him. Meditate on the following poem that reminds us that Jesus cried out as one forsaken in order that you and I may never have to.

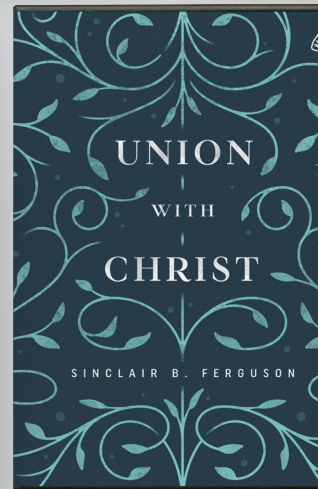
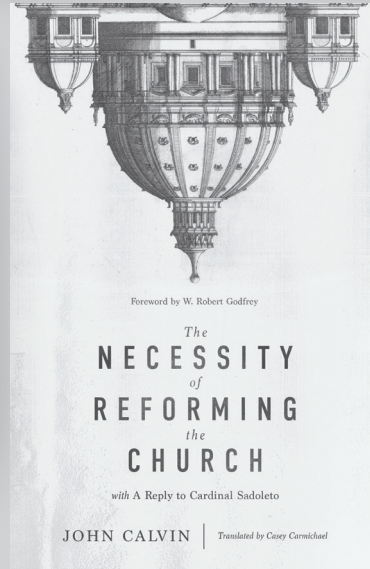
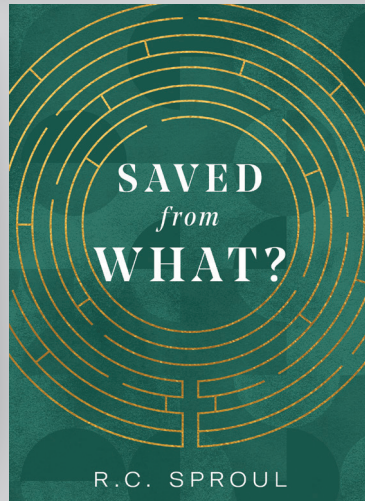
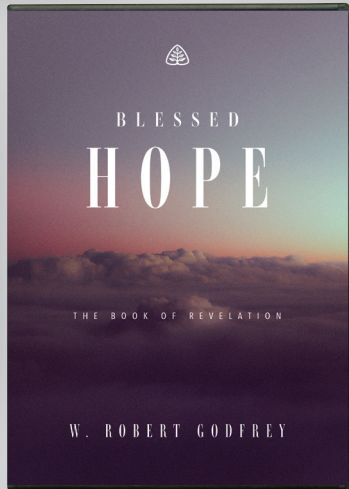
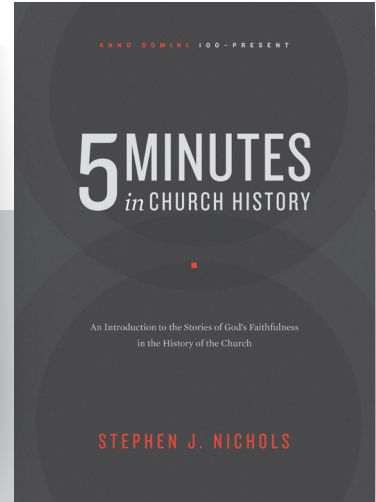
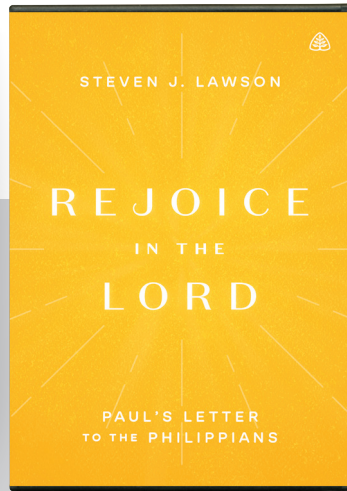
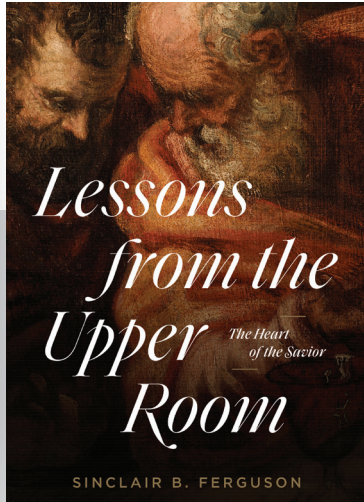
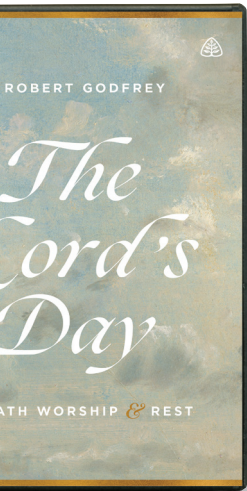
*Yea, once Immanuel’s orphaned cry this universe hath shaken.
It went up single, echoless, “My God! I am forsaken!”
It went up from the Holy’s lips amidst his lost creation,
That of the lost, no son should use these words of desolation.*

SUGGESTED READING FOR FURTHER STUDY

Athanasius. *On the Incarnation*.
Bavinck, Herman. *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 3, pp. 212–16, 323–482.
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