

# Philippians 2:1-11: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[ 0 : 00 ] Philippians chapter 2 verses 1 to 11 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 man, 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.

The first half of Philippians chapter 2 is one of the most famous passages in all of Paul's writings. Many regard verses 5 to 11 as a sort of a Christological hymn.

Although it clearly has a pronounced poetic character, whether or not it was actually a hymn is uncertain, and there are various competing theories of the hymn's supposed origin. Paul begins the section by appealing to the Philippians.

Do they enjoy encouragement in Christ? Do they find comfort in his love? Do they know fellowship in the Spirit? Do they know affection and compassion in him? Paul doesn't make the source of this encouragement, comfort, fellowship, affection and compassion plain.

[ 1 : 49 ] However, while the primary source is clearly Christ, it probably also includes what they experience from brothers and sisters in Christ too. If they do have these things, they should go even further and make Paul's joy complete.

They have already brought him great joy, as he has made clear, but they could raise his joy to even greater heights. They can do this by pursuing unity of mind and love with each other. By mind, Paul is referring to mindset and attitude.

In unpacking what this united mindset should involve, Paul contrasts selfish ambition and conceit to a humility that puts others ahead of themselves, and which is mindful of and concerned for others' well-being.

The success of the Christian understanding of virtue can be seen in part by the fact that we are probably not startled by this exhortation from Paul. In the Roman culture of the Philippians, humility would not be regarded as such a virtue.

Rather, it would be regarded as weak and servile. To many minds, this passage is the very height of the sort of slave morality that Friedrich Nietzsche identified as subverting the master morality of nobility, strength of will, pride, power and courage.

[ 3 : 00 ] Until we have some grasp of the mindset of the typical Roman, the shock of Paul's teaching here won't hit us. This passage is a direct assault upon the fundamental morality of the society Paul was living in.

The importance of Christians recognising, being attentive to, serving and not exerting their strength at the expense of others is a recurring theme in Paul's writing.

Rather than vaunting themselves over others, pursuing their own rights, advancing themselves ahead of others, acting without regard for others or putting others down to privilege themselves, the Philippians are to act out of a humility with regard to themselves and an attention to the value of others.

Just how revolutionary this vision of morality was is difficult for us to grasp in a society that has inherited the world that it transformed. The historian Tom Holland has recently written about the way in which the entire world of Rome was built upon systemic exploitation and brutality and an

extreme massed morality.

Millions were killed and many millions more enslaved, and that was something to boast in. It was a sign of might, a sign of the Roman will to power achieving its ends. Sex, for instance, was about the free Roman man, and the eclipse of the concerns of the parties that they exerted their dominance over.

[ 4 : 21 ] Paul's teaching here goes for the jugular of such a society, rejecting and disqualifying it outright. In this message, and the good news of a king that, as we will see, exemplifies this humility and meekness, this entire Roman way of perceiving the world would be brought down.

In the section, or perhaps the hymn that follows, Paul presents the example of Jesus himself, an example in which, as we will soon see, humility is presented as something divine.

You can imagine the Roman man responding to the notion of humility as a virtue by claiming that such a virtue might perhaps have a place for slaves and women, who need to put some positive spin upon their weakness and loneliness.

By suggesting that humility is a virtue, the unavoidable state of servility can be made somewhat less alienating. However, the free Roman man is above such morality.

He has strength, power, status, and humility is just for those who lack such things. However, the biblical understanding of humility is not just the lack of power, will, or greatness.

[ 5 : 26 ] Humility can be seen in God himself, as God displays his power and greatness, not in self-aggrandizement, but in service of the weak and dependent. In Jesus the Messiah, the Lord of the universe is revealed to be a humble God.

When we are called to adopt the mindset of the humble, we are not being called to act as slaves, crafting a vision of morality around the unavoidable condition of our powerlessness and our resentful frustration at the master morality of those who lord over us, but as those who are imitating our master, the King of kings and Lord of lords, following in his path.

The hymn, if we are to call it that, divides into two parts. Verses 6 to 8 tell of Christ's humiliation, and verses 9 to 11 of his exaltation over all.

The focus of the first section is upon Christ's voluntary humiliation. From the outset, we can see that Paul is working with an extremely high Christology. Christ pre-exists his birth.

We have hints of this elsewhere in Paul, in places like 2 Corinthians 8, verse 9. For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.

[ 6 : 40 ] However, it is at its clearest here, and in Colossians chapter 1, verses 15 to 20. Christ isn't just sent by the Father. He voluntarily empties himself and comes.

Various commentators have suggested that Paul is drawing a contrast between Christ and Adam, much as he does in Romans chapter 5. The connection with the servant of Isaiah that some have proposed is weaker, if it is present at all.

Adam had been made in the image of God, and had grasped at equality with God in the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. By contrast, Christ, being the very image of God, did not regard the equality with God that he already possessed as something to be exploited, or used for his own advantage.

The translation here is difficult, and even when scholars agree with the general sense of the passage, the more precise sense is a matter of some lively debate. The translation in the form of God might remind us of Colossians chapter 1, verse 15.

He is the image of the invisible God. The word the ESV translates, a thing to be grasped, is even more debated. Some have suggested, for instance, that the word translated as robbery, or a thing to be grasped, or something to be exploited, might have a more particular reference to something to be exploited for rape and robbery.

[ 8 : 00 ] At the very least, this would sharpen the contrast between Christ and the false gods of the pagans, whose divine power was used precisely for such self-aggrandizement and exploitation of others, often involving rape of human women, as in the case of Zeus, on numerous occasions.

This is what divine power looked like to the Greeks and the Romans. Christ stands out, then, not only from Adam, but also from the false gods and idols. While Adam was made in God's image, but sought to grasp at equality with God.

Christ had equality with God, yet did not exploit it. Rather, he voluntarily forwent all his prerogatives and assumed the position of a slave, someone without any of the honour that he possessed by

right.

Many have speculated about what it would have meant for Jesus to empty himself, an act referred to as his kenosis. Some have argued that he gave up his divine power and other divine attributes, ceasing to be truly God in order that he might become truly man.

This, of course, must be rejected, not merely on the grounds of Christian orthodoxy, but also on the basis of a proper reading of this passage. The full force of Paul's teaching cannot be appreciated unless we recognise that Christ's emptying of himself was far from a departure from divinity, a true manifestation of it.

[ 9 : 19 ] Christ, who was in the form of God, took the form of a slave. The seeming contrast could not be sharper, but the contrast is a revelatory one and isn't fundamentally opposing.

The character of God is revealed in Christ's assuming the character of a slave. What the form of a servant involves becomes clearer when we are told that he was born in the likeness of men and was found in human form.

However, this wasn't the measure of the depth of Christ's self-humbling. He, like a slave, took the path of obedience, the path of obedience to the cross itself, practically the most humiliating death imaginable, the annihilation of all dignity, status, honour, glory, belonging, all these sorts of things. In his disobedience, Adam had taken from the tree to grasp at equality with God. In his obedience, Christ went to the tree, not merely to reverse Adam's action, but also to reveal what God is truly like.

In John's Gospel, for instance, it is in the cross that Christ is lifted up. This is the beginning of his glorification. God is not as we expected him to be.

[ 10 : 29 ] The hymn concludes with a movement of exaltation that responds to the downward movement of the first half. Christ did not exalt himself, but God highly exalted him.

Indeed, God exalted him to the greatest degree imaginable. His name is above every name. Every knee everywhere must bow before him, and every tongue must confess his lordship.

The name that Christ receives is the name that is above every name. There is only one such name, the name of God himself. In his exaltation, Jesus' divinity is openly proclaimed.

When we baptise, for instance, we do so in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Not three different names, but the one name of the triune God. Of course, Jesus doesn't become divine in his exaltation.

Rather, his divinity is openly declared. And as it is declared, the way of the cross that led to that exaltation is declared to be the way of God himself. In bestowing the name that is above every name upon Jesus, the Father sets him forth as the one to whom the worship of all is due.

[ 11 : 37 ] Every knee must bow, and every tongue confess. There is an expression taken from the Old Testament here. Isaiah chapter 45, verses 18 to 23 reads, For thus says the Lord who created the heavens, He is God, who formed the earth and made it.

He established it. He did not create it empty. He formed it to be inhabited. I am the Lord, and there is no other. I did not speak in secret in a land of darkness. I did not say to the offspring of Jacob, Seek me in vain.

I, the Lord, speak the truth. I declare what is right. Assemble yourselves and come, draw near together, you survivors of the nations. They have no knowledge, who carry about their wooden idols, and keep on praying to a God that cannot save.

Declare and present your case. Let them take counsel together. Who told this long ago? Who declared it of old? Was it not I, the Lord? And there is no other God besides me, a righteous God and a saviour.

There is none beside me. Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth. For I am God, and there is no other. By myself I have sworn, from my mouth has gone out in righteousness, a word that shall not return.

[ 12 : 47 ] To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear allegiance. The one true God was unique in creating the world. The one true God is unique in his rule over the world.

And the one true God will demonstrate his uniqueness over against the idols through the great salvation that he will bring about. This is what the Lord is speaking of in this passage in Isaiah. And the proof of all of this is that the day will come when every knee will bow to him and every tongue will swear allegiance to him. Read against such a background, Philippians chapter 2 could not be more astonishing.

Paul's startling message is that the uniqueness of God has been revealed in Christ. And if that wasn't remarkable enough, it has been revealed in the self-emptying way of the cross. God will not give his glory to another, but the Father is glorified in his Son who lives and reigns with him in the unity of the Holy Spirit. Glory and God-likeness is found not in self-aggrandizement, but in humility and in the path of service to others.

[ 13 : 52 ] If the Philippians take on the mindset that Paul wishes them to, they will be formed according to the character of the Lord of all, according to the character of God himself. A question to consider, how might knowing that God's true character is seen in Jesus challenge some of our preconceptions about God and about virtue?

