

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #23: WHAT DID JESUS KNOW AND WHEN DID HE KNOW IT?

By John Temples

The coming of God into human flesh has always been marvelous to the human mind. The fact that the Creator would enter into His creation to save it is beyond our comprehension (as well as our ability to thank Him for it).

Perhaps the ultimate challenge to our thinking, though, is HOW the Creator came--as a helpless human infant. The gospels give us glimpses (albeit too brief, according to our thinking) of His childhood. Jesus grew into manhood in exactly the same way all of us do. Luke summarizes this maturing process in just one verse: "And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men" (Luke 2:52).

It's that "increasing in wisdom" part that unsettles us. That implies mental growth and development. But that would mean that Jesus had to "learn" some things the same way we do. But wait a minute, we say--how could the Son of God "grow" in wisdom, understanding, or knowledge? He was (is) God!

So, let us think on this: what did Jesus know and when did He know it? How much knowledge did He have as a newborn baby? A child? A teenager? When did He know who He was (or did He always know)?

There are perhaps two extreme views on this subject.

One view is, Jesus knew He was God from the moment He was born; in fact, He knew everything--His pre-existence, His mission, who His parents were, their entire genealogy, etc. There was never a time when Jesus did not possess omniscience.

The other view is, Jesus had to learn everything--He was on a "need-to-know" basis with the Father. Even His perception of His divinity was a gradual process, say some; He had to become aware of His Godhood gradually.

As with many Bible concepts, the truth probably lies somewhere in between. Here are some things we can know:

FACT ONE: BEFORE JESUS CAME TO EARTH, HE, BEING GOD, KNEW EVERYTHING.

Jesus was (is) the Second Person of the Godhead, the Divine Nature. The other two Persons are the Father and the Holy Spirit. There is one Divine Nature, hence only one God; but each of the three Persons is equally and fully God. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit all possess the same nature, mind, and will. Each is *omniscient*, meaning “all-knowing.” The Godhead is not like a committee, where some members of the committee might not know some things the others know, or where one member can withhold information from another.

Here are some Scriptures to this point:

- 1 John 3:20 says, “For if our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and *knows all things.*”
- Psalms 147:5 states, “Great is our Lord, and mighty in power; *His understanding is infinite.*”
- 1 Corinthians 2:11 states that the Holy Spirit “knows the things of God” (possesses the mind of God). Since all members of the Godhead are fully God, then by implication this must be true of the Son also.
- Philippians 2:6 states that before Jesus came to earth, He was “in the form of God” and “equal with God.” Equality with God would mean that since God is omniscient, then so was the Son.

Please understand how powerful “omniscience” is. It means God knows all things completely and eternally. The past, present, and future of everything in the universe is continually within His view. God not only knows everything that has happened and that will happen, He even knows all possible contingencies--what **WOULD HAPPEN** if any person who ever lived had made alternate plans or choices at any time.

FACT TWO: WHEN JESUS BECAME HUMAN, HE VOLUNTARILY LAID ASIDE CERTAIN ASPECTS OF HIS EQUALITY WITH GOD.

The key passage here is Philippians 2:5-8: "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross."

The beginning clause of verse 7 says in the KJV and NKJV, "[He] made Himself of no reputation." The ASV, which typically more accurately reflects the Greek, says "He emptied Himself." The NIV and ESV say, "He made Himself nothing." I don't like the NIV and ESV rendering--Jesus certainly did not lower Himself to "nothing" status. "Emptied Himself" is probably the best translation.

But of exactly what did the Lord empty Himself in becoming a man? Certainly not His divine nature--the quality of "being God." He did not cease to be God at any time; He simply added a human nature to His divine nature.

I like John MacArthur's explanation of this, found in his commentary on Matthew 24: "Although He was fully God as well as fully man (John 1:1, 14), Christ voluntarily restricted His use of certain divine attributes when He became flesh. 'Although He existed in the form of God, [He] did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped,' that is, to be held onto during His humanness (Phil. 2:6). It was not that He lost any divine attributes, but that He voluntarily laid aside the use of some of them and would not manifest those attributes except as directed by His Father (John 4:34; 5:30; 6:38).

"Jesus demonstrated His divine omniscience on many occasions. 'He did not need anyone to bear witness concerning man for He Himself knew what was in man' (John 2:25). When, for example, Nicodemus came to Him at night, Jesus already knew what he was thinking and answered his question before it was asked (John 3:13). But there were certain self-imposed restrictions in His human knowledge. He told the disciples, 'All things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you' (John 15:15). Jesus obediently restricted His knowledge to those things that the Father wanted Him to know during His earthly days of humanity.

“The Father revealed certain things to the Son as He reveals them to all men--through the Scripture, through the Father’s working in and through His life, and through the physical manifestations of God’s power and glory (see Rom. 1:19–20). Jesus learned much of His earthly knowledge just as every human being learns, and it is for that reason that He was able to keep ‘increasing in wisdom’ (Luke 2:52). In addition to those ways, some truths were revealed to the Son directly by the Father. But in every case Jesus’ human knowledge was limited to what His heavenly Father provided.” (End of quote; emphasis mine, JT)

Scripture does indeed suggest that there were some limits to the Lord’s knowledge. Consider these references:

- Mark 5:30 (in reference to the woman who was healed after touching Jesus’s garment) reads, “And Jesus, *immediately knowing in Himself that power had gone out of Him*, turned around in the crowd and said, ‘*Who touched My clothes?*’”
- Jesus “marveled” upon seeing the faith of a Roman centurion (Matthew 8:10, Luke 7:9).
- Mark 11:13--“And seeing from afar a fig tree having leaves, *He went to see if perhaps He would find something on it*. When He came to it, He found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs.”
- Mark 9 records the healing of a demon-possessed son. Jesus asked the father, “*How long has this been happening to him?*” (Mark 9:21)
- Mark 13:32--“But of that day and hour [the day of the second coming] no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, *nor the Son*, but only the Father.” (Cf Matthew 24:36.)

In regard to the first four of these references, people might say, “Well, Jesus knew these things; but He acted as if He did not for the benefit of His disciples, or to heighten and prove the reality of the miracles He did.” I would not argue with that explanation; it is a possibility. But the last one (Mark 13:32) cannot be put into this category--Jesus said flatly, “I don’t know the time of My return.”

JESUS DID NOT KNOW THE TIME OF HIS RETURN WHILE A MAN; BUT DOES HE NOW KNOW IT?

I believe that He does. It seems likely that Jesus regained full divine knowledge after the resurrection. Here are two passages to think about in that regard:

- When giving the Great Commission after His resurrection, He said, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth” (Matthew 28:18). “All authority in heaven and on earth” would include, it seems, the right to know and/or dictate the time of His return.
- Just before His ascension, the disciples inquired about the timetable for the establishment of the kingdom. Jesus replied, “It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority” (Acts 1:7). This is a subtle shift in meaning from “I don’t know the time of My return.” He repeats the truth that the time of His appearing would not be revealed, but He does not disclaim knowledge of it Himself. If He still did not know the timing of His return at this point, it seems that He would have said, “It is not for US to know.” Instead, He said, “It is not for YOU to know.”

Consider the following syllogism:

- Christ was equal to God (and therefore omniscient) before He left heaven (John 1:1, Philippians 2:6).
- Just before His death, He prayed to be restored to His former glory (John 17:5), and surely that prayer was answered.
- Therefore, Christ is now once again equal with God, and therefore knows all things.

SO WHEN DID JESUS KNOW THAT HE WAS GOD?

An Internet resource says, “When did Jesus know that He was God? From the heavenly perspective, the Son knew from eternity past who He was and what His earthly work was to be. From the earthly perspective, the incarnate Jesus came to that realization at some point early in life. Just when that point was, we cannot know for sure.” (<https://www.gotquestions.org/Jesus-know.html>)

This article has involved some speculation on my part and, maybe some would say, reasoning that is beyond my pay grade. But our goal as Christians is to ponder and learn everything we can about our Lord, including what His time on earth was like. Let me hasten to add, though, that these matters, while interesting, are certainly not matters of faith; and certainly should not divide brethren. Perhaps the important thing we can take away from this discussion is that Jesus was willing to cast His lot with us--even literally becoming us and accepting limits on His knowledge and power--in order to save us. Praise God for that. --John Temples