

Chapter 4: Humility

Philippians 2:1–11

Philippians 2:1–11 is not only the theological center of this letter. More than that, this is one of the most important passages in the entire Bible. For good reason, the Christ hymn that takes up the second half of this passage has captivated believers for two thousand years. In only a few verses, Paul's writing takes us from the incomprehensible depths of eternity past when the Son existed in the form of God, all the way to the point in time where he willingly takes on the form of a servant through his incarnation, and then down to the deepest shame of his death on the cross, only to soar back up into the heavens, being exalted as Lord over all creation. What a magnificent Savior we worship!

On its own, the Christ hymn is glorious, but we must also grapple with this hymn in the context of Paul's whole letter to the Philippians. This is not merely doxology, as though Paul were spontaneously bursting into praise of the exalted, glorious, suffering servant without a larger goal for including this hymn right here. Instead, Paul gives us this written portrait of Christ's humility as the picture of humility to which *we* ought to be conformed. Paul has written of his own rejoicing in the midst of suffering (Phil. 1:12–18), and of the confidence he has on the basis of his suffering (Phil. 1:19–30), and now he reveals the secret of how to rejoice with confidence in the midst of suffering: *humility*. Christ's cruciform mindset is the answer to the riddle that we have puzzled over through the first chapter of the letter. By taking up the mind of Christ, we not only learn to rejoice in our sufferings as Paul did. More than that, we grow to be conformed to the very image of Christ himself.

Why We Struggle to Become Servants (Phil. 2:1–4)

To begin the second chapter, Paul uses the conjunction “therefore” (ESV: “so”). In the last section, we observed how the word “for” (Phil. 1:19, 21) gave the cause or the reason for what had preceded. The word “therefore” that he uses here, however, gives the result or consequence of what had preceded.¹ With “for,” Paul was taking steps backward to explain what had written more precisely. But now, with “therefore,” Paul is forging ahead, applying the theology he has written to the lives of the believers.

In this case, Paul is explaining the nature of the fruit that will come out of the suffering which God has graciously given to the Philippians (Phil. 1:29). They have been “engaged in the same conflict that you saw I [Paul] had and now hear that I still have” (Phil. 1:30), and God will use their involvement in that conflict for good. Again, Paul does not rejoice in the midst of suffering because he enjoys pain. Instead, Paul rejoices in suffering because he recognizes that suffering produces fruit that we could not gain any other way. Just as we push ourselves to continue exercising our bodies by telling ourselves, “no pain, no gain,” so Paul here seeks to encourage the suffering Philippians by reminding them about the unique gains that are emerging from their pain.

The Comforting Love of the Triune God

Paul begins by identifying four evidences of God’s gracious work in the lives of believers: “if there is any encouragement in Christ, if any comfort from love, if any participation in the Spirit, if any affection and sympathy...” (Phil. 2:1).² Importantly, the word “if” here means something more along the lines of “since”: “*Since* there is encouragement in Christ, *since* comfort from love, *since* participation in the Spirit, *since* affection and sympathy....” Paul does not think that these qualities are imaginary or hypothetical, but genuine realities that flow from our union with Christ, in fellowship with the Holy Spirit.³

The first evidence of God’s grace, then, is “*paraklēsis* in Christ,” translated as “encouragement” in the ESV. This word *paraklēsis* conveys the idea of coming alongside someone for one of two reasons: either to correct them or to comfort them. So, on the one hand, this word could mean the kind of correcting “exhortation” that a coach might come alongside you to give, as in Hebrews 13:22: “I appeal to you, brothers, bear with my word of *exhortation* [*paraklēseōs*], for I have written to you briefly.” On the other hand, this word could also mean “comfort,” which shows up most prominently in 2 Corinthians 1: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort [*paraklēseōs*], who comforts [*parakalōn*] us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort [*parakalein*] those who are in any affliction, with the comfort [*paraklēseōs*] with which we ourselves are comforted [*parakaloumetha*] by God” (2 Cor. 1:3–4).⁴

In Philippians 2:1, the second option of “comfort” is probably the better translation choice in the context of Paul’s discussion of the suffering that the Philippians must endure (Phil. 1:29–30).⁵ Remember, Paul’s original letter did not come with chapter divisions, so these ideas of suffering and comfort are next door neighbors to each other without any fence between them. This phrase deals with the comfort that God graciously gives to his people in and through their union with Christ, since to be “in Christ” is Paul’s normal way to describe our ingrafting into Christ and union with him in his life, death, and eventually his resurrection. This first evidence of grace, then, emphasizes the *source* of our comfort, which is our union with Christ.⁶

The second evidence of God’s grace is the “comfort from love.” While the word for “comfort” here is not *paraklēsis*, it has a similar range of translation possibilities, whether to mean “exhortation” or “comfort.” Again, the context suggests that it is probably better to read this in the sense of “comfort,” but Paul has a different purpose for speaking of comfort this time. In the previous phrase, he spoke of the *source* of our comfort as being “in Christ,” but here he speaks of the *nature* of our comfort: love.

But what kind of love is Paul talking about? Again, the context is helpful. In the first evidence of grace, Paul pointed to Christ as the source of our comfort, and in the third evidence of grace, Paul will speak of the Holy Spirit’s involvement. It seems, therefore, that Paul may be employing a Trinitarian model for these evidences of grace, which would suggest that this “comfort of love” refers to the love of the *Father*.⁸ In other words, Paul is saying that our comfort flows from experiencing the love that the Father has for us in Christ, through the Spirit.

Third, Paul states that believers experience the “*koinōnia* in the Spirit.” This is the word for “fellowship” or “partnership” that Paul had used earlier in Philippians 1:5 and 1:7.⁹ The whole phrase of “participation in the Spirit” captures our common share as believers in the Holy Spirit, who applies to us the salvation that Christ accomplished through his life, death, and resurrection. If our comfort

in Christ is the *source* of these evidences of grace, and if the comfort of (the Father’s) love is its *nature*, then our participation in the Spirit is the *means* by which God begins and brings to completion the good work that he has begun in us.

The Fruit of God’s Love

The fourth evidence of God’s grace, then, identifies the result of the comforting love of the Triune God that we receive through the first three evidences Paul lists here. As we receive the comforting love of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, that love spills out from us in the form of mutual affection and sympathy for one another. The first word for “affection” refers to the bowels of a person, which ancient peoples considered to be the seat of emotions, in the same way that we would speak of the “heart.” Paul used this word back in Philippians 1:8: “For God is my witness, how I yearn for you with all the *affection* of Christ Jesus.” The second word for “sympathy” describes compassion, mercy, or even pity felt for someone else.¹⁰

Together, Paul uses these two phrases in this fourth evidence to describe the mutual affection that has already begun to shape the lives of believers. Because we *receive* the comforting love of the Triune God, we are able to turn to our fellow believers to *give* them that same comforting love that we ourselves have experienced through affection and sympathy. This idea sounds very similar to what Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 1:3–4, quoted above, with the repetitive use of the word “comfort”: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.” There, Paul blesses God for comforting *us* so that we may comfort *others* in affliction, with the same comfort that we ourselves are comforted by *God*.

Apart from suffering, it is impossible for us to experience this comforting love of the Triune God. Just as we would prefer to experience better health apart from the strain of exercise, or to master a musical instrument without the tiresome repetition of practice, or to gain expertise in a subject without the drudgery of study, so also we would prefer to receive the *gain* of the experience of our Triune God’s comforting presence without the *pain* of suffering. Sadly, however, we cannot grow in our intimacy with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit except through suffering. Again, this is not to say that the pain itself is good, but that God, in his grace, uses our pain as the soil to grow the gospel fruit which cannot grow in any other environment.

Unity through Suffering

After describing the comforting love of the Triune God as the first fruit of suffering in our lives, Paul exhorts the Philippians to seek a second fruit of suffering: unity. In Philippians 2:2, Paul argues that *since* God has begun working through their suffering, “...complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.” It is worth mentioning once again that we see here yet another glimpse into the fact that Paul’s joy is determined not by his own personal circumstances, but by the advancement of the gospel—in this case, in the form of exhaustive unity within the church. John Calvin writes, “Here again we may see how little anxiety he had as to himself, provided only it went well with the Church of Christ.”¹¹

The word that Paul uses for “complete” in Philippians 2:2 means “fill up,” which suggests that the Philippians already enjoy unity to some degree, but that there is more work to do. Indeed, if we peek

ahead to Philippians 4:2–3, we will find that Paul addresses one specific crack in the unity of the Philippians in the disagreement of Euodia and Syntyche. So, in Philippians 2:2, Paul lists four aspects of unity that correspond to the four evidences of God’s grace he had listed in the first verse of this chapter.¹² Each of these four elements speak to the singular unity Paul seeks from the Philippians. So, the Philippians ought to have “the same” mind and love. They ought also to be “one-souled,” the literal translation of Paul’s Greek word.¹³ Finally, they ought to have “the one” mind. The outlook, disposition, attitude, and desire of the Philippians must be united as one.

This idea does not negate the beauty of the Philippians’ diversity within the church or suggest some kind of bland homogeneity. Paul does not want all Christians to look, act, and speak in exactly the same ways. On the contrary, Paul elsewhere celebrates the great diversity of God’s church, where different people with different spiritual gifts play different roles in the body of Christ (Rom. 12:3–8; 1 Cor. 12) for the sake of displaying the God’s “manifold” (lit., “many sided”) wisdom (Eph. 3:10).¹⁴ The church is the place where people from different tribes, languages, peoples, and nations (Rev. 5:9) can come together in unity. We will never look the same, and our God who delights in sanctified diversity never wanted us to. *Unity* never mean *sameness*. Moreover, we cannot speak meaningfully about unity except from a context of diversity.

Instead, Paul explains that true unity emerges from the kind of humility where vastly different people are able to put the interests of others before their own. Paul preaches the need for humility in a few ways, beginning by exhorting the Philippians to “Do nothing from rivalry or conceit...” Paul used this word for “rivalry” in Philippians 1:17, when he described those who preached Christ from “rivalry, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment.” The word for “conceit” (*kenodoxian*) is a compound word, literally meaning “empty (*keno*) glory (*doxian*).” Through this compound word, Paul sets up a contrast he will draw in the example of Christ in Philippians 2:6–11. There, he will tell us that it is because Christ “emptied” (from the verb, *kenōō*) himself (Phil. 2:7) that God exalted him (Phil. 2:9), to the “glory” (*doxan*) of God the Father (Phil. 2:11). The fullest kind of glory comes not by clinging the glory we already have, making sure that none of it escapes. Instead, the fullest kind of glory comes by emptying oneself of glory out of self-sacrificial humility. Ironically, those who seek glory apart from humility will receive only “empty glory” rather than the real thing.

Then, Paul directly instructs the Philippians to take up the attitude of “humility” (Phil. 2:3). This word for “humility” (*tapeinophrosunē*) is another compound word that we might translate more literally as, “humility/lowliness (*tapeino*) of mind (*phrosunē*).” Once again, Paul is setting up a comparison with what he will write about Christ in the coming verses, but this time his goal is to reinforce, and not to contrast, the attitude of Christ. Indeed, it is the “mind” (verb: *phroneō*) of Christ that Paul wants the Philippians to have (Phil. 2:5), for Christ was willing to “humble” (verb: *tapeinoō*) himself in obedience to the point of death, even death on the cross (Phil. 2:8).

Then, in Philippians 2:4 Paul writes, “Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.” This sentiment straightforwardly describes the unity that the Philippians need to grow in, but it also vividly describes Christ’s own refusal to consider equality with God something to be grasped, so that he rather took upon himself the form of a servant for us and for our salvation (Phil. 2:6–8). If God the Son had looked out for his *own* interests, he would have never emptied himself of his glory in the form of God by taking the form of a servant. He could only do such a thing because he looked out for *our* interests.

The second fruit of suffering, then, is the supernatural unity that we can only gain through the kind of humility that is willing to suffer for the sake of someone else. While it is possible for us to *imagine* humility, to *preach* about humility, and to *pray* for humility, it is ultimately not possible to *experience* humility without suffering. In the midst of suffering, God teaches us to put the needs of others in front of our own. Suffering is the crucible in which God forges unity-fostering humility.

How God Took the Form of a Servant (Phil. 2:5–8)

Philippians 2:5 forms a strong link between Paul's exhortations in Philippians 2:1–4 and the Christ hymn in Philippians 2:6–11. We misread what Paul is doing if we see Paul's encouragement toward unity and humility as one idea, and then the doxological Christ hymn as a different idea. Paul very much intends for these two sections to stand together, and he demonstrates this by using the example of Christ Jesus as the model to hold up for the Philippians to follow.

Have This Mind

Now, there has been some disagreement about the precise meaning of Philippians 2:5, since the verse is written quasi-poetically, leaving at least one word out in the second half of the verse. Very literally, the verse reads, "Have this mind in you [plural], which also in Christ Jesus." The lack of a verb in the phrase "which also in Christ Jesus" leaves two main interpretive possibilities. Either Paul intends (1) to emphasize the mind that *we* gain through our union with Christ ("which also [is yours] in Christ Jesus"), or (2) urge us to take up the mindset and attitude that *Christ himself* had ("which also [was] in Christ Jesus"). The ESV takes the first option, translating the verse this way: "Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus." The strength of this interpretation is the phrase "in Christ," which Paul frequently uses to describe the benefits we gain through our union with Christ.

In my judgment, however, the context forces us to read this as a reference to Christ's own mind that we should seek to imitate: "Have this mind in you, which also [was] in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 2:5, my translation).¹⁵ Christ's own example in Philippians 2:6–11 is the ultimate example of what Paul urges believers to be in Philippians 2:1–4. Even if Paul were trying to express the mindset that we gain through our union with Christ, the *characteristics* of that mindset (according to Phil. 2:6–8) urges us to take up Christ's humility that did not cling to his equality with God, but willing took the form of a servant. At the end of the day, no matter how you translate Philippians 2:5, Paul is urging us to imitate the example set by Christ.

Conformity to Christ

On this point, however, we must be very clear about the fixed limitations on speaking about Christ as our *example*. First, humility in *us* is not the same kind of thing as humility in *Christ*, because we are finite creatures, whereas Christ existed from eternity past in the form of God (Phil. 2:6). John Calvin writes:

This is not a comparison between things similar, but in the way of greater and less. Christ's humility consisted in his abasing himself from the highest pinnacle of glory to the lowest ignominy: our humility consists in refraining from exalting ourselves by a false estimation.

He gave up his right: all that is required of us is, that we do not assume to ourselves more than we ought.¹⁶

Second, through the union of divine nature with human nature, Christ's incarnation, life, death, and resurrection decisively accomplished redemption in a way that we cannot replicate, but only receive. William Hendriksen helpfully parses out the practical difference between Christ's accomplishments and our own:

To be sure, there is an area in which Christ cannot be our example. We cannot copy his redemptive acts. We cannot suffer and die vicariously. It was he, he alone, who was able to satisfy the divine justice and bring his people to glory. But with the help of God we can and should copy the spirit that was basic to these acts.¹⁷

It is for this reason, as O'Brien suggests, that "it is better to speak of Paul's ethics as having to do with 'conformity' to Christ's likeness rather than an 'imitation' of his example."¹⁸ So, while we cannot imitate Christ's *accomplishments*, Paul does not hesitate to insist that we must learn from Christ's *mindset*.

Form of God

It is important to observe that the Greek text does not include the word "though" that the ESV adds in their translation of Philippians 2:6: "who, *though* he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped." By adding the word "though," the translation seems to be contrasting Christ's existence in the form of God on one side with his humility on the other.

But, that isn't at all what Paul has written. The force of verse changes entirely when we refrain from adding that non-existent word: "who, being in the form of God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped." Looking at the text as written, we can see that Paul points to the divinity of Christ not in *contrast* to his humility, but as the *cause* of it. Part of what it means to be God is that Christ's mind was not set on selfishly clinging to his rights and privileges in glory, but on self-giving, self-sacrificial love.

Because he existed in the form of God, he did not consider equality with God something to be grasped. The "grasping" here cannot refer to an attempt to seize what was not his, but rather as a demand to continue clinging to the rights and privileges that *did* belong to him for his own advantage.¹⁹ While those of us who are *not* God try to exploit whatever advantages we have for our own gain, the one who *is* God did not consider his infinite power, glory, and might as something to be grasped. The cross, therefore, does not contradict God's dignity, but rather manifests the true character of God's "outlandish, lavish expression of love."²⁰

For this reason, Christ "emptied himself" (Phil. 2:7).²¹ Some read too much into this language, arguing that Christ must have somehow set aside his divinity in order to become human, but that cannot be the case. The idea of "emptying" almost always takes a metaphorical sense in the New Testament, which a previous version of the ESV accurately paraphrased through their translation "made himself nothing."²² The strongest evidence for taking this phrase metaphorically comes in the explanation of the emptying that follows: "but *he* emptied himself, taking the form of a servant" (Phil. 2:7, my translation). Grammatically, the phrase "taking the form of a servant" clarifies

how Christ emptied himself.²³

Form of a Servant

As Paul defines what it meant for Christ to take the form of a servant in Philippians 2:7–8, he briefly narrates Christ’s catastrophic descent from his glory in the form of God to the most shameful death possible on the cross. First, we read that Christ became fully human, which Paul expresses in two ways: “born in the likeness of men” (Phil. 2:7) and “being found in human fashion” (Phil. 2:8, my translation).²⁴ To begin illustrating the humility of Christ, the incarnation alone marks a substantial humiliation for the eternal Son of God. The Infinite One took on finite limitations, and the Creator became a creature!

Through the incarnation, Christ’s human life became a means by which he entered into the deepest kind of suffering possible: “he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death,” and then—as if death were not enough—Paul adds, “even death on a cross.” (Phil. 2:8). Jews and Romans alike considered crucifixion to be the worst possible death, but for different reasons. For Jews, dying on the cross meant being hanged on a tree, which represented the harshest curse of God (Deut. 21:23; Gal. 3:13). For Romans, death on the cross was so degrading that Roman citizens (like the Philippians) were not even legally eligible to die by the slow torture of crucifixion. Instead, the quick death of decapitation was the worst punishment they could face.²⁵

But Christ, in his servanthood, endured the worst of the worst. Not only did he empty himself by taking the form of a servant as a human being, but as a servant, he relinquished his rights day after day, obeying moment by moment, humbling himself even to the point of dying on the shameful cross. It is *this* mindset that Paul exhorts us to adopt. While no suffering of ours can accomplish Christ’s redemption, Paul insists that we take up the servant mindset of Christ, who willingly embraced shame and suffering in his obedience.

If Christ, being in the form of God, did not exploit the riches of his divinity to avoid such suffering, then what excuse do we have when we grasp at the straws of our own privileges?

Why We Must Worship the Highly Exalted Servant (Phil. 2:9–11)

Because the Christ hymn of Philippians 2:6–11 draws us to worship, it is easy to overlook the fact that Paul does not include a single word through this passage to show how what Christ does has any application to *us*. Rather, we are reading pure Christology (the doctrine of Christ). Philippians 2:6–11 proclaims nothing but *Christ’s* eternal glory, *Christ’s* humiliation, and *Christ’s* exaltation. Remember, the primary purpose of this passage is not to teach us something about our *salvation*, but about the *mindset* of Christ who took the form of a servant and humbled himself to the point of death on a cross. This passage is not written to teach us that the gospel message about Christ’s life, death, and resurrection saves us, although it does, secondarily, do that. First and foremost, the Christ hymn teach us the pattern of humility to which we must be conformed.²⁶

It is almost as though Paul is giving us practice in humility by writing a passage that puts Christ *alone*—and not our *saving interest* in Christ—as the focal point. Can we step out of the picture and simply worship the Lord Jesus Christ, or will we, like envious children at someone else’s birthday party, insist on writing ourselves onto *his* center stage?

The Exaltation of Christ

The second half of this Christ hymn, then, narrates the exaltation of Christ. The opening phrase, “Therefore God...” (Phil. 2:9) does not use the same word for “therefore” that we saw earlier in Philippians 2:1. By contrast, the earlier word in Philippians 2:1 spoke to results and consequences, while this is an “inferential conjunction”²⁷ that explains the logical link between two sections—that is, it explains how Philippians 2:9–11 follows from what we read in Philippians 2:5–8. In this case, Christ’s humility explains the logical reason behind his exaltation.. Peter O’Brien suggests translating this phrase as “That is why God...” in order to “express the connection between the cause of the servanthood of the Son with the result of the exalting work of the Father.”²⁸

The Father’s response to the servanthood, humiliation, and death of Christ on the cross is to highly exalt him by graciously bestowing upon him “the name that is above every name” (Phil. 2:9). When Paul speaks of a “name above every name,” he cannot mean that Jesus is changing his name, since it is “at the name of *Jesus*” that every knee should bow, and every tongue will confess that “Jesus Christ” is Lord (Phil. 2:10–11). This is not a case of Abram changing his name to Abraham, Jacob changing his name to Israel, or Saul changing his name to Paul. Instead, it seems best to interpret this as the exaltation of Jesus to be universally recognized as Lord (*kurios*), since Paul says in Philippians 2:11 that every tongue will now confess that “Jesus Christ is Lord (*kurios*). This is significant, since the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint) uses the word *kurios* to translate God’s personal name, Yahweh. Note carefully the stunning two-fold reversal of Christ’s situation. First, the Son who existed in the form of God empties himself by taking the form of the servant. Then, the human servant named Jesus, who humbled himself in obedience even to endure a cursed, humiliating death on the cross, now reigns as *kurios* over the cosmos. The disgraced, humiliated name of Jesus has now received sufficiently extensive honor and glory to cause every knee to bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and to prompt every tongue to confess that this Jesus is *kurios*.

Now, it is not as though Christ, in his exaltation as *kurios*, is gaining something that he never had. On the contrary, the eternal Son existed “in the form of God” (Phil. 2:6), so there was never a time when God the Son was not *kurios*. But, when he took the form of a servant, he did so by emptying himself of the rights, privileges, and glory he enjoyed as *kurios* in order to take on a human nature, in which he suffered and died in humility and shame. It is the God-man Jesus, in the form of a suffering, shameful, humiliated, crucified servant, whom the Father has exalted as *kurios*. Understand, then, that a *crucified and resurrected human being* is right now reigning over every creature in heaven, on earth, and under the earth.

Importantly, this does not mean that Jesus has replaced the Father as *kurios*. Rather, the Father’s exaltation of Jesus as *kurios* takes place “to the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2:11). Jesus does not rival the Father, but is worshiped *with* the Father (and the Spirit) as one God, now and forevermore.

From this majestic passage, let’s work through three major implications.

We Worship Christ Because he is God

It is impossible to overstate the significance of insisting that Christ is fully God, which Paul states clearly by writing that Christ “was in the form of God.” The Son of God is “God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God,” as the Nicene Creed articulates it. The idea of the Greek word

“form” (*morphē*) does not focus on “external features by which something is recognized, but of those characteristics and qualities that are essential to it. Hence it means *that which truly characterizes a given reality*.”²⁹ From all eternity past, the Son has existed as God—essentially, by nature, in his being, *God*.

We must also, however, confess that the Son is fully equal with his Father (and the Spirit) in glory and authority. Certainly, we can see how someone might come to a different conclusion if we overemphasize that the Son took the “form of a servant” (Phil. 2:7), or if we take statements of Jesus such as “The Father is greater than I” (John 14:28) out of context. On these points, the exegetical insights of the church fathers are helpful, since they wrestled deeply with these questions to answer several questions that appeared almost immediately within the church. For example, Augustine (354–430 AD) recognized that Philippians 2:6–7 offers a critical key to help us interpret various texts as they relate to the relationship between the Father and the Son. In his classic work *The Trinity (De Trinitate)*, Augustine explains that some biblical texts speak of the Son “in the form of God” (Phil. 2:6), while others speak of the Son “in the form of a servant” (Phil. 2:7):

There are then some statements of scripture about the Father and the Son which indicate their unity and equality of substance, like *I and the Father are one* (Jn 10:30), and *Since he was in the form of God he thought it no robbery to be equal to God* (Phil 2:6), and any other such. And there are others which mark the Son as the lesser because of the form of a servant, that is because of the created and changeable human substance he took, like *The Father is greater than I* (Jn 14:28), and *The Father does not judge anyone, but has given all judgment to the Son* (Jn 5:2), for as he goes on to explain shortly after, *He also gave him power to do judgment because he is the Son of man* (Jn 5:27). Lastly there are others which mark him neither as less nor as equal, but only intimate that he is from the Father, like *As the Father has life in himself, so he also gave the Son to have life in himself* (Jn 5:26), and *Neither can the Son do anything of himself except what he sees the Father doing* (Jn 5:19).³⁰

In the form of God, the Son is fully equal in dignity, majesty, authority with the Father and the Holy Spirit; in the form of a servant, he is subordinate to the Father—and, as Augustine notes, in the form of a servant, he is even subordinate to himself in the form of God, as well as to the Holy Spirit.³¹

For this reason, the Athanasian Creed (one of the three ecumenical creeds confessed by all Christians everywhere) plainly states that, “And in this Trinity none is afore, or after another; none is greater, or less than another. But the whole three Persons are coeternal, and coequal. So that in all things, as aforesaid; the Unity in Trinity, and the Trinity in Unity, is to be worshipped. He therefore that will be saved, must thus think of the Trinity.”³² Throughout history, the entire Christian church has confessed as an issue of first-tier, core importance, this doctrine that none of the persons of the Trinity is before or after, lesser or greater than another.

Furthermore, we cannot understand Philippians 2:11, “to the glory of God the Father,” as suggesting that the Father gains some kind of supreme glory in the Trinity. First, this text specifies *without qualification* that the servant Jesus has received the name that is above every name. If the Father’s name were *above* Jesus’ name, then we would be forced into the position of saying that Paul has given false testimony about Jesus, which is absurd. Furthermore, the preposition translated as “to” should not be twisted too far. Again, we are not reading about ricocheted glory, bouncing off of Jesus in order to settle on the Father. The preposition, rather, is *eis*, which can be literally translated

as “in” or “into.” That is, the Father manifested the fullness of his glory through Christ, and now that the Father has exalted the servant Christ, the Father is glorified *in* his Son.³³

Second, when Paul writes about every knee bowing at the name of Jesus and every tongue confessing that Jesus Christ is Lord (which is to the glory of God the Father), Paul is actually quoting a modified form of Isaiah 45:23: “To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear allegiance.” In this chapter, Yahweh (*kurios*) is insisting that he alone is God, and that besides him there is no other god. In fact, Yahweh says no less than *six* times that there is no other god besides *kurios* in the verses leading up to the statement that Paul borrows (Is. 45:5, 6, 14, 18, 21, 22).³⁴ From this, we must recognize that the Son is in perfect *union* with the Father (along with the Holy Spirit). The three persons of the Trinity do not possess different levels of glory, but they share glory as one God—and God does not share his glory with anyone else.

The Father is glorified through the exaltation of the Son so that the Father and the Son, with the Holy Spirit, are glorified *together*. Hear the words of Jesus himself: “The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son, *that all may honor the Son, just as they honor the Father*. Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him” (John 5:22–23). If we do not honor the Son *just as* we honor the Father, then we honor neither the Father *nor* the Son.

Therefore, let us worship Christ, who existed from all eternity past in equal glory, majesty, dominion, and authority with the Father and the Spirit as one *kurios*, now and forevermore.

We Worship Christ as the Exalted Servant

Christ, however, possesses a unique kind of glory because of his human nature. While the Father and the Holy Spirit, with the Son, existed eternally in “the form of God,” only the Son took “the form of a servant” (Phil. 2:7). Only Christ was made incarnate, “being born in the likeness of men” (Phil. 2:7). Only Christ, in human fashion, “humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:8). And accordingly, only Christ is exalted *as a servant*.

There are two things about Jesus that we must never think. First, we must never think that when Christ “emptied himself, taking the form of the servant” (Phil. 2:7), he somehow then ceased to exist “in the form of God.” Christ did not—could not!—empty himself of his divine nature. Rather, he emptied himself *of divine privilege* by veiling his glory in order to make himself as nothing when he took on the form of a servant. Throughout his incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension, Jesus always remained fully God—even though the world did not worship him as God.

Second, we must never think that the Son took on human nature in the incarnation for *only* his ministry on earth, and that he somehow then abandoned his human nature when he ascended to the right hand of the Father. Rather, Philippians 2:9–11 emphasizes that it is the *human* Jesus who receives the name above every other name, so that by his *human* name Jesus, every knee bows and every tongue confesses the the *human* Jesus Christ is *kurios*.

So, Jesus never ceased to be God, and, from the moment of his conception by the Spirit in his mother Mary, Jesus never has and never will cease to be human. He is exalted as *kurios*, but neither as God alone nor as human alone. Instead, Christ is exalted as the God-man who suffered as a servant. John Calvin addresses the question of Jesus’ dual natures, but singular personhood, this way:

But here a question arises—whether this [the exaltation of Jesus as *kurios*] relates to the divinity of Christ or to his humanity, for either of the two is not without some inconsistency,

inasmuch as nothing new could be given to his divinity; and his humanity in itself, viewed separately, has by no means such exaltation belonging to it that it should be adored as God? I answer, that this, like many things else, is affirmed in reference to Christ's entire person, viewed as God manifested in the flesh. (1 Tim. iii. 16.) For he did not abase himself either as to his humanity alone, or as to his divinity alone, but inasmuch as, clothed in our flesh, he concealed himself under its infirmity. So again God exalted his own Son in the same flesh, in which he had lived in the world object and despised, to the highest rank of honour, that he may sit at his right hand.³⁵

We worship Christ in part because he is God—not only God now, but from eternity past, and forevermore. There was never a time when Christ was *not* God.

But additionally, we worship Christ as the servant who suffered—the servant whom the Father exalted and bestowed upon him the name which is above all names. When Paul says that every knee should bow in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is *kurios*, to the glory of God the Father, we must certainly join in that adoration. Let us worship the God-man Jesus, the one who, being God, humbly submitted as a servant in obedience to death on the cross, but who is now alive in glory forevermore (Rev. 1:18).

We Worship Christ who Suffered for Us

Finally, we worship Christ from the knowledge that all of this—his emptying himself by taking the form of the servant, his incarnation, and his obedience to the point of death on the cross—he did *for us*. Although we should resist reading this text with an eye of putting ourselves and our salvation as the central theme, we cannot help but to read about Christ's humility knowing that everything he did was out of love for us. If there is anyone who looked “not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others” (Phil. 2:4), it is our Lord Jesus Christ.

Indeed, the very reason that Paul introduces the Christ hymn with the phrase “Have this mind in you” (Phil. 2:5) is that we are sinful. It was our sin that necessitated Christ's servanthood, and it is our sin that we must put to death by the grace of God's Spirit in order to have the mind in us that was also in Christ. While we are selfish and arrogant, thinking that we are something when we are nothing, Christ existed in the form of God, and *as* God, he was willing to empty himself of his privileges in order to serve us. Glorious humility!

I have quoted John Calvin several times on this chapter, since his commentary on this passage is magnificent. Let me quote him in closing just one more time:

For it is the design of the Holy Spirit, that we should, in the death of Christ, see, and taste, and ponder, and feel, and recognise nothing but God's unmixed goodness, and the love of Christ toward us, which was great and inestimable, that regardless of himself, he devoted himself and his life for our sakes. In every instance in which the Scriptures speak of the death of Christ, they assign to us its advantage and price;—that by means of it we are redeemed—reconciled to God—restored to righteousness—cleansed from our pollution—life is procured for us, and the gate of life opened.³⁶

Hallelujah! What a Savior!

Discussion Questions

1. Can you think of a time that joint suffering created unity, whether in a family, on a team, or in the church? Why do you think that real unity is so difficult to foster until a group of people have suffered together? What parts of your suffering might God be using to bring about your unity with his people?
2. How many ways does Paul describe the humility of Jesus? By contrast, how many ways can you think of where humility has been difficult to you? What privileges in your own life are the most difficult for you to be emptied of? What do you think it will require for you to be conformed to Christ's example?
3. How does Christ's humiliation relate to his exaltation? How do the two natures of Christ (God and man) help us to understand his simultaneous glory in the form of God along with his humiliation in the form of a servant? Why is it so important to insist that, as Son, Christ is fully, eternally equal with the Father and the Spirit, but that as servant, Christ submitted to his Father's will in obedience to the point of death?
4. What does it mean to worship Christ as exalted servant? Why is it so significant to realize that Christ who reigns over all creation is a human being who retains his scarred hands, feet and side? What does Christ's exaltation tell us about our own salvation and eventual glorification?

Notes

1. "οὐν," *BDAG*, 736–37.
2. The word "if" (*ei*) shows up before each of these four realities in the Greek, but it would be awkward English to translate all of them. The ESV does not include them, but I have added them back in for emphasis.
3. Thielman, *Philippians*, 96.
4. For an extensive evaluation of these interpretive choices, see O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, 167–71.
5. So Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, 179–80, and Thielman, *Philippians*, 96.
6. The ESV's translation of "encouragement" seems to straddle the two interpretive options by capturing what we might consider to be a hortatory element of comfort.
7. O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, 171–72.
8. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, 180–81.
9. In Philippians 1:7, Paul uses a compound word meaning "fellowshippers with."
10. See other uses of this word in Romans 12:1; 2 Corinthians 1:3; Colossians 3:12; and Hebrews 10:28.
11. Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Philippians*, 51. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom42.iv.iii.i.html>>
12. "The fourfold appeal of v. 1 is to lead to the fourfold result of v. 2." (O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, 165.)
13. O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, 178.
14. "πολυποίκιλος," *BDAG*, 847.

15. While the ESV takes the “which is yours in Christ Jesus” translation, they include a footnote with a similar translation to what I have supplied here: “Or *which was also in Christ Jesus.*”

16. Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Philippians*, 54. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom42.iv.iii.ii.html>>

17. Hendriksen, *Philippians*, 103.

18. O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, 252.

19. Silva, *Philippians*, 102–04.

20. Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, 208.

21. Older versions of the ESV translate this phrase with the metaphorical interpretation of “made himself nothing,” while newer versions have reverted to the literal meaning of the phrase, “emptied himself.”

22. O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, 217. In the most current edition, the ESV translates this phrase literally: “emptied himself.”

23. Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, 210.

24. The Greek word I translate as “fashion” in Philippians 2:8 (*schēmati*; Greek, Phil. 2:7) is a different word than the word used twice in Philippians 2:6, 7 for “form” (*morphē*). For clarity, then, it is helpful to use a word like “fashion” (e.g., KJV) rather than using the same English word, “form” (ESV).

25. Silva, *Philippians*, 107.

26. O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, 252.

27. “*δίό*,” *BDAG*, 250.

28. O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, 233.

29. Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, 204. Original emphasis.

30. Augustine, *The Trinity*, 2nd ed., trans. Edmund Hill, ed., John E. Rotelle (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1991), Book II, 1,3; 98. Although Augustine does not cite Philippians 2:7 in his second set of verses, he clearly has this verse in mind, as he calls the second kind of passage as those which mark the Son as lesser because of his existing in the “form of a servant,” a direct quotation of Philippians 2:7.

31. Augustine, *The Trinity*, Book I, 11,22; 86.

32. “Athanasian Creed,” in *The Creeds of Christendom, with a History of Critical Notes*, vol. II, ed. Philip Schaff. <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/creeds2.iv.i.iv.html>> Accessed September 17, 2016.

33. “It might also be read, IN the glory, because the particle *eis* (to) is often used in place of *en*, (in.) I prefer, however, to retain its proper signification, as meaning, that as the majesty of God has been manifested to men through Christ, so it shines forth in Christ, and the Father is glorified in the Son.” (Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Philippians*, 63. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom42.iv.iii.ii.html>>)

34. Todd Scacewater, “Phil 2-9-11b,” on *Daily Dose of Greek*, July 23, 2016. <<http://dailydoseofgreek.com/guest-hosts/phil-2-9-11b/>> Accessed July 27, 2016.

35. Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Philippians*, 62. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom42.iv.iii.ii.html>>

36. Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Philippians*, 59–60. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom42.iv.iii.ii.html>>