

**CHRIST HUMBLED  
YET EXALTED**



# CHRIST HUMBLD YET EXALTD

John Flavel

Abridged by  
J. Stephen Yuille



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*Christ Humbled yet Exalted*

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## Preface

“For those who believe unto the saving of the soul,” writes John Owen, “Christ is precious—the sun, the rock, the life, the bread of their souls—everything that is good, useful, amiable, desirable, here or unto eternity.”<sup>1</sup> When Adam and Eve disobeyed in the garden, they—along with all their posterity—fell into bondage to sin and death. On the cross, however, Christ bore God’s judgment in our place. We enter into the blessings of His substitutionary sacrifice when we believe in Him. He unites us to Himself by the Holy Spirit, whereby we enjoy all that He purchased for us. This makes Christ *precious* beyond compare (Phil. 3:8). As John Flavel declares,

Lord, the condemnation was Yours, that the justification might be mine. The agony was Yours, that the victory might be mine. The pain was Yours, and the ease mine. The stripes were Yours, and healing balm issuing from them mine. The vinegar and gall were Yours, that the honey and sweet might be mine. The curse was Yours, that the blessing might be mine. The crown of thorns

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1. John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, ed. W. H. Gould (London: Johnstone & Hunter, 1850; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1977), 1:3.

was Yours, that the crown of glory might be mine. The death was Yours, but the life purchased by it mine. You paid the price that I might enjoy the inheritance.<sup>2</sup>

Flavel was one of the most popular preachers among the seventeenth-century English Puritans.<sup>3</sup> By the time of his death in 1691, he had ministered for over forty years. “I could say much, though not enough, of the excellency of his preaching,” writes one of his congregants, adding, “that person must have a very soft head, or a very hard heart, or both, that could sit under his ministry unaffected.”<sup>4</sup> Thankfully, Flavel gave a considerable amount of his time to writing and publishing his sermons. These were compiled after his death, and

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2. John Flavel, *The Works of John Flavel* (London: W. Baynes and Son, 1820; repr., London: Banner of Truth, 1968) 1:101.

3. For details of Flavel’s life, see *The Life of the Late Rev. Mr. John Flavel, Minister of Dartmouth*, in *Works*, 1:i–xvi; and *Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. S. Lee (London: Smith, Elder 1909). Flavel is the subject of the following PhD dissertations: Kawi Chang, “John Flavel of Dartmouth, 1630–1691” (University of Edinburgh, 1952); John Thomas Jr., “An Analysis of the Use of Application in the Preaching of John Flavel” (New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, 2007); Brian H. Cosby, “The Theology of Suffering and Sovereignty as Seen in the Writings and Ministry of John Flavel, c. 1630–1691” (Australian College of Theology, 2012); Nathan Thomas Parker, “Proselytization and Apocalypticism in the British Atlantic World—The Theology of John Flavel” (Durham University, 2013). In addition to these dissertations, there are several books on Flavel: Adam Embry, *Keeper of the Great Seal of Heaven: Sealing of the Spirit in the Life and Thought of John Flavel* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2011); J. Stephen Yuille, *The Inner Sanctum of Puritan Piety: John Flavel’s Doctrine of Mystical Union with Christ* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2007); Brian H. Cosby, *John Flavel: Puritan Life and Thought in Stuart England* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2014); Clifford B. Boone, *Puritan Evangelism: Preaching for Conversion in Late-Seventeenth Century English Puritanism as Seen in the Works of John Flavel* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2013).

4. As quoted in Flavel, *Works*, 1:vi.



his complete works were printed five times in the eighteenth century and multiple times in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Some of his books have become classics: *The Fountain of Life*, *The Method of Grace*, *The Mystery of Providence*, and *Keeping the Heart*. Each demonstrates his commitment to doctrinal instruction and pastoral application. It has been said that “there are few writers of a more experimental, affectionate, practical, popular, and edifying character than Flavel.”<sup>5</sup>

Much of Flavel’s appeal is explained by his familiarity with life’s manifold sorrows and sufferings. He ministered out of his experience of great personal loss. His parents died of the plague, contracted while imprisoned for nonconformity.<sup>6</sup> He buried his first three wives along with several children.<sup>7</sup> He was ejected for nonconformity in 1662, exiled by the Five Mile Act in 1665, and generally harassed throughout his ministry. On one occasion, he managed to escape arrest by plunging his horse over a cliff into the sea and swimming to

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5. Edward Bickersteth, as quoted in Iain Murray, “John Flavel,” *Banner of Truth*, no. 60 (September 1968): 3–5.

6. In 1662, Parliament passed an Act of Uniformity according to which all who had not received Episcopal ordination had to be reordained by bishops. In addition, ministers had to declare their consent to the entire Book of Common Prayer and their rejection of the Solemn League and Covenant. As a result, approximately two thousand ministers left the Church of England. They became known as “dissenters” or “nonconformists.” Flavel’s father, Richard, pastored a small group of dissenting Christians in London in 1655. In the middle of a prayer meeting, soldiers entered and arrested a number of the participants, including Richard and his wife. Sadly, they contracted the plague while in prison and died shortly after their release.

7. Flavel’s first wife, Joan Randall, died while giving birth. Their child also died. His second wife, Elizabeth Stapell, died. They had two children. His third wife, Ann Downs, with whom he also had two children, died. His fourth wife, Dorothy Jeffries, survived him.

shore. Factoring in the strain of demanding pastoral duties and wearying doctrinal disputes, coupled with the challenges of living without modern comforts and amenities, Flavel was deeply acquainted with affliction.

By his own account, it was “joy” that “upheld and fortified” him throughout life’s arduous journey.<sup>8</sup> He defined Christian joy as “the cheerfulness of our heart in God” arising from “the sense of our interest in Him and His promises.”<sup>9</sup> Flavel was convinced that joy is ultimately rooted in the knowledge of Jesus Christ. “All the comforts of believers,” says he, “are streams from this fountain.”<sup>10</sup> Again, “Take away the knowledge of Christ, and a Christian is the most sad and melancholy creature in the world. Let Christ but manifest Himself, and dart the beams of His light into their souls, it will make them kiss the stakes, sing in flames, and shout in the pangs of death.”<sup>11</sup> Persuaded of this, Flavel emphasized the importance of cultivating the knowledge of Christ in the soul. “All other knowledge, however pleasant and profitable, is not worthy to be named in the same sentence with the knowledge of Christ.”<sup>12</sup>

This conviction is on full display in the present work: *Christ Humbled yet Exalted: The Fountain of Life, Part 2*.<sup>13</sup> Here Flavel demonstrates that Christ is the fountain of true

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8. Flavel, *Works*, 2:244–45.

9. Flavel, *Works*, 4:429.

10. Flavel, *Works*, 1:35.

11. Flavel, *Works*, 1:35.

12. Flavel, *Works*, 1:34.

13. It is found in Flavel, *Works*, vol. 1. Flavel’s original work (*The Fountain of Life*) is a collection of over forty sermons, celebrating Christ from His preincarnate glory through His incarnation to His postresurrection glory.

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joy because He has secured it for His people by means of His twofold estate—humiliation and exaltation.

When Flavel speaks of Christ's humiliation, he is thinking of His incarnation. "It is a great wonder that God should dwell in a body of flesh (John 1:14), that the eternal God should be born in time, that the Ancient of Days should be as an infant of days. For the infinite glorious Creator of all things to become a creature is a mystery exceeding all human understanding."<sup>14</sup> When the Son of God emptied Himself (Phil. 2:8), He did not cease to be who He is (God) but rather took to Himself the very opposite—human nature (body and soul). He hid His heavenly glory (John 17:5) and gave up the independent exercise of His authority (John 5:30). He emptied Himself of these things with reference to His human nature, not His divine nature. He grew in wisdom and stature yet possessed all knowledge and wisdom. He was hungry and weary yet was all-sufficient and self-sufficient.

For Flavel, Christ's humiliation reached even lower than His incarnation (in itself) to His crucifixion. "And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross" (Phil. 2:8). The cross marks the lowest point in Christ's humiliation because it is there that He was "made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree" (Gal. 3:13). Flavel remarks, "The symbol of suspending [Christ] between heaven and earth carries much shame in it, for it implies that He was so vile that He no longer deserved to touch the surface of the earth. And the command to bury Him the same day implied

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14. Flavel, *Works*, 1:226.

that He was such an abominable sight that He was to be removed as soon as possible from before the eyes of others.”<sup>15</sup>

Turning to Christ’s second estate (exaltation), Flavel unpacks its four stages: Christ’s resurrection from the dead, ascension into heaven, session at God’s right hand, and return in judgment. As Flavel explains, this exaltation is of fundamental importance to Christ’s work as mediator:

Christ’s work was not finished on earth in His state of suffering and affliction. His exaltation was necessary for the completion of His work.... In the Old Testament, it was not enough to kill the sacrifice thereby shedding its blood. After this was done, the blood had to be carried through the veil into the most holy place before the Lord (Heb. 9:7). So, the shedding of Christ’s blood on earth would not have been enough unless He had carried it into heaven, and there performed His work of intercession for us.<sup>16</sup>

According to Flavel, Christ’s intercession is the means by which the benefits of His oblation are applied to His people. He “acted the first part on earth, in a state of deep abasement, in the form of a servant; but He acts this in glory...that He may fulfill His design in dying, and give the work of our salvation its last completing act.”<sup>17</sup>

By virtue of His twofold estate (humiliation and exaltation), Christ is the foundation of our joy. He has removed our debt and secured our inheritance. For Flavel, this inheritance

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15. Flavel, *Works*, 1:323.

16. Flavel, *Works*, 1:170.

17. Flavel, *Works*, 1:166.

is principally the enjoyment of God. This is a present reality in the practice of spiritual duties whereby the Holy Spirit stirs our affections, thereby drawing us to God. Ultimately, however, the full enjoyment of our inheritance awaits us in heaven. “The believer knows,” says Flavel, “that however sweet his communion with Christ is in this world, yet that communion he will have with Christ in heaven will far excel it.”<sup>18</sup> As Flavel makes clear, the presence of sin disrupts our enjoyment of God at present. At glorification, however, we will be free from this burden. We will be like Christ and therefore able to commune with God to the fullest capacity of our souls. This will result in unparalleled delight as we rest fully in Him. “What is the life of glory but the vision of God, and the soul’s assimilation to God by that vision? From both of these results that unspeakable joy and delight which passes understanding.”<sup>19</sup>

We see God at present through the eyes of faith,<sup>20</sup> but this is nothing compared to what we will see in heaven. Flavel remarks, “To see God in His Word and works is the happiness of the saints on earth, but to see Him face to face will be the fullness of their blessedness in heaven.”<sup>21</sup> As for what it means to see God face to face, Flavel says it is “to know Him as He is...to see Him so perfectly and fully that the understanding can proceed no farther in point of knowledge concerning that

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18. Flavel, *Works*, 6:450.

19. Flavel, *Works*, 2:95.

20. According to Flavel, people see Christ in three ways: (1) They see Him “carnally” with an eye of “flesh” (Isa. 53:2); (2) they see Him “fiducially” by the eye of “faith” (John 6:40); and (3) they see Him “beatifically” by the “glorified” eye (Job 19:26–27). Flavel, *Works*, 6:411–12.

21. Flavel, *Works*, 2:282.

great question, *What is God?*<sup>22</sup> For Flavel, this is not primarily a sight of the eye, but a sight of the soul. In short, the beatific vision means that the image of God will be restored in us. The faculties of the soul will again be marked by knowledge, righteousness, and holiness. The mind will perceive God as the greatest good, and the affections will love God as the greatest good. God will impress His glory on the soul to its fullest capacity, whereby we make suitable returns to Him.

These “returns” are summed up in the enjoyment of God. According to Flavel, there is a threefold happiness to be enjoyed in heaven. The “objective” happiness is God Himself.<sup>23</sup> If He were to offer us heaven without Him, we “would fall a weeping,” declaring, “it is no heaven to us unless You are there.” The “subjective” happiness is the “suited” of our soul and body to God. All that is “inconsistent” with a state of glory will be removed.<sup>24</sup> The “formal” happiness is “the fullness of satisfaction resulting from the blessed sight and enjoyment of God.” “Ah, what a happiness is here! To look and love, to drink and sing, and drink again at the fountain head of the highest glory!”<sup>25</sup> We will find our complete rest in God, and this will be our heaven.<sup>26</sup> In short, our inheritance is God, in whose “presence is fulness of joy” and in whose “right hand there are pleasures for evermore” (Ps. 16:11).

This is what Christ has purchased for us by means of His twofold estate of humiliation and exaltation. And it is this

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22. Flavel, *Works*, 3:47.

23. Flavel, *Works*, 1:193.

24. Flavel, *Works*, 1:194.

25. Flavel, *Works*, 1:195.

26. Flavel, *Works*, 2:284.

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knowledge of Christ that nurtures that “cheerfulness of heart” so prevalent in Flavel’s writings. In the present volume, he shares his meditations on this glorious subject. He encourages us to cultivate a “sensible” and “practical” knowledge of Christ—that is, a knowledge that has its “seat in the heart.”<sup>27</sup> He explains, “A saving, though an unmethodical knowledge of Christ, will bring us to heaven (John 17:2), but a regular and methodical, as well as a saving, knowledge of Him will bring heaven into us (Col. 2:2–3).”<sup>28</sup> With that in mind, I encourage you to read Flavel’s work methodically (i.e., prayerfully and expectantly), keeping in mind his pastoral counsel from centuries ago: “To your work, Christian, to your work.... Whatever communion God and the soul maintains, it is in this way. Count all, therefore, but dross in comparison to that excellency which is the knowledge of Jesus Christ.”<sup>29</sup>

—J. Stephen Yuille  
Cambridge, Ontario  
June 2020

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27. Flavel, *Works*, 1:131.

28. Flavel, *Works*, 1:21.

29. Flavel, *Works*, 1:42.