

### 03. Philippians 2:1-6



Jesus kneeling in prayer, Michael Jervis Nelson,  
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## Philippians 2:1-2

If there is any appeal in the Messiah, any consolation from love, any communion in the Spirit, any movements of compassion and feelings of love, make my joy complete

We have had occasion to observe Paul's affectionate nature and his capacity for deep friendship. His close communion with the risen Jesus also stands out in everything he writes. Rarely do these two aspects of Paul's character come together as beautifully as in this passage. He has spoken of the need to support each other in the faith in the face of opposition coming from outside the community. Now he appeals to the Christians in Philippi to do all they can to deepen communion within the community.

## Philippians 2:1

### If there is any appeal in the Messiah

He begins his appeal by speaking of four aspects of the life which they enjoy as disciples of Jesus. The first is the way in which Christ himself continues to appeal to them to live a life of love. The Greek παράκλησις has many nuances, including encouragement and comfort. It often means **appeal** and that seems to suit the present context best. Jesus 'gave himself' (Galatians 1:4) for us, and from the heart of the risen Christ comes the Spirit through whom 'God's love is poured into our hearts' (Romans 5:5). Jesus gives us his Spirit so that we might enjoy his own communion with God and so with each other. He continues to appeal to us to live in the communion of love for which he gave his life.

## Philippians 2:1

any consolation from love, any communion in the Spirit, any movements of compassion and feelings of love

Paul speaks of the **consolation** (παράμυθιον) that comes with love. He is referring to God's love which they continue to receive from Jesus in any number of unexpected ways. He is thinking especially of the comfort which they receive from Christ through the love of other Christians.

Paul speaks of the **communion** (κοινωνία) which they enjoy 'in the Spirit': communion with the risen Christ and so with the Father; and communion with those who share their faith.

He speaks of 'movements of compassion' (σπλάγχνα) which they have experienced and 'feelings of love' (οἰκτιρισμός). He is thinking of 'the mercies of God' (Romans 12:1), and the compassion and love of the heart of Jesus, especially as these are mediated to us through other members of the Christian community.

## Philippians 2:2

make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.

Paul urges the Philippians to ‘**be of one soul** [σύμψυχοι] **and of one mind**’ [φροονέω]: to be in tune with each other in their thinking, feelings and attitudes. He wants them to experience ‘**the same love**’: the love of the heart of Jesus drawing them into ever more intimate communion with God and with each other. He wants to see them ‘**in full accord**’ (σύμψυχοι, ‘sharing the same soul’, see 1:27). This is what it means to ‘**live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ**’ (1:27).

## Philippians 2:3

Do nothing from selfish ambition. Do not strive after or seek to find your value in things that are worthless

Paul wants them to let the special trusting dependence of Christ on his Father find expression in their lives too. Then they would not be tempted to self-centredness or to striving after things that are **worthless** (κενοδοξία). The only glory (δοξα) worth having is a sharing in the glory of the risen Christ. Then they would have no difficulty in delighting in the gifts which Christ has bestowed on others, in looking up to them and caring for them: 'Do not seek your own advantage, but that of the other' (1 Corinthians 10:24). 'I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, so that they may be saved' (1 Corinthians 10:33). One of the characteristics of true love is that 'it does not insist on its own way' (1 Corinthians 13:5).

## Philippians 2:3-5

in humility [ταπεινοφροσύνη] regard others above yourselves, so that you are not all focused on yourself, but each is looking to the interests of the others. Let the same mind be in you that was in the Messiah Jesus.

At the basis of such selfless love lies humility, which for a disciple of Christ has nothing to do with belittling self. It is the recognition of oneself as a child of God and includes the trust that one's true self will be cared for by God's love.

The only way to grow in this virtue, as in the others, is to receive it from the one who said: 'learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart' (Matthew 11:29).

The Greek ταπεινοφροσύνη denotes ‘thinking of oneself as being low [ταπεινος]’. In ordinary Greek usage outside the Bible ‘being in a low state’ is considered undesirable. To be reduced to such a state by people or by the gods is to suffer an evil fate. At the same time, since in relation to the gods one is necessarily ‘low’, to refuse to accept our lowly condition is to fall into the vice of pride. To accept one’s low position in relation to the gods, and even in relation to other people when fate has so willed it, is considered sensible and virtuous.

The Greek Old Testament mirrors non-Biblical Greek, with one important qualification which reflects Israel's understanding of itself as a religious people born out of the Exodus event. Central to Israel's self-understanding is that God has redeemed them from their 'low' condition in Egypt. Being 'low' has no value in itself, but it does attract God's compassionate love, and it does hold out hope for redemption.

The following text from Isaiah is typical: 'Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth; break forth, O mountains, into singing! For the Lord has comforted his people, and will have compassion on his lowly ones [ταπεινός]' (Isaiah 49:13)

Sirach recommends lowering oneself before God: 'They who fear the Lord keep their hearts prepared and bow down their souls in his presence' (Sirach 2:17; see also 7:17; 18:21).

Greek moral philosophy, outside the Bible, has no place for 'thinking of oneself as low'. The word translated 'humility' in our text (ταπεινοφροσύνη) does not occur prior to Paul. Shortly after him we find it being used by Plutarch, Epictetus and Josephus, but always as a vice, never as a virtue. As they use ταπεινοφροσύνη, it is best translated 'small-minded' or 'mean-spirited'. It is the equivalent of having a low self-esteem.

In the Greek Old Testament the related adjective [ταπεινόφρων] occurs only once: 'A person's pride will bring humiliation, but one who is lowly in spirit will obtain honour' (Proverbs 29:23).

The related verb [ταπεινοφρονεω] also occurs only once in the Greek Old Testament, in a text which prepares us for its use in the New Testament: 'O Lord, my heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvellous for me. But I have calmed [The Greek reads: 'I think of myself **humbly**'] and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother; my soul is like the weaned child that is with me. O Israel, hope in the Lord from this time on and for evermore' (Psalm 131).

The New Testament, like Sirach, calls upon people to ‘lower themselves’ before God. Recall the statement of Jesus: ‘All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who **lower** [ταπεινωω] themselves will be exalted’ (Matthew 23:12; compare James 4: 10; 1Peter 5:5-6)

The following scene from the Gospel recalls Psalm 131: ‘At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, ‘Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?’ He called a child, whom he put among them, and said, ‘Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes **lowly** like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven’ (Matthew 18:1-4).

The little child is offered as a symbol of humility for it beautifully captures Jesus' own childlike trust in the God whom he calls 'Abba! Father!' He wants his disciples to have a heart that is humble like his (Matthew 11:29). Because Jesus looked up to God in loving trust, he was able to look up to everyone, delighting in people with the delight that belongs to the innocence of childhood and experiencing it as a privilege to serve them.

All this provides the background to the virtue which appears for the first time in Greek in Paul. 'Thinking of oneself as low' (or 'humility') is an attitude of mind and heart that recognises oneself as God's child, sharing the life of his Son, and therefore as living in total dependence on God. The humble person delights in this dependence, knowing that God is a Father and can be absolutely counted on as a source of life, love and hope.

In the Greek and Roman world it was considered a virtue to recognise one's low position in regard to the gods; it was right not to exaggerate one's own importance or to strive beyond one's fate. But the self held a central place in their ethics, for they thought of their individual nature as sharing in the divinity. The divine in each person was thought of as identified with the self. It was important, therefore, to recognise and respect one's self, and not to think of oneself in a servile way.

For the Christian the divine Spirit which sanctifies the self is the Spirit of Jesus: 'It is no longer I who live, but the Messiah who lives in me' (Galatians 2:20). To know how to obey the divine will, Christians do not look to their own nature and strive to act accordingly. Rather, they listen attentively to the call of the Lord, and strive to be obedient to one in whose wisdom and love they trust.

Christians experience a radical and liberating change of perspective: 'If anyone is in the Messiah, there is a new creation' (2 Corinthians 5:17).

In this new creature, humility is a basic virtue. Everything now is possible, not to the one who is most self-sufficient, but 'for one who believes' (Mark 9:24). The self is no less important, but perfection for the self is a flowering of the gifts of the Spirit, and the way to this perfection is in self-giving, after the example of Jesus, and by the power of his Spirit. 'Those who try to make their life secure will lose it, but those who lose their life will keep it' (Luke 17:33). Humility as a Christian virtue is a sharing in the life of Jesus, the child of God, and in the intimacy of his trust in his Father.

This call to humility provides the setting for the following verses, for to see what humility is we need to contemplate Jesus.

## Philippians 2:6

The Messiah Jesus, being in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped

The hymn begins by speaking of Jesus as ‘being in the form (μορφή) of God’. It then introduces the concept of ‘equality with God’. For Paul the monotheist ‘there is one God, the Father’ (1 Corinthians 8:6). No one can be equal to God. The concept occurs in only one other place in the New Testament, where Jesus’ opponents accuse him of ‘making himself equal to God’ (John 5:18). This Jesus denies, asserting his complete dependence on God, his Father.

Since it is John who makes this point so clearly in his Gospel, let explore John’s teaching at some length

## John 5:16-18

The Jews started persecuting Jesus, because he was doing such things [he had just healed a man at the pool of Beth-zatha] on the sabbath. But Jesus answered them, “My Father is still working, and I also am working.” For this reason the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because he was not only breaking the sabbath, but was also calling God his own Father, thereby **making himself equal to God**.

The intimacy Jesus experienced in his relationship with God is central to Christianity. Christians, including the community of the Beloved Disciple, saw Jesus as the perfect human expression (the Incarnation) of God, revealing God as Love. However their experience was interpreted by outsiders, they vigorously opposed the misinterpretation that Christians thought of Jesus ‘**equal to God**’.

Jesus is claiming to be one with God whom he calls ‘my Father’ because he knows God, and he knows, too, the perfect communion of love that he enjoys with God. He wants to share this communion with us. Far from claiming to be equal to God, Jesus knows he can do nothing apart from God on whom he utterly depends for who he is, and for everything he says or does.

John 5:19-20

Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise. The Father loves (φιλέω) the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing.

The Christian understanding of the nature of the relationship between Jesus and God is so important to John that we will pause here to meditate on the many statements he places on Jesus’ lips that take us to the heart of Jesus’ prayer-communion.

# I. Jesus knows and reveals God

John 1:18

No one has ever seen God. It is the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, who has made God known.

John 10:15,17

The Father knows me and I know the Father ... The Father loves me.

John 3:16

God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.



Jesus kneeling in prayer, Michael Jervis Nelson,  
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John 3:31-32

The one who comes from heaven testifies to what he has seen and heard.

John 6:40

This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life (6:40).

John 6:46

The one who is from God has seen the Father.

John 6:57

The living Father has sent me and I live because of the Father.

John 7:29

I know him because I am from him and he sent me.

John 8:19

If you knew me you would know my Father also.

John 10:14-15

I know my own and my own know me, as the Father knows me and I know the Father.

John 10:30

The Father and I are one.

John 14:10-11

Do you not believe  
that I am in the Father  
and the Father is in me?  
The words I say to you  
I do not speak as from myself.  
It is the Father living in me  
who is doing this work.  
You must believe me when I say  
that I am in the Father  
and the Father is in me;  
believe me on the evidence of  
what I am doing, if for no other  
reason.



Christ Pantocrator mosaic in Byzantine style,  
from Cefalù Cathedral in Sicily, Italy, c. 1130  
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2. Jesus does not speak his own words, but those of God .

John 3:34

He whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure.

John 7:16-17

Jesus answered the Jews: “My teaching is not mine but his who sent me. Anyone who resolves to do the will of God will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own.

John 8:26, 28

I declare to the world what I have heard from God ... I speak these things as the Father instructed me.

John 8:38

I declare what I have seen in the Father's presence

John 8:40

You are trying to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God.

John 8:55

I know him and I keep his word.

John 14:10

Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?  
The words I say to you I do not speak as from myself.

John 14:24

The word that you hear is not mine. It is from the Father who sent me.

John 17:8

The words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me.

3. Jesus does not carry out his own actions, but those of his Father

John 4:34

Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work.

John 5:17

My Father is still working, and I also am working.

John 5:19-20

The Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise. The Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing.”

John 6:38

I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me.

## John 5:30

I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge; and my judgment is just, because I seek to do not my own will but the will of him who sent me.

## John 5:36

The deeds that the Father has given me to complete, the very deeds that I am doing, testify on my behalf that the Father has sent me.

## John 8:28-29

Jesus said, ‘When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will realise that I AM (ἐγώ εἰμι), and that I do nothing on my own.’ The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to him.

John 14:10

It is the Father living in me who is doing this work.

John 17:4

I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do.

John 12:44-46

Then Jesus cried aloud: “Whoever believes in me believes not in me but in him who sent me. And whoever sees me sees him who sent me. I have come as light into the world, so that everyone who believes in me should not remain in the darkness.”

## Philippians 2:6

The Messiah Jesus, being in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped

The hymn states that Jesus did not regard equality with God as ἀρπαγμὸς. Some translators interpret this as saying that Christ did not consider being equal with God as ‘something to be exploited’. They see in verse six a reference to a pre-existent Christ who chose to become human rather than use his divinity for his own advantage.

Though ἀρπαγμὸς is not found in any other text in the Greek Bible, the related verb ἀρπάζω is found in both the Septuagint and the New Testament, and always with the idea of grasping something forcibly. If we interpret ἀρπαγμὸς along these lines, Paul is contemplating Jesus as humbly accepting the reality of the human condition and living in complete dependence on the Father. This fits with John’s understanding of Jesus’ relationship with God.

In light of Paul's portraying of Jesus as a new Adam (see 1Corinthians 15:45-47; Romans 5:18-19), he may also be saying that, whereas Adam grasped at the forbidden fruit in his desire to be 'like God' (see Genesis 3:5), Jesus remained faithful and obedient. He accepted to depend on God in loving trust: 'the Son can do nothing on his own' (John 5:19). In this way he showed us what it means to be human ('Adam').

If this is the direction of Paul's thought, what does he mean by the expression 'being in the form (μορφή) of God'? The thought seems to be the same as that expressed in John's Gospel when Philip says to Jesus: 'Show us the Father and we shall be satisfied', and Jesus replies: 'Whoever has seen me has seen the Father' (John 14: 8-9). A being can be manifest in a number of different forms. When the forms change we borrow the Greek word used here by Paul and speak of a 'metamorphosis'. Paul is reminding us that when we look at Jesus we are seeing how God chose to reveal God's self in human form. It is precisely because of this fact that Jesus chose to live and to die in the manner which Paul goes on to describe.

Paul is speaking of Jesus in this way to remind us of what we are all called to be. By communion with Jesus we are called to undergo a transformation till we can say with Paul: 'it is no longer I who live. It is the Messiah who lives in me' (Galatians 2:20). He goes on to say: 'My little children, for whom I am again in the pain of childbirth until the Messiah is formed (μορφώω) in you' (Galatians 4:19). We are to be 'transformed' (μεταμορφώω) by a 'renewal of mind' (Romans 12:2). As Paul says to the Corinthians: 'All of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed (μεταμορφώω) into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit' (2Corinthians 3:18).

## Philippians 2:1-6

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in humility regard others above yourselves, so that you are not all focused on yourself, but each is looking to the interests of the others. Let the same mind be in you that was in the Messiah Jesus.

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