

Union

Humility

The Joy of
Self-Forgetfulness

Gavin Ortlund



“Saint Augustine once counseled that the top three virtues of Christianity are ‘Humility, humility, and humility.’ One suspects he said this because when humility is intact, all other fruit of the Spirit fall into place. What Gavin Ortlund has given us in this wonderful book is not only a description of humility but also a pathway that makes the reader desire more of it, for the smaller we become in our own eyes, the bigger Christ becomes to us. I can’t recommend this book highly enough.”

Scott Sauls, Senior Pastor, Christ Presbyterian Church, Nashville, Tennessee; author, *Beautiful People Don't Just Happen*

“If humble people are realists (and they are), and if realists are humble people (and they are), then Ortlund’s concise work helpfully jabs us awake from our dreamy delusions of self-identity (whether too inflated or too deflated) and gives us very practical help in constructing our lives according to the plumb line of Christlike realism. Wisely, Ortlund wants us to not only understand humility but pursue it, experience it, feel it, and even enjoy it. Making reference to gems by Churchill, Lewis, Keller, Wesley, Edwards, Aquinas, Kidner, ten Boom, Augustine, Spurgeon, and more, Ortlund guides us away from misconceptions and toward genuine love, even tackling the dreaded concept of submission. I’m glad I read it.”

Sam Crabtree, Pastor for Small Groups, Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota; author, *Practicing Affirmation*

“In today’s high-pressure world of Christian ministry, it is all too easy to adopt attitudes that are antithetical to those modeled by Christ. Pride is often considered a necessary component in the advancement of the kingdom, and humility is viewed as a weakness that is to be overcome. In this insightful book, Gavin Ortlund reminds us that humility is the way of Jesus and the only real option for his servants. A much-needed word in our time.”

Brian Brodersen, Pastor, Calvary Chapel Costa Mesa, Santa Ana, California

“There are timely books and there are timeless ones; fortunately, Gavin Ortland’s new book, *Humility*, happens to be both. In a culture of bravado and hubris, Gavin shows us the beauty and freedom of humility—not mere kindness, sweetness, and a nonoffensive personality, but humility as the redemptive DNA of the gospel, the heartbeat of Jesus’s incarnation, and the culture God’s Spirit creates in a heart and church alive to the riches of grace. What a compelling, inviting, life-giving study.”

Scotty Smith, Pastor Emeritus, Christ Community Church,
Franklin, Tennessee; Teacher in Residence, West End Community
Church, Nashville, Tennessee

“In an age of self-creation and self-promotion, this book serves as a reset. The burden of creating one’s own image and work is heavy. We feel a compulsion to prove our worth and tell others about it. But Gavin reminds us that it’s self-forgetfulness, not self-promotion, that leads us to joy. He puts on display the relief of humility and the comfort that comes with personally knowing the goodness and compassion of God. In an age where we feel the pressure to put ourselves front and center, this book is a needed correction and a sweet exhortation to instead hide ourselves in Jesus.”

Jen Oshman, author, *Enough about Me* and *Cultural Counterfeits*

Humility

Union

Growing Gospel Integrity

Michael Reeves, series editor

Humility: The Joy of Self-Forgetfulness, Gavin Ortlund

Humility

The Joy of Self-Forgetfulness



Gavin Ortlund

■ ■ CROSSWAY®
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*In memory of my grandfather,
Ray Ortlund Sr.,
who modeled through his life that humility
leads to contagious joyfulness*

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Series Preface

GOSPEL INTEGRITY IS, I suggest, the greatest and most vital need of the church today. More than moral behavior and orthodox beliefs, this integrity that we need is a complete alignment of our heads, our hearts, and our lives with the truths of the gospel.

In his letter to the Philippians, the apostle Paul issues a call to his readers to live as people of the gospel. Spelling out what this means, Paul sets out four marks of gospel integrity.

First, he entreats, “Let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ” (1:27a). The people of the gospel should live lives *worthy* of the gospel.

Second, this means “standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel” (1:27b). In other words, integrity to the gospel requires a *united* stand of faithfulness together.

Third, knowing that such a stand will mean suffering and conflict (1:29–30), Paul calls the Philippians not to be “frightened in anything” (1:28a). He describes this *courage* as “a clear sign” of our salvation (1:28b).

Fourth, Paul writes,

So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. (2:1–3)

Paul thus makes it clear that there is no true Christian integrity without *humility*.

The simple aim of this series is to reissue Paul’s gospel-based call to an integrity that means living *worthily, unitedly, courageously*, and *humbly*. We need to recognize, however, that these four marks are not abstract moral qualities or virtues. What Paul has in mind are, quite specifically, marks and manifestations *of integrity to the gospel*. As such, the books in this series will unpack how the gospel fuels and shapes those qualities in us.

SERIES PREFACE

Through this little series, may God be glorified, and may “the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit” (4:23).

Michael Reeves
Series Editor

Preface

SOMEONE INNOCENTLY ASKED what it's like to write a book about humility. I thought of Winston Churchill's reputed quip about a political opponent: "He is a humble man, but then, he has much to be humble about!"¹

This is my only qualification for writing this book: I have much to be humble about!

But humility is too wonderful a thing for us not to consider and pursue. It is like oxygen. Humility is restorative, normalizing. It is for your soul what a good night's sleep is for your body.

As we start together in this book, here's an image to help orient us. Take a moment to think about what it feels like to

1 This quotation has appeared in various forms. One appeared in William Henry Chamberlin, "The So Austere, So Safe Clement Attlee," *Chicago Tribune*, June 27, 1954.

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be truly *awed* by something. For instance, consider the feeling you have when you stare up at the immensity of a night sky full of stars and become overwhelmed with how small you are and how huge the universe is. Think of the particular nuances of this feeling—the sense of wonder, of enchantment, of losing track of yourself. It is one of the most wonderful feelings you will ever have.

Humility is the pathway to that feeling. Humility can lead you to that feeling continuously, in all kinds of scenes.

After all, the world is chock-full of things that should inspire our awe. Cloud formations. The movements of ants. Mathematical equations. Trees that have been alive since before the time of Christ. The way a baby grows in the womb. The story of the person who works in the cubicle next to you. There are no uninteresting objects, only uninterested subjects. There is no reason not to live with a kind of astonished gratitude at what is around us—except a lack of humility.

Humility opens our eyes to the wonders all around us: it is sensitivity to reality, the turning of our narrow selves to the vast ocean of externality, and ultimately to God himself. In this way, humility is, in every circumstance, the key to joy, flourishing, and life itself.

This book was written to help us understand and pursue humility. It was written especially for Christians, and

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chapter 4 has an eye to pastors and church leaders—but I hope anyone might benefit from it. The first half of the book considers personal humility, while the second half considers humility in the context of the church. Throughout, the goal is to understand one particular quality of humility: namely, its ability to lead us back to joy.

Special thanks to Justin Taylor and the entire team at Crossway for being a joy for an author to work with—they are professional, courteous, generous, and so skilled at what they do. Greg Bailey's sharp editorial comments improved the book in many ways. I'm grateful to Mike Reeves for his gracious invitation to be a part of this fantastic series. Thanks also to Andrew Wolgemuth for his help, encouragement, and friendship in my writing. And most of all, thank you, Esther, for being such a friend through the last several years. You alone understand. Psalm 27:13–14. Don't stop believing.

Introduction

Why We Misunderstand Humility

WE OFTEN THINK OF HUMILITY as a somewhat dreary virtue. We know we need it, but we don't expect it to be much fun.¹

I remember hearing a talk on humility at a youth group. The speaker opened with dutiful reluctance: "I know we don't really enjoy this topic, but we need to talk about it anyway."

This is how many of us think: humility is important, but strictly as a duty. It's like paying our taxes or going to the dentist.

Interestingly, C. S. Lewis argued the opposite: "To get even near [humility], even for a moment, is like a drink of cold

1 Portions of this introduction are adapted from my article "Humility Isn't Hating Yourself: The Joy of Self-Forgetfulness," *Desiring God*, August 19, 2019, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/>.

water to a man in a desert.”² Tim Keller preached something similar: “There’s nothing more relaxing than humility.”³ As he explained, pride grumbles at everything, but humility can joyfully receive life as a gift.

So perhaps we get it backward: we think humility is an impossible burden, but in reality it is as light as a feather. It is pride that makes life gray and drab; humility brings out the color.

Misconceptions about Humility

Why do we get this wrong? I don’t fully know, but I suspect that part of the answer is that we simply misunderstand what humility is. It may be the most misunderstood virtue there is. Here are three misconceptions, in particular.

Misconception #1: Humility Is Hiding

Humility is *not* hiding your talents or abilities. If you can paint like Van Gogh, humility does not require you to keep your work under a veil in the basement closet. If you can

2 C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, in *The Complete C. S. Lewis Signature Classics* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2002), 71–72.

3 Cited in Bethany Jenkins, “There’s Nothing More Relaxing Than Humility,” The Gospel Coalition, November 5, 2015, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/>.

pitch a ninety-five-mile-per-hour fastball, humility will not encourage you to sit on the bench and never tell the coach.

In Lewis's classic *The Screwtape Letters*, one devil advises another,

The Enemy [God] wants to bring the man to a state of mind in which he could design the best cathedral in the world, and know it to be the best, and rejoice in the fact, without being any more (or less) or otherwise glad at having done it than he would be if it had been done by another. The Enemy wants him, in the end, to be so free from any bias in his own favor that he can rejoice in his own talents as frankly and gratefully as in his neighbor's talents—or in a sunrise, an elephant, or a waterfall.⁴

If Lewis is right, then denying your talents is not humility—if anything, it is the opposite, since you are still focused on yourself, biased for or against yourself as an exception to the rest of the human race. Humility means the death of this

4 C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, in *The Complete C. S. Lewis Signature Classics*, 153–54.

craving, self-referential framework. It means the freedom of valuing your contribution to the world alongside every other good thing in the world.

Imagine it like this: you are part of a team of doctors working to cure a disease. You make a discovery that contributes approximately 25 percent toward finding the cure. Another doctor then makes a different discovery that contributes the remaining 75 percent toward finding the cure. Humility means you are pleased with your accomplishment and able to speak freely about it, while simultaneously and effortlessly three times more pleased with your colleague's effort.

To be such a person is not a burden, but joy and freedom.

Misconception #2: Humility Is Self-Hatred

Humility is *not* self-hatred, self-neglect, or self-punishment. The Bible never says, "Hate yourself; instead, love your neighbor." It says, "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev. 19:18). Self-hatred is actually no less sinful than hatred of others (just as suicide is a form of murder).

Musician Andrew Peterson has a song entitled "Be Kind to Yourself." It's quite a lovely song. But this idea of self-kindness strikes some of us as strange—and, to be sure, it can be misunderstood. It must be distinguished from self-indulgence,

for instance. But there is a way to take care of yourself, to genuinely have regard for yourself, that is healthy and good, and ultimately makes you more useful to others. As I often say in counseling situations, self-care is not selfish.

Many in our society struggle with a sense of shame, inferiority, and low self-worth. We must sharply distinguish such feelings from the goal of humility. Whatever else humility will require of you, it will never rob you of your dignity as an image bearer of God.

Humble people don't need constant attention, but they also don't necessarily *mind* being noticed. Humble people don't need flattery, but they can sincerely receive a compliment. Such people are not constantly minimizing themselves. They can walk into a room with a bounce in their step, open to what their presence might contribute to others (but not needing it to).

Again, to be such a person is not a burden, but joy and freedom.

Misconception #3: Humility Is Weakness

Humility is *not* weakness. We often think of it this way—as though humble people are the type you can push around if you want. They think so lowly of themselves that they don't stand up against opposition.

But the truth is once again close to the opposite. Humility actually breeds strength and resilience because it frees us from the restricting needs of the ego—the need to be in charge, the need to look good, the need to defend ourselves, and so on. Humble people are often marked by a healthy ability to speak their minds on a given subject. They are not distracted by the burdens of constant self-regard and self-assessment.

Humility also breeds strength because it is motivating. There is nothing like freedom from self-awareness and self-protectiveness that so wonderfully concentrates you on the matter in front of you. As a result, humble people tend to be productive and industrious, often without even thinking about it.

So again, humility is not a burden but a joy. It feels like discovering how something is supposed to work (that “something” being yourself).

Humility Is Self-Forgetfulness Leading to Joy

Okay, this gives us a sense of what humility isn't—but what is it, exactly?

Keller, following Lewis, speaks of humility as self-forgetfulness—it's not thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less.⁵ Self-hiding, self-hatred, self-protection—

5 Timothy Keller, *The Freedom of Self-Forgetfulness: The Path to True Christian Joy* (Leyland, England, UK: 10Publishing, 2012).

these are all forms of self-preoccupation, whereas humility leads us into freedom from thoughts of self altogether.

Lewis helps us once again:

Do not imagine that if you meet a really humble man he will be what most people call “humble” nowadays: he will not be a sort of greasy, smarmy person, who is always telling you that, of course, he is nobody. Probably all you will think about him is that he seemed a cheerful, intelligent chap who took a real interest in what you said to him. If you do dislike him it will be because you feel a little envious of anyone who seems to enjoy life so easily. He will not be thinking about humility: he will not be thinking about himself at all.⁶

The word *cheerful* strikes me in this passage, as well as the emphasis on the enjoyment of life. This is the particular theme we will explore in this book: the pleasantness of humility. When we see humility in others, it is attractive, charming, and winsome. When we practice it ourselves, life goes more smoothly and happily.

In fact, we can go so far as to identify joy as the acid test of humility, for true humility always produces joy. If we lack

6 Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, in *The Complete C. S. Lewis Signature Classics*, 72.

joy, we know we've got a counterfeit humility. Something is misfiring. Of course, this doesn't mean that humility will always feel uplifting and comfortable. There will be arduous moments. But the net result will be, as with exercise or a healthy diet, distinctly pleasant.

So we can think of humility like this: self-forgetfulness leading to joy.

We will develop this throughout the rest of the book, but as an entry point, consider this wonderful passage from J. R. R. Tolkien's story *The Hobbit*. It's the conclusion of the book, after the Hobbit Bilbo Baggins has returned home and is reflecting on his adventures with his friend, the wizard Gandalf.

"Then the prophecies of the old songs have turned out to be true, after a fashion!" said Bilbo.

"Of course!" said Gandalf. "And why should not they prove true? Surely you don't disbelieve the prophecies, because you had a hand in bringing them about yourself? You don't really suppose, do you, that all your adventures and escapes were managed by mere luck, just for your sole benefit? You are a very fine person, Mr. Baggins, and I am very fond of you; but you are only quite a little fellow in a wide world after all!"

“Thank goodness!” said Bilbo laughing, and handed him the tobacco-jar.⁷

Oh, how I love this passage. It conveys a sense of the *relief* of humility. Being a big deal is a burden. Humility, in contrast, means you don’t interpret everything in relation to yourself, and you don’t need to. It is the death of the narrow, suffocating filter of self-referentiality. It is the nourishing, calming acceptance that you have a small place in a much larger story: that your life is being guided by something far bigger than your plans or controls, and serving something far bigger than your “sole benefit.”

Humility is the joy of embracing life as it is meant to be lived. Humility is accepting Gandalf’s rebuke that “you are only quite a little fellow in a wide world after all” and responding, like Bilbo, with relief and laughter.

We are tiny people in a vast world: thank goodness!

Discussion Questions

1. What do you think is the biggest misconception about humility today?

⁷ J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1982), 305.

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2. Have you ever seen—in yourself or others—humility confused with self-hatred? What was the result of that error?
3. Do you agree or disagree that joy is the acid test of humility? Why or why not?

PART 1

Cultivating Personal Humility

How the Gospel Defines Humility

IF YOU HEAR SOMEONE DESCRIBED as “a really humble person,” what comes to mind?

Often we think of how humility plays out, first and foremost, toward other people. Humble people are not “one-uppers,” for example. They apologize more, they notice others more, and so forth.

There is much truth to this, but we should first conceptualize humility in relation to God. All true humility starts before God himself, then trickles out into our other relationships. And, in the other direction (here is a sobering thought!): all pride, before it is ever directed to other people, is first directed to God.

One of the great themes of the Bible is the importance of humility before God: “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble” (James 4:6). God himself declares that the one he regards is “humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word” (Isa. 66:2).

But what does it mean, exactly, to be humble before God? How does God define humility?

In order to answer this question, we must begin with what God himself has done for us in the gospel. God has not merely given us an abstract definition of humility—in the person of Jesus Christ, he has himself (astonishingly!) *displayed* humility.

The Incarnation Is the Supreme Act of Humility

The central belief of Christian theology is what we call the incarnation—the belief that God became man. It is a staggering idea on many levels, but most breathtaking of all, perhaps, is what it reveals of divine humility.

Can we even speak of *divine humility*? Dare we think that God himself is humble? Or is humility only proper to creatures?

This is a complicated question, and we won’t get into all the nuances here.¹ But this much is certain: we can indeed conceive of Christ’s incarnation as an expression of humil-

1 For a defense of divine humility, see Matthew A. Wilcoxon, *Divine Humility: God’s Morally Perfect Being* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2019).

ity. This is how the apostle Paul speaks in his letter to the Philippians:

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 emptied himself, by 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. (2:5–8)

Why is the incarnation an act of humility? First, Paul speaks of it as a kind of *emptying*: Christ did not cling to his divine rights, but emptied himself by becoming a man. It is important to clarify that this does not mean that Christ in any way ceased to be God (it has sometimes been misunderstood that way). Nonetheless, the act of taking on a human nature can be spoken of as a kind of emptying: a lowering, a condescension, a descent.

Second, Paul characterizes the incarnation as an expression of *servanthood*. By becoming man, Christ took “the form of a servant.” The climactic moment of this act of servanthood was when Christ humbled himself by accepting death by crucifixion, followed by his burial in a borrowed tomb.

It's not hard to see how God becoming man can be described as an act of humility. In fact, no act could ever possibly be a greater demonstration of humility. You might think you've seen people display humility before—for instance, when an important adult gets down on the floor to play with a little child. But could there be any greater descent than for God to become a human baby? For the Creator to lie dead in a tomb?

Let's just pause and dwell on this mind-boggling thought for a moment: *God became a baby*. The transcendent Son of God, adored by angels, through whom every star was made, while remaining fully God, lowered himself to the status of a fetus growing in Mary's womb. Can you fathom it?²

Theologians often describe the period of Christ's incarnate work leading up to his death and burial as his “state of humiliation.” This is in contrast to his “state of exaltation,” consisting of his resurrection, ascension, and heavenly rule. For example, the Westminster Shorter Catechism uses the label *humiliation* to describe Christ's “being born, and that in a low condition, made under the law, undergoing the miseries of this life, the wrath of God, and the cursed death of the

2 I wrestled with some of the ideas that follow on my personal blog in “What Amazed Me This Year about Christmas,” Truth Unites, December 13, 2014, <https://gavinortlund.com/>.

cross; in being buried, and continuing under the power of death for a time.”³

Consider this word *humiliation* for a moment. Have you ever been humiliated? Do you remember that feeling? This is the word, albeit with some distinct nuance, that theologians use to describe *what God himself did*.

God, the Lord himself, the Almighty, humbled himself—to the point of *crucifixion*—for us and for our sins.

Lord, we marvel at your stunning display of humility. You, the Most High, have not refrained from taking the lowest and worst position imaginable. O Lord, how foolish all our pride seems when we remember the cross! Help us to follow your example, Lord. Teach us the pathway of humility.

The Details of the Incarnation Reflect Humility

We can go even further. As if it was not enough for God to become man, when he did so, it was in humble circumstances. He not only stooped down to the lowest place, but he did so—if I may put it like this—quietly, unassumingly.

I first began to reflect on this a few years ago during the Christmas season. Each year during advent, we often hear

³ The Westminster Shorter Catechism, Question 27, in *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian, 1966), 294.

the same Scripture passages read over and over, reminding us of the wonderful Christmas story. During one service, it suddenly occurred to me to wonder about the story of the angels' appearance to the shepherds (Luke 2:8–20).

The thought came: Why involve these shepherds at all? We've already got several other angelic visits (Matt. 1:20; 2:13, 19) and seemingly more important characters responding to the events, such as the wise men (2:1–12). Why send a whole multitude of angels out to the rural fields for only a few shepherds to notice? Why not spread the news further?

The more I considered this, the more I began to notice how all kinds of other details in the Christmas story reflect a kind of quiet humility. For example:

- Jesus could have beamed down as a full-grown man; instead, he was born as a baby.
- He could have at least been born in a palace; instead, he was laid in a manger where animals fed.
- He could have been rich or a prince; instead, he was born into poverty to become a carpenter.
- He could have been born in a city (such as Rome, or at least Jerusalem); instead, he was born in rural Bethlehem.

Just consider it! The most important moment in history, the event that triggered the redemption of the whole world, the union of Creator and creation—and almost nobody knew. God limited the revelation of angelic rejoicing to a few rural shepherds, while all the important people of the world went about their business. “The world was made through him, yet the world did not know him” (John 1:10).

Now bear in mind, the one who was sleeping in the manger was the same one who “upholds the universe by the word of his power” (Heb. 1:3); even while he nursed at Mary’s breast, it remained true that “in him all things hold together” (Col. 1:17). He was baby and Lord all at once. The juxtapositions of the Christmas story are mind-boggling:

- filling the heavens, yet swaddled tightly
- holding every atom in place, yet clinging to his mother
- sustaining the fiery stars, yet crying and needing Mary’s comfort
- adored by the angels, yet sleeping amongst the donkeys

Again, you might think that when God did this, it would at least have made the headlines! This was the most significant turning point in the history of created reality. Yet there was

no parade. No fanfare. The angels sang their herald to . . . a few rural shepherds.

When I contemplate the unpretentiousness of the gospel, I am ashamed of times I try to be noticed. Who am I to draw attention to myself when *God himself* took the hidden road?

O Lord, when we consider what you have done for us, we are ashamed of our fragile egos. We feel like the great hymn puts it: "My richest gain I count but loss, and pour contempt on all my pride." Help us follow your example of humility. Help us to pour contempt on all our pride.

Who Can Be Arrogant When Standing beside the Cross?

D. A. Carson tells the story of interviewing two famous theologians and asking them how they stayed humble despite all their accomplishments. One of them, in a kind of “gentle outrage,” responded by asking, “How on earth can anyone be arrogant when standing beside the cross?”⁴

Indeed. Who of us can possibly be arrogant while remembering Bethlehem and Golgotha? If God himself has taken the lowest position, who are we to seek importance?

4 D. A. Carson, *Basics for Believers: An Exposition of Philippians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), 58.

The incarnation also compels us to ask: Who are the shepherds in the world today? What are the mangers in our lives? Where is the work of the cross happening now? This is God's pattern: he often shows up in a package that is all too easy to reject, to despise, to overlook. Humility is always God's way.

What are the unseen angels singing about right now? Be assured it is little noted by the world. It will sneak undetected under the radar of human pride, just as God himself did when he came into our world.

O God, you are the God of mangers, not palaces. Open our eyes to see you at work all around us.

Discussion Questions

1. Is it correct to say that God is humble? Are there any dangers in how such a statement might be understood?
2. What do you think it means to say that Christ “emptied himself” (Phil. 2:7)?
3. Which detail of the Christmas story stands out to you most as an expression of divine humility?