

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

IMITATING THE CHARACTER OF CHRIST

AN EXEGESIS OF PHILIPPIANS 2:1-11

A PAPER SUBMITTED TO Dr. JAMES JOSEPH  
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR  
THE COURSE NBST 610-B03

LIBERTY BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

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SUNDAY, OCTOBER 5, 2014

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## INTRODUCTION

The Apostle Paul is one of the most prolific writers of the New Testament. Paul is believed to have written at least ten of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament, with possibly an additional three being attributed to him. Philippians is one of Paul's prison epistles, so called because it was written while he was imprisoned, possibly in Ephesus or Caesarea.<sup>1</sup> Philippians 2:1-11 is closely connected to the preceding verses in the first chapter, and many scholars believe that verses 6-11 represent an early Christian hymn that probably pre-date Paul's writing.<sup>2</sup> "Modern scholarship has been preoccupied with the question of whether verses 6-11 come originally from Paul or whether he has simply made use of an already existing poem that puts us in touch with the worship and doctrine of the early church."<sup>3</sup> These debates are missing the point of the passage. Philippians 2:1-11 states:

<sup>1</sup> Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, <sup>2</sup> then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. <sup>3</sup> Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, <sup>4</sup> not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

<sup>5</sup> In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

<sup>6</sup> Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;  
<sup>7</sup> rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.  
<sup>8</sup> And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!  
<sup>9</sup> Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name,

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Barker, ed., *The NIV Study Bible: New International Version*, 10 ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 1803.

<sup>2</sup> Ronald J. Allen, "Philippians 2: 1-11," *Interpretation* 61, no. 1 (January 2007): 73.

<sup>3</sup> Moisés Silva, *Philippians*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 92.

<sup>10</sup> that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

<sup>11</sup> and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (New International Version)

The examination of this passage will show that the debate about whether this is original material from Paul is irrelevant to the overall understanding of the intent of Paul's message. By understanding the historical-cultural context, the occasion and purpose, and literary context of Paul's letter to the church at Philippi, the reader can gain a deeper understanding of one of the most profound passages in the New Testament. In Philippians 2:1-11, Paul is exhorting the believer to love others as Christ loves us through his example of the supreme sacrifice he made, "by becoming obedient to death---even death on a cross! (Philippians 2:8b)."<sup>4</sup>

## CONTEXT

### HISTORICAL-CULTURAL CONTEXT OF PHILIPPIANS

The early Christian church was in unanimous agreement that Paul is the author of Philippians.<sup>5</sup> The authorship of the letter is clearly stated in the opening of the first chapter. The city of Philippi in the Roman province of Macedonia is named for King Philip II, the father of Alexander the Great.<sup>6</sup> According to Acts 16, Paul and his companions, including Silas, Timothy, and Luke, traveled to Philippi, probably in the early 50s of the first century, where he founded the church there.<sup>7</sup> The city of Philippi had a very diverse population, many of which were retired

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<sup>4</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the New International Version (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995).

<sup>5</sup> Kenneth Barker, ed., *The NIV Study Bible: New International Version*, 10 ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 1803.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Silva, *Philippians*, 1.

Roman soldiers who had been given land around the city.<sup>8</sup> The city was an important center of trade and commerce, and was very prominent in the gold-producing region of Macedonia.<sup>9</sup> It was located along the Egnatian Way, a trade route “which connected Rome with Byzantium (later Constantinople and Istanbul).”<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, Paul’s first evangelistic success was with a group of women, including wealthy “woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple fabrics, [and] a worshiper of God (Acts 16:14).” This represented the first group of Christians in what is modern-day Europe. Paul’s establishment of the first Christian church in this strategic city was important in the history of Christianity, and key to the spread of the gospel in Europe.

#### THE OCCASION OF PAUL’S LETTER

Philippians is one of Paul’s prison epistles, so-named because he wrote it while he was imprisoned, perhaps in Ephesus, Caesera, or more likely in Rome.<sup>11</sup> Paul wrote this letter, probably with the help of Timothy (Phil 1:1), as Epaphroditus was delivering a gift to him from the church at Philippi (Phil 4:15-18). The letter was most likely written in the early 60s in the first century.<sup>12</sup> Paul’s primary purpose of his letter was to thank the Philippians for the gift they had sent him.<sup>13</sup> Epaphroditus delivered Paul’s letter to the Philippians, despite the fact that he had had recently recovered from a serious, and near fatal, illness (Phil 4:25-27). As the church was growing in Philippi it was not “as bitter, divided or entrenched as in Corinth,” yet Paul felt

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8 Barker, *NIV Study Bible*, 1803.

9 Ibid., 1804.

10 Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible Book by Book: a Guided Tour* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 353.

11 Barker, *NIV Study Bible*, 1803.

12 David A. Keddie, "Philippians 2: 1—13," *The Expository Times* 119, no. 11 (August 2008): 552.

13 Ibid.

the need to write to them a letter of encouragement.<sup>14</sup> The church in Philippi was suffering persecution because of pagan opposition to the gospel; this led to tension within the church.<sup>15</sup> Paul's affection for the believers in Philippi is evident, and he writes of his admiration, encouragement, and joy for them. Paul addresses the challenges the church is facing throughout in his letter, and his writing fluctuates between their suffering and his own pain and suffering (1:12, 27, 2:19, 23).<sup>16</sup> Overall, Philippians is a letter of with themes of thanksgiving, encouragement, joy, and friendship, with a special emphasis on Christ's suffering and deity.

### LITERARY CONTEXT OF PHILIPPIANS

Understanding the author's original intent is the primary goal of understanding the meaning of a passage of scripture. Key to this is understanding the literary context of the passage. A core requirement for the exegetical exercise is "bringing out of the text the meaning the writers intended to convey and which their readers were expected to gather from it."<sup>17</sup> This also requires understanding the passage in the overall context of scripture as a whole.

"Many scholars conclude that the present epistle to the Philippians is a compilation of two (or more) letters."<sup>18</sup> The conclusion held by some is that chapters 3 and 4 are from a prior letter that Paul wrote to the church in thanks for their support and as warnings against false teaching (3:2-11) and quarrelling among one another (4:2-3).<sup>19</sup> Chapters 1 and 2 may be from a

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14 Keddie, "Philippians 2: 1—13," 552.

15 Fee and Stuart, *How Read the Bible*, 354.

16 Ibid., 355.

17 Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 611.

18 Ronald J. Allen, "Philippians 2: 1-11," *Interpretation* 61, no. 1 (Jan 2007): 72.

19 Ibid.

letter written later “in which Paul reinforces the importance of congregational living as a community of mutual support.”<sup>20</sup> There are some examples in the letter that support this view, such as 3:2 of “where Paul seems to conclude his thoughts, then suddenly changes the subject.”<sup>21</sup> In 4:9, Paul again seems to conclude his thought, and then moves to expressing thanks. Many commentators believe it is unusual for an ancient author to place a “thanks” in at the end of a letter rather than at the beginning.<sup>22</sup>

The opening of Paul’s letter speaks of his thanks for the believers in Philippi. His use of affectionate language clearly shows his love for them. He then moves to his own situation, telling the Philippians that he is “in chains for Christ” (1:13), alluding to the fact that he is in prison. Yet despite this situation, he tells them he will “continue to rejoice” (1:18). For Paul, “to live is Christ and to die is gain” (1:22). He expresses his struggle with a desire to “depart” (e.g.: be with Christ in heaven) yet that “is more necessary for you that I remain in the body” (1:24). At the closing of the first chapter, he exhorts the Philippian believers to “conduct yourselves in a manner worth of the gospel of Christ” (1:27). This will ensure that if Paul is able to visit them again or if he is only able to hear about them, he will know that they “stand firm in the one Spirit” and will not be “frightened in any way” by opposition (1:27-28). Paul’s final statement before chapter 2 is that the Philippians cannot only believe in Christ “but also suffer for him” since they are going through the same sufferings that Paul experienced (1:29-30). This leads him to the opening passages in chapter 2, the subject of this exegetical analysis.

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20 Allen, “Philippians 2:1-11”, 72.

21 Carolyn Osiek, *Philippians, Philemon* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2000), 2.

22 Ibid.

Following Philippians 2:1-11, Paul continues to encourage the believers to be “lights in the world” (2:15b). He tells them he hopes to send Timothy to them soon (2:19), but he has sent Epaphroditus to them first (2:25). Paul extols Epaphroditus’ credentials, and tells the Philippians that Epaphroditus “risked his life so he could make up for [their] inability to serve [Paul] (2:30).” In chapter 3, Paul provides teaching on several matters, including true and false righteousness (3:1-11) and the importance of following his own example (3:15-21). Paul’s closing includes an appeal for the Philippians to “stand firm in the Lord” (4:1). He names specific believers (Euodia, Syntyche, and Clement) of whom he says their names “are in the book of life” (4:3). He closes with an emphasis on rejoicing, focusing on what is noble, right, pure, lovely, and admirable (4:8); and a final thanks for the gifts that the Philippians sent him.

### **EXEGETICAL ANALYSIS OF PHILIPPIANS 2:1-11**

The primary Bible translations used for this exegetical analysis are the New International Version (NIV), the New English Translation (NET), and the New American Standard Bible (NASB). The NASB was used to facilitate a review of the Greek in *The New Strong's Expanded Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible Red Letter Edition* and using the Bible Hub online NASB + *Strong's Concordance*. An examination of key Greek words, their transliteration, and definitions was compiled in a spreadsheet to aid in this exegesis. This examination focused on the NIV and NASB in a side-by-side, verse-by-verse comparison. Additionally, several scholarly exegetical commentaries and specialty sources were consulted.

## VERSES 1-4

The first word in verse 1, “is the Greek word *οὖν* (“oun”) which means either “therefore” or “then.”<sup>23</sup> This shows a clear connection to the preceding verses; thus one should maintain and understanding of the following verses in light of what Paul wrote in chapter 1. Additionally, in 2:1-2, “Paul uses a conditional construction: ‘If (vs. 1)...then (vs. 2ff.)’ If the Philippians experience encouragement in Christ...then they are to make Paul’s joy complete by having the same mind.”<sup>24</sup> The phrase, “‘if there is any encouragement’ in Christ, is followed by an alliterative echo—‘if there is any consolation of love’ (2:1b). In addition to their alliteration, there is a close conceptual relationship between the near synonyms, ‘encouragement’ and ‘consolation’.”<sup>25</sup> It should be noted that the Greek word *παράκλησις*, or “*paraklésis*” is a “term most elusive as to precise meaning. Literally it is a ‘calling alongside’.”<sup>26</sup> Additional definitions for *paraklésis* include “a calling for, summons, hence: (a) exhortation, (b) entreaty, (c) encouragement, joy, gladness, (d) consolation, comfort.”<sup>27</sup> The Philippians are to do these first two conditions in order to make the Apostle Paul’s “joy complete.” The concept of joy relates back to the previous chapter, where “Paul has emphatically expressed his joy that, no matter what the motivation, Christ is being proclaimed even while Paul is in the bonds of imprisonment—‘in this I rejoice. And indeed I will be joyful’ (1:18b).”<sup>28</sup> This joyful attitude is accomplished by the Philippians “being one in spirit and of one mind” (NIV). “Paul also

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23 James Strong, *The New Strong's Expanded Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible Red Letter Edition, with Greek Dictionary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2001), Greek Dictionary Reference 3767.

24 R. Allen, "Philippians," 72.

25 John Paul Heil, *Philippians: Let Us Rejoice in Being Conformed to Christ* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2010), 82.

26 Clifton J. Allen, ed., *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, vol. 11, *2 Corinthians-Philemon* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1971), 193.

27 Strong's, Greek Dictionary Reference 3874.

28 Heil, *Philippians*, 83.

continues the topos of joy in 2:1-4. However, this time he does not hold up his joy as exemplary but alludes to its deficiency. Paul's joy is not yet full, because of the disunity that exists among the Philippians (2:2).”<sup>29</sup> Here, Paul seems to be somewhat disappointed in the Philippians.

“The Philippians’ afflictions have brought discouragement to the community. Because they have lost, or at least are in danger of losing, the fundamental Christian perspective of joy, the apostle in this letter exhorts them repeatedly to rejoice.”<sup>30</sup> Finally, the notion of a partnership is expressed with “‘sharing in the spirit’ (2:1) and ‘be of the same mind’ (2:2, 5). The former is a verb form of *koinonia*: the Spirit animates the partnership. The latter expression means to seek a commonly shared goal, in this case, witnessing to eschatological community.”<sup>31</sup>

The opening of verse 3 is rendered similarly in the NET and NIV with the phrase “selfish ambition.” Here, the Greek work *ἐπιθεία*, or “*eritheia*” has a range of meanings of “ambition, rivalry, self-seeking; a feud, faction.”<sup>32</sup> Paul continues, “each of you should, in humility, be moved to treat one another as more important than yourself” (NET) or more succinctly “Rather, in humility value others above yourselves” (NIV). Verse 4 concludes the thought with, “not looking to your own interest by each of you to the interests of others” (NIV). The NET renders verse 4 in a bit longer sentence, “Each of you should be concerned not only about your own interests, but about the interests of others as well.” This concept of valuing others above oneself can be linked to Christ’s own teaching found in Matthew 27:39 and Luke 10:27, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” This seems to be the core of the theme of unity, or being “of the same mind” about which Paul is writing.

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29 Paul A. Holloway, *Consolation in Philippians: Philosophical Sources and Rhetorical Strategy* (Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series) (Birmingham: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 121.

30 Silva, *Philippians*, 86.

31 R. Allen, “Philippians”, 72.

32 Strong’s, *Greek Dictionary* Reference 2052.

## VERSES 5-11

Verses 5-11 have traditionally been ascribed to an early Christian hymn that predates Paul's letter to the Philippians. Paul may have borrowed this hymn from another Christian source, "because it is generally (but not universally) agreed that this is a pre-Pauline, or non-Pauline, hymn with which he was familiar and which perfectly made the point he wished to get over to the Philippians."<sup>33</sup> He introduces verses 6-11 by saying, "You should have the same attitude toward one another that Christ Jesus had" (NET). The word "attitude" here is the Greek word *φρονέω*, or "*phroneó*" which can be defined as "(a) I think, (b) I think, judge, (c) I direct the mind to, seek for, (d) I observe, (e) I care for."<sup>34</sup>

Verse 6 opens the so-called "Christ-hymn" with, "who though he existed in the form of God did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped" (NET). The NIV translates this verse as "Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage." The word "form" here is the Greek word *μορφή* or "morphé", which means "form, shape, outward appearance."<sup>35</sup> This verse tells the reader "Christ existed in heaven with God before descending to earth."<sup>36</sup> The word "'form' is sometimes used in Jewish literature synonymously with "image" (*eikon*) (Gen 1:26-27)."<sup>37</sup>

Verse 7 says, "but emptied himself by taking on the form of a slave by looking like other men, and by sharing in human nature" (NET). The NIV renders this verse using the word "servant" instead of "slave", and "human likeness" rather than "human nature." The NASB

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33 David A. Keddie, "Philippians 2: 1—13," *The Expository Times* 119, no. 11 (August 2008): 552.

34 Strong's, *Greek Dictionary* Reference 5426.

35 Ibid., Reference 3444.

36 R. Allen, "Philippians", 73.

37 Holloway, *Consolation in Philippians*, 122.

uses the word “bond-servant” in place of “slave.” The Greek word here is δοῦλος or “*doulos*”, which can be translated “a slave / (a) (as adj.) enslaved, (b) (as noun) a (male) slave.”<sup>38</sup>

“The *doulos* was properly the ‘bond man’” or “one who gives himself up to the will of another.”<sup>39</sup> This verse implies that “Christ emptied himself, i.e., left the heavenly world, and took the form of a slave.”<sup>40</sup> Interestingly, here the same word “slave or servant refers to the servant songs of Isaiah 52:13-53:12.”<sup>41</sup>

Verse 8 continues, “He humbled himself, by becoming obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross!” (NET). The NIV adds “and being found in appearance as a man” at the beginning of the verse. The NASB renders verse 8 in a similar fashion as the NIV. The key word here is “humbled” which is the Greek word ταπεινόω or “*tapeinoó*” which means “to make low, figuratively to humble, make or bring low, humble, humiliate; pass.”<sup>42</sup> Here, Paul seems to be “even more explicit in linking Jesus’s humiliation/exaltation with that of believers: ‘if we suffer with him, so that we may also be glorified with him’ (Rom. 8:17; cf. 2 Tim. 2:11).”<sup>43</sup> The word “death” in this verse is the Greek θάνατος or “*thanatos*” which refers to either a physical or spiritual death.<sup>44</sup> Here Paul is more likely referring to a physical death.

Verses 9-11 conclude the hymn and in the NET say, “As a result God exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow—in heaven and on earth and under the earth—and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord

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38 Strong’s, *Greek Dictionary* Reference 1401.

39 Ibid.

40 R. Allen, “Philippians”, 73.

41 Ibid.

42 Strong’s, *Greek Dictionary*, Reference 5013.

43 Silva, *Philippians*, 98.

44 Strong’s, *Greek Dictionary*, Reference 2288.

to the glory of God the Father.” The phrase “as a result” refers back to the previous verses; as a result of Christ emptying himself, taking on the form of a slave, and being obedient, God exalted him. The NIV adds to verse 9, “Therefore God exalted him to the highest place.” The Greek word *ὑπερυψώω* or “*hyperupsoó*” for “exalted” here means, “to exalt beyond measure, highly exalt.”<sup>45</sup> The phrase, “the name that is above every name” seems to refer to *Ἰησοῦς* or “*Iésous*”, the Greek form of Jesus, and not to Lord.<sup>46</sup> One of the final key words is “tongue.” Here, the Greek word *γλῶσσα* or “*glóssa*” refers to “the tongue, a language, a nation (usually distinguished by their speech).”<sup>47</sup> This usage seems to refer to the idea that all people or all nations will confess or acknowledge that “Jesus is Lord.” Finally, the word “Lord” in verse 11 (Jesus is Lord) “is equivalent to the Old Testament word *Jehovah*.”<sup>48</sup> Here it should also be noted that in verses 10 and 11 the Greek is quoting “the LXX of Isaiah 45:23 with a change in the word order.”<sup>49</sup>

## CONCLUSION AND EXEGETICAL APPLICATION

The Apostle Paul’s letter to the church at Philippi may very well be a compilation of two separate letters he wrote to the believers in this Macedonian city. The letter was written to a church that, like many at the time, was experiencing both internal strife and external pressure. The verses 2:5-11 may have been part of a pre-existing hymn or poem about Christ; however, Paul’s use of this seems to fit well his purpose of describing the humility of Christ in his voluntary atonement for all of humanity on the cross. Some scholars believe that verses 6-11

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45 Strong’s, *Greek Dictionary*, Reference 5251.

46 Silva, *Philippians*, 110.

47 Strong’s, *Greek Dictionary*, Reference 1100.

48 Jerry Falwell, Edward E. Hindson, and Woodrow Michael Kroll, eds., *Liberty Commentary On the New Testament* (Lynchburg, VA: Liberty Press, 1978), 574.

49 Joseph A. Fitzmyer, “The Aramaic Background of Philippians 2: 6-11.,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 50, no. 3 (July 1, 1988): 483.

may have had their origin in Aramaic; however, Lohmeyer concluded that the “poem was originally written in Greek by a poet whose mother-tongue was Semitic.”<sup>50</sup> The verses in Philippians 2:1-11 have their own deep meaning, but they also are strongly connected to the rest of Paul’s letter as well as the rest of scripture. “The hymn of 2:6:11...looks back to the exhortation to humility in 2:1-4.”<sup>51</sup> There are also key verses and phrases that point to other parts of scripture including both the Old and New Testament; thus keeping with the general continuity that the Bible has, and showing its influence of the Holy Spirit on the authors. Through this exegesis, one understands that the debate about whether this is original material from Paul is irrelevant to the overall understanding of the intent of Paul’s message. The understanding of the historical-cultural context contained within this paper, the occasion and purpose, and literary context of Paul’s letter to the church at Philippi, has provided a deeper understanding of one of the most profound passages in the New Testament.

Christians can learn at least two important theological points from Philippians 2:1-11. First, in verses 1-4, Paul is encouraging believers to be unified. He calls Christians to not be motivated by selfishness, but look to Christ’s example of humility and sacrifice. Second, Paul reminds Christians that Jesus paid the ultimate price for salvation. And, as a result, he has been exalted to God. Eventually, the whole world will recognize this fact. But until that day, Christians must remain faithful, humble, joyful, and united. This, Paul says, is the same attitude that Christ Jesus has and one that followers of Christ would do well to imitate.

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50 Fitzmyer, “Aramaic Background of Philippians,” 472.

51 Holloway, *Consolation in Philippians*, 122.

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