



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermons

Celebrating Christ Jesus

Philippians 2.5–11

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Introduction

Have you ever felt excitement in thinking about what it would have been like to be a part of the church in the first century? Acts 2.42–47 and 4.32–35 give us a sense of it. So do letters like Philippians. The people in the community of God were a persecuted minority (Phil 1.7, 12–14, 28) who nevertheless rejoiced (Phil 1.18; 2.17–18, 28; 3.1; 4.4, 10) and were filled with joy (Phil 1.4, 25; 2.2, 29; 4.1). We don't get the sense that their church life was routine — “church as usual” — or that they dutifully assembled from week to week before going about their business. Nor do we read any elaborate pleas for motivated involvement (and some did become less faithful over time; e.g., Demas, Col 4.14; 2 Tim 4.10).

How would we go about replicating their sense of purpose, involvement, and joyful belonging? Philippians 2.5–11, our text in this study, suggests an answer. Although it is a vital part of Paul's appeal to the Philippians to practice the things that will see them remain united (see 1.27–2.4, 12–16), it is a passage that can stand alone.

When they have taken note of its themes, style, psalm-like rhythm, etc., scholars since the beginning of the 20th century have generally concluded that Philippians 2.5–11 is one of several in the New Testament that were early Christian hymns or odes (cf. Col 1.15–20; John 1.1–18; Rev 4.8; 5.9–10; 15.3–4); some think it may be the earliest example (see Hurtado 2005, 84–85). Thus, we have here a sort of snapshot that shows what the earliest Christians believed, how they expressed it, and what it meant for how they lived in a world that was often hostile. What stands out is that celebrating Christ was at the heart of all they did. To the extent that we capture their sense of celebration, our lives as believers will more closely resemble theirs.

A Statement of Belief

Aside from the recapitulation of Jesus's story, our text includes one of the greatest statements of exaltation about Jesus in the New Testament.

Let the same mind be in you that was
in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of
God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but 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 Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

~ Philippians 2.5–11 NRSV

It's obvious that Paul is making bold and dramatic claims about Jesus here, not least that his choice to live humbly was the reason God exalted him as he did. But, while this is a significant point, it is apparent when we look at the rest of the passage that it is just the beginning of the powerful statement this text makes. The verb, “exalted” (ὑπερυψώω, *hyperypsoō*) in verse 9 appears in the LXX of Psalm 97.9 (English versification), and elsewhere only in Psalm 37.35 where it refers to self-exaltation.

Significantly, Paul says that Jesus was the beneficiary of God's graciousness, literally that God “gave [which translates the Greek verb *χαρίζομαι* (*charizomai*)] him the name that is above every name.” To people acquainted with the Old Testament, this phrase, used with the word, “Lord” (κύριος, *kyrios*; v. 11), would have immediately suggested “the traditional, devout Jewish estimation of the sacred name of God” (Hurtado 2005, 94).

Notice also that Paul does not just use the title “Christ” (Χριστός, *Christos*) with these references; he uses the human name “Jesus” (Ἰησοῦς, *Iēsous*). As a monotheistic Jew, he's making a bold claim in a letter to a church that began with God-fearers in a place of prayer (Acts 16.13). But there's more; the language of Philippians 2.10–11 is taken from Isaiah 45.22–23, a text that focuses on the singular devotion that was to be reserved for Yahweh, Israel's LORD. Larry Hurtado summarizes the point, noting that in Isaiah's context:

Isaiah 45:18-25 is unexcelled as a ringing declaration of the uniqueness of the God of biblical Israel. Three times we have the refrain that there is no other deity (vv. 18, 21, 22), and in 45:22-25 all the earth is summoned to join in universal submission to this one true God. It is nothing short of astonishing, therefore, to find phrasing from this passage appropriated to describe the acknowledgment of Jesus' universal supremacy” (Hurtado 2005, 91).

We should also take note of the historical timing of Paul's confession. He wrote Philippians around 60 AD, barely thirty years after Jesus was crucified. If, as many think, Paul was quoting a well-known poem or hymn, the origin for the date of this confession is pushed even closer to the crucifixion. What this text contains is the earliest Christian belief—that Jesus is Lord and therefore worthy of worship. Hurtado has not overstated the point when he writes, “As astonishing as it may be, Philippians 2:9 must be taken as claiming that in some way God has

given to Jesus (to share?) the divine name that was represented in Greek by *Kyrios* and represented in Hebrew by the tetragrammaton [YHWH]” (Hurtado 2005, 94–95).

An Expression of Worship

As we think about the text as an expression of worship, we’ll first consider its *focus*. Since the form and rhythm of this passage give credence to the idea that it was a hymn, what does that tell us about the worship life of the earliest Christians? Simply this: like their preaching, teaching, and lives generally, their worship was centered in Jesus. He was its focal point, a reality accentuated by the phrase, “in the form of God” (v. 6).¹ This was not just true of the thinking of leaders like Paul; rather, the way he uses the poem here “practically requires us to think that Paul expected his readers to recognize and affirm either the passage (i.e., as an early ode/hymn known to them) or at least what the passage expresses *as reflective of what they already knew and affirmed about Jesus*” (Hurtado 2005, 87). Furthermore, their worship included a rehearsal of the story that gave rise to their movement and provided the impetus for the way they lived.

In terms of *practice*, we should learn from and imitate their example. What makes us unique and gives us the reason for our lives is Jesus. What will attract people to Jesus is us letting them see Jesus. And what will motivate us to persist in our faith is to make sure we stay focused on Jesus.

How, then, shall we worship Jesus as Lord? Focusing particularly on verses 9–11, we should keep in mind that this “passage is primarily a celebration of the actions of Jesus and God that are recounted, presenting in lyrical (though also dense and compact) phrasing notions that could require pages to explicate in ordinary prose” (Hurtado 2005, 106).

There are two sides to this that go together. On the one hand, there is a sense of celebration. But, on the other hand, it is grounded in the theological content of the hymn. Indeed, without the content, there can be no real celebration, because nothing has been said that can be celebrated. In other words, without being *convinced* about Jesus, there will be no lasting *conviction*, and thus very little *commitment*.

The Basis for Life

To fully appreciate this, we need to review the context of verses 5–11. Paul included these verses to illustrate the “mind of Christ” that he commanded them to imitate (1.27—2.4, 12-16). Verses 5–11 are “intended to inspire the humility and consideration of others that Paul exhorts his readers to strive for in 2:1–5” (Hurtado 2005, 104). This means that the content and practice of worship is not something separate from “Christian life,” it is the stimulus for living that life in the best way. Our lives will be what they should be when we make sure our worship is what it should be: patterned after the earliest Christians in both content and character.

Conclusion

We see just how important that is in Stephen Fowl’s reminder of Paul’s intent in this text: “Paul is trying to form in the Philippians the intellectual and moral abilities to be able to deploy their

knowledge of the gospel in the concrete situations in which they find themselves, so that they will be able to live faithfully (or ‘walk worthily’ 1:27)” (Fowl 1998, 145). Significantly, he points to the nature and example of Jesus to support his contention. Belief in him stands apart from anything else we believe. Worship centered in him keeps our focus on the things that are above, where he is (Col 3.1–4). And that regular and constant focus gives us the motivation and example we need to be transformed into his image (2 Cor 3.18), fully enjoying the life he provides (John 10.10).

Have you admitted he is Lord? Have you entered his new life? As a Christian, are you *letting* him be Lord every day?

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Works Cited

- Stephen Fowl. 1998. “Christology and Ethics in Philippians 2:5–11.” *Where Christology Began: Essays on Philippians 2*. ed. Ralph P. Martin and Brian J. Dodd. pp. 140–153. Westminster John Knox Press.
- Larry W. Hurtado. 2005. *How On Earth Did Jesus Become a God? Historical Questions About the Earliest Devotion to Jesus*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

Notes

¹ This truth is reinforced from later historical writings, both Christian and secular. For example, in Book 10, Letter 96, written to the Emperor Trajan (98–117 AD), Pliny the Younger says that Christians he had examined said “they were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang in alternate verse a hymn to Christ, as to a god” (<https://vroma.org/vromans/hwalker/Pliny/Pliny10-096-E.html>).