

p 35 WEEK 5: A CALL TO HUMBLE SACRIFICE; JESUS' SUPREME EXAMPLE

Philippians 2:1-11

The Place of the Passage

After almost a full chapter of thanking and comforting the Philippian church, Paul turned in Philippians 1:27 to some direct exhortations or commands. As we noted in the last section, unity is central to the exhortations ending chapter 1. In chapter 2, Paul's exhortations continue, as does the major theme of unity in the church—now with a heightened appeal, with more specificity, and with motivation added to the general commands of 1:27. Paul will return to the theme of unity again in chapter 4. Unity is clearly a major theme of this letter, but 2:1–11 is the linchpin holding it all together.

p 36 The Big Picture

On the basis of the rich realities of the gospel, Paul commands the church to be unified by being humble and caring, looking to Christ as the perfect example of humble servanthood in his incarnation, crucifixion, and exaltation.

Reflection and Discussion

Read through the complete passage for this study, Philippians 2:1–11. Then review the questions below concerning this section of Paul's letter and write your notes on them. (For further background, see the *ESV Study Bible*, pages 2282–2283, or visit www.esvbible.org.)

Paul will go on in verses 2 and following to call the Philippians to specific ways to strive for unity and peace. But first, in verse 1, he begins by establishing four fundamental realities of being in Christ. Why do you think Paul did this before telling them what to do in verses 2ff.?

How do the four conditions of verse 1 relate to what follows in verses 2–8? Notice that Paul is speaking in personal, experiential, “vertical” ways (one's relationship to the gospel and God) in verse 1, but does that very language also hint at “horizontal” implications? How?

Notice that little word “if” at the beginning of verse 1. What is the significance of the word in this context? How might it relate to assurance of salvation? Does p 37 it signify that Paul is skeptical about the genuineness of the Philippians' faith? Is there anything in chapter 1 that helps us answer this question?

Paul has already expressed his general desire for the church to “progress” in their joy and faith (1:25). In chapter 2 he calls them to progress in specific ways: “being of the same mind, having the same love,” etc. (v. 2). But, technically, these aren’t the *commands* of verse 2. His command is that they would “complete my joy.” What does it say about Paul’s heart, leadership, and personal connection to the Philippians that he couches his call to unity in a call to “complete [his] joy”?

Verse 2 contains four different phrases describing unity. There is distinctiveness and overlap in each phrase. Notice that Paul seems to stress the unity of *mind* and *truth* in each. What does Paul have in mind with this emphasis? (As you answer, consider Eph. 4:1–6.)

As he moves from verse 2 to verses 3–4, Paul clearly sees personal humility as a necessary ingredient in the church’s unity. Such humility is exemplified in a number of different ways. What are they and why are they integral to unity?

p 38 What is the relationship between verses 1–5 and verses 6–8? Why does Paul include this thorough description of Jesus’ incarnation in verses 6–8 after his call to unity and humility?

With all of the rich theological language of verses 6–8, Paul’s primary point may be slightly overlooked. It is a point about servanthood and service. The word “servant” (v. 7) is a good summary of these verses, tethering the rich theological language to Paul’s main point in verses 1–8. In what ways was Jesus a “servant”?

After unpacking Christ’s humility in the servanthood of the incarnation and the cross, Paul turns in verses 9–11 to Jesus’ subsequent exaltation. Why do you think he added that? Is Christ’s exaltation also in some way exemplary for the Philippians, or is it just a necessary completion of Christ’s personal story?

Read through the following three sections on *Gospel Glimpses*, *Whole-Bible Connections*, and *Theological Soundings*. Then take time to consider the *Personal Implications* these sections may have for you.

p 39 Gospel Glimpses

AN EXAMPLE, BUT MORE THAN AN EXAMPLE. Those familiar with Philippians 2 may think of the rich Christology of verses 6–11 apart from the context and Paul’s aims in the passage. Though these verses are important for our understanding of Christ’s deity, humanity, incarnation, etc., Paul’s primary goal here is to show Jesus as the ultimate example of humility, servanthood, and sacrifice. It is “this mind” that we should have among ourselves (v. 5). So too, elsewhere in

Scripture, Jesus' life and death are an "example" to his followers (John 13:15; 1 Pet. 2:21). And yet it is crucial that Christians never begin to think of Jesus' cross as *merely* an example. For those who have received his free and deep grace, gratitude and awe are never far from their minds. They cannot read words like those in Philippians 2:6–11 without remembering the servanthood and sacrifice of the cross that was on *their behalf* and in *their place*.

THE GOSPEL'S HORIZONTAL EFFECTS. The four conditions of verse 1 are simply the fundamental realities of the gospel; they are inevitable results of being "in Christ." But Paul sees these as bases for his call to peace and oneness with others (v. 2). This suggests that the gospel doesn't merely forgive, or even merely restore us to fellowship with God. It also changes us from the inside out and unites us to others in Christ's body. Because we have Christ's *encouragement, comfort, and love*; because we share the *Spirit*; because we each have God's *affection and sympathy*, we are "one" in Christ. To be sure, our sinful, selfish selves often get in the way of living that out fully. That's why Paul wrote these words to the Philippians, and why we still need them today. But the basis and power for pursuing further unity with others is in the gospel, with its manifold benefits.

Whole-Bible Connections

JESUS, THE SUFFERING SERVANT. Paul's teaching on Christ's humble, servant-like sacrifice has its roots in the Old Testament theme of "the servant of the Lord" (Isaiah 42; 49; 53). While not quoting directly from key passages like Isaiah 53, Paul clearly alludes to Isaiah's "suffering servant." Though he was eternally and fully God—with all divine rights, privileges, and attributes—the second person of the Trinity took on flesh and was born (Phil. 2:6). In doing so, he "emptied himself" and took on the "form of a servant" (v. 7). The extent of his servanthood was complete—unto death. Further, Paul specifies that his death was "on a cross" (v. 8)—a form of death that uniquely fits the graphically violent language of Isaiah 53. Paul, then, isn't just reminding the Philippians [p 40](#) what happened or what Jesus did but is reminding them also *who he is*: the Promised One, the Messiah, the fulfillment.

JESUS, THE EXALTED LORD. Philippians 2:9–11 explains one major outcome of Christ's righteous suffering and death: the Father exalted Jesus. In the resurrection, and later in the ascension, Christ's deity, obedience, and sacrificial death were vindicated by God. The themes of vindication and exaltation are likewise part of those servant passages in Isaiah. God will "prolong his days; the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand. Out of the anguish of his soul, he shall see and be satisfied" (Isa. 53:10–11). God's servant "shall be high and lifted up, and shall be exalted" (52:13). Paul also insists that this exaltation resulted in Christ bearing "the name that is above every name" (Phil. 2:9). He is "LORD"—a term that reflects not only authority but also God's personal name, *Yahweh* (Isa. 42:8). Before this name, "every knee should bow ... and every tongue confess" (Phil. 2:10–11). Paul takes these phrases from Isaiah 45:23, thereby equating the servant Christ with Yahweh himself.

Theological Soundings

JESUS' ETERNITY AND DEITY. As discussed in the previous paragraph, Christ's deity is unmistakable in the exaltation language of Philippians 2:9–11. However, Paul's earlier words

about Christ's preincarnate state also stress his deity. He was "in the form of God" (v. 6)—not that he had some Godlike qualities or appearance, but that he was of the same nature or essence. He "did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped" (v. 6)—a thing to attain or reach—since equality with God was already his. Paul mentions no starting point for this divine status; it is eternally so, just as Jesus himself taught (John 8:58) and Paul elsewhere states (Col. 1:16).

ONE PERSON, TWO NATURES. When Paul writes that Christ "emptied himself" (v. 7), he doesn't mean that Christ emptied himself of divinity, or even of some divine attributes. He is stressing that all divine *privileges*, though rightfully his, were humbly set aside in becoming a man and suffering in our place. Likewise, the language of "taking the *form* of a servant ... being born in the *likeness* of men ... in human *form*" (vv. 7–8) doesn't suggest that Christ was only human-like or only *appeared* human. The incarnate Christ was one divine-human person with two natures. The early church rightly discerned that these two natures are united without mixture, confusion, separation, or division. As one person, Jesus did not alternate between his human and divine natures. Instead he operated out of the totality of his divine-human person. While these are profound theological matters, in principle they are simply drawn from and necessitated by the divine-human language of Philippians 2:6–8. (For more on these matters, see the article "The Person of Christ," pp. 2515–2519 in the *ESV Study Bible*.)

p 41 **Personal Implications**

Take time to reflect on the implications of Philippians 2:1–11 for your own life today. Consider what you have learned that might lead you to praise God, repent of sin, and trust in his gracious promises. Make notes below on the personal implications for your walk with the Lord of the (1) *Gospel Glimpses*, (2) *Whole-Bible Connections*, (3) *Theological Soundings*, and (4) this passage as a whole.

1. Gospel Glimpses

2. Whole-Bible Connections

3. Theological Soundings

4. Philippians 2:1–11

p 42 **As You Finish This Unit ...**

Take a moment now to ask for the Lord's blessing and help as you continue in this study of Philippians. And take a moment also to look back through this unit of study, to reflect on a few key things that the Lord may be teaching you—and perhaps to highlight and underline these things to review again in the future.