

04. Philippians 2:7-30



Philippians 2:1-6

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

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

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.

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

Philippians 2:7-8

He emptied himself taking the form of a slave being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death — even death on a cross.

Verse seven takes us to the paradox that is at the very core of Christianity, to what Paul calls the ‘mystery’ in his letters to the Colossians and Ephesians. Jesus is God’s self-revelation in human form, and the paradox is that when ‘being in the form (μορφή) of God’ is expressed in human terms it means accepting ‘the form (μορφή) of a slave’. Nothing prepared us for this. Everyone in Paul’s world knew what it was like to be a slave. It meant that one’s very person was completely at the disposal of others. How can being a slave reveal the truth of what God is?

There is a rhythmic, hymn-like, quality about this hymn. It beautifully expresses the humility which Paul wishes to encourage in the Christians of Philippi as well as a conviction of God's fidelity to love. We must avoid the temptation to read the language of the heart as though it was the language of rational thought. We are being invited to be swept up into the wonder and praise which these verses express rather than to attempt to pin down their exact meaning to the complete satisfaction of our inquiring mind. This is not to say that these verses lack clarity. It is just that they cannot be comprehended within the limits of logic. They must be read in the spirit in which they were composed, with the recognition that we are dealing with the language of love.

Paul is not so much offering Jesus as an example to be followed, as pointing to Jesus and asking them to let Jesus live in them. Only in this way can we experience the humility that so characterised his life.

At the human level, what is amazing about Jesus is that this is the life which he freely chose. At the level of revelation – and this is central to what Paul is saying here – this choice, and the lifestyle and way of self-giving that go with it, is a revelation of God. God is revealed in Jesus as self-giving love. God's glory is realised in the gift of self such that creatures, by their existing in love, radiate the very beauty of God.

Like all of us, Jesus had to live within the limits of the human condition. Paul expresses this here in terms of his being ‘**born in human likeness**’ (ὁμοιῶμα). We are reminded of Paul’s statement in his letter to the Romans where he speaks of God sending his Son ‘in the likeness of sinful flesh’ (Romans 8:3). ‘**Likeness**’, because, though his flesh is the same, he was unique in that he did not sin. Similarly here, though his ‘**human form**’ is the same of ours, his uniqueness is in being the one in whom ‘the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily’ (Colossians 2:9).

Paul describes Jesus' choice in **'taking the form of a slave'** as a self-emptying (κενόω). Jesus 'gave himself' (Galatians 1:4) for us. He poured out his life in obedient service of his Father, and he spent himself in the service of others. His self-giving brought him to the giving of his life, even to dying the death of a slave: death by crucifixion.

Granted the context, Paul speaks of Jesus' choice also in terms of humility: **'He humbled himself'** (2:8; see 2:3). In giving himself in love the way he did he was giving expression to his complete trust in his Father's love and to his conviction that self-giving is the way in which we express what it is to be created in the image and likeness of God (see Genesis 1:26).

Philippians 2:9-11

⁹Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹and every tongue should confess that Jesus the Messiah is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Having contemplated Jesus in the humility of his self-giving love, the hymn goes on to contemplate the fidelity of God. We found a similar movement from humble service to glory in the introduction to the letter to the Romans where Paul speaks of ‘the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord’ (Romans 1:3-4). Likewise, the hymn-like passage in Colossians which sings of ‘the blood of his cross, and goes on to sing of the exaltation of the Messiah.’ (Colossians 1:20).

There are echoes here of the song of the suffering servant ('slave') of the Lord (Isaiah 52:13 - 53:12). He, too, 'poured out himself to death' (Isaiah 53:12); and he, too, was 'exalted' (Isaiah 52:13).

Again and again, Isaiah speaks of the unique glory of the God of Israel: 'I am the Lord, that is my name; my glory I give to no other' (Isaiah 42:8). 'There is no other god besides me, a righteous God and a Saviour; there is no one besides me. Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other ... To me every knee shall bend, every tongue shall swear' (Isaiah 45:21-23).

Philippians 2:11

every tongue should confess that Jesus the Messiah is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

To call upon God as '**Lord**' is to relate to God as Saviour. In giving to the exalted Christ the name 'Lord', God is telling us that he shares his glory with his Son, and that we are to call upon him and be saved.

We recall Paul's words in his letter to the Ephesians: 'God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come' (Ephesians 1:20-21).

The exalted Jesus lives in the fullness of divine communion. Enjoying the intimacy of the love of his Father in the communion of the Holy Spirit, Jesus shares to the full in the glory of God. He is the Lord to whom God has entrusted God's power to redeem and to save. As we call upon him, Paul wants us to remember the way in which the 'lordship' of God is expressed in human terms, and it is with this in mind that he presents this portrait of the humble Jesus. He is appealing to us to live the life of Jesus, to realise that everything we have is gift and to use all our gifts in humble service of others. He is appealing to us to give our lives for others as Jesus did.

We are called to ‘serve (serve as slaves, δούλευω) a living and true God’ (1 Thessalonians 1:9). ‘Through love’, we are to ‘become slaves to one another’ (Galatians 5:13). In the future, we shall share Jesus’ glory (see 1 Thessalonians 4:14), but the path to glory is the same path as that taken by Jesus himself. This is why Paul can write: ‘May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world’ (Galatians 6:14).

Luke gives us the following reflection on the way in which Jesus exercised his 'lordship'. The scene is the last supper: 'A dispute also arose among them as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest. But he said to them, 'The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves' (Luke 22:24-27).

A powerful example of such service is given us in John's account of the supper: 'Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, laid aside his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him ... [He said] You call me Teacher and Lord — and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet' (John 13:3-5,13-14).

Jesus laid aside what was his own and took on the task of a slave that he might serve his brothers and sisters. In this final gesture, he gave expression to his own understanding of his life and of the life-giving which he was about to make. This is the meaning of the broken bread and the poured-out wine. We are at the heart here of our understanding of God and of the essence of the human condition as being in the image and likeness of God. It is in his humble service that Jesus reveals what it is to be divine and what it is to be human.

Philippians 2:1-11

He emptied himself taking the form of a slave being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death — even death on a cross.

Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus the Messiah is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Philippians 2:12-13

Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Conscious of the commission given to him to proclaim the gospel, Paul sees their obedience to him as being obedience to God. He has just been contemplating Jesus who ‘**became obedient to the point of death**’ (2:8). It is this obedience that he urges on the Philippians. He wants them to recognise their complete dependence on God. He wants them to allow the Spirit of God to penetrate their minds and hearts so that they might hear and heed God’s call.

‘work out your salvation in fear and trembling’

Paul is referring to ‘the fear of the Lord’, an expression that occurs only twice in the New Testament, in 2 Corinthians 5:11 and in Acts 9:31.

The Book of Proverbs expresses its meaning well in the following texts: ‘The fear of the Lord is hatred of evil’(Proverbs 8:13). ‘The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight’ (Proverbs 9:10). ‘The fear of the Lord is a fountain of life’ (Proverbs 14:27). Isaiah speaks of the fear of the Lord as one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit (Isaiah 11:3), and writes: ‘The fear of the Lord is Zion’s treasure’ (Isaiah 33:6). The fear of the Lord is the opposite of ‘pride and arrogance’. It is ‘knowing the Holy One’: knowing that God is the creator and sustainer of life, the redeemer and saviour. It results in a commitment to seek and to carry out God’s will, knowing that all our hope is in God, the ‘fountain of life’.

God is at work in them, so they should live in ‘**fear and trembling**’; that is to say, with a profound reverence before the mystery and power of God’s presence and activity in their midst. We should respond with reverence to the direction which God gives us, for it is God who **at work** in us (ἐνεργέω), giving us the energy to make and to carry out the decisions that are needed to deliver us from whatever it is that is inhibiting our obedience to the gospel, and to live to the full the life of a disciple of Jesus. It is God who is leading us to the salvation which is the fulfilment of God’s design for us. We are reminded of Paul’s prayer of praise ‘to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine’ (Ephesians 2:30).

Philippians 2:14-15

¹⁴Do all things without murmuring and arguing, ¹⁵so that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish, in the midst of ‘a crooked and perverse generation’ (Deuteronomy 32:5).

Paul goes on to urge them not to fall into the sin of those whom God freed from the slavery of Egypt and led through the wilderness to the Promised Land. Faced with the difficulties of the journey, they failed to trust God and indulged in ‘murmuring’ against God (see Exodus 16:7-12). Of them it is said: ‘his degenerate children have dealt falsely with him, a crooked and perverse generation’ (Deuteronomy 32:5). Paul borrows these words to describe the Gentile world in which the Christian Philippians have to live. As disciples of Jesus, by contrast, they are to continue to trust their Father, and as God’s children, be ‘**blameless**’, ‘**innocent**’ and ‘**without blemish**’.

Philippians 2:15

[A crooked and perverse generation] **in which you shine like stars in the world.**

It is through the trust which they place in God in obeying God's inspiration and living as true disciples of Jesus that the Christians of Philippi will be what Jesus himself urged us to be: 'You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lamp stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven' (Matthew 5:14-16).

We recall Paul's challenge to the Gentile churches of the east: 'Once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light' (Ephesians 5:8).

Philippians 2:16

It is by your holding fast to the word of life that I can boast on the day of the Messiah that I did not run in vain or labour in vain.

Ever the missionary, Paul will rejoice ‘on the day of the Messiah’ (see 1:6,10), that his apostolic work has born fruit in that the world has been attracted to Jesus by the life of the Christians in Philippi. For the third time he speaks of his mission in terms taken from the athletic stadium: he does not want to ‘run in vain’ (see 1:27,30).

Philippians 2:17-18

But even if I am being poured out as a libation over the sacrifice and the offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all and in the same way you also must be glad and rejoice with me.

Paul likens their faith to a **sacrifice** that is being offered up to God. To the Romans he wrote of 'the grace given me by God to be a minister of the Messiah Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit' (Romans 15:16). They are concerned about his condition in prison, so Paul adds that even if his life is poured out like oil poured over the sacrifice, his heart is full of a joy, a joy he wants them to share.

Philippians 2:19-21

I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, so that I may be cheered by news of you. I have no one like-souled who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare. All of them are seeking their own interests, not those of Jesus the Messiah.

Paul has already spoken of those who are ‘proclaiming the Messiah from envy and rivalry’ and from ‘selfish ambition, not sincerely but intending to increase my suffering in my imprisonment’ (1:15,17). They are ‘seeking their own interests, not those of Jesus the Messiah’.

Philippians 2:22-24

But Timothy's worth you know, how like a son with a father he has served with me in the work of the gospel. I hope therefore to send him as soon as I see how things go with me; and I trust in the Lord that I will also come soon.

Timothy is portrayed as exemplifying the qualities which Paul has been urging on the Philippians. He speaks of Timothy as '**like-souled**' (ἰσόψυχος, 2:20). He shares Paul's concern for the Philippians and is like a son to Paul (compare 1 Corinthians 4:17). Jesus took '**the form of a slave**' (δούλος, 2:7). Timothy and Paul '**serve**' (δούλω) together in the work of the gospel.

Philippians 2:24-30

I trust in the Lord that I will also come soon. Still, I think it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus — my brother and co-worker and fellow soldier, your messenger and minister to my need; for he has been longing for all of you, and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill. He was indeed so ill that he nearly died. But God had mercy on him, and not only on him but on me also, so that I would not have one sorrow after another. I am the more eager to send him, therefore, in order that you may rejoice at seeing him again, and that I may be less anxious. Welcome him then in the Lord with all joy, and honour such people, because he came close to death for the work of the Messiah, risking his life to make up for those services that you could not give me.

Everything that Paul does is done 'in the Messiah'. Notice that the hope which he has of sending Timothy to Philippi is 'in the Lord Jesus', as is his trust that he himself will be able to visit them soon. All Paul's plans are subject to God's will. We recall his words to the Corinthians: 'I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills' (1 Corinthians 4:19); 'I hope to spend some time with you, if the Lord permits' (1 Corinthians 16:7).

Epaphroditus your messenger and minister

Paul is careful to avoid giving the impression that he does not appreciate their thoughtfulness in sending Epaphroditus to him (see 4:18). He is sending him back earlier than they would have expected, but he explains why in a way that demonstrates his respect for Epaphroditus and his deep affection and concern for the Philippians. He calls Epaphroditus their ‘messenger’ (ἀπόστολος), because he was sent (ἀπόσπελλω) to Paul by the community. He calls him their ‘minister’ (λειτουργός), because he was carrying out a service on behalf of the community. Like Christ (and like Paul and Timothy), Epaphroditus was willing to give his life in a mission of love.