

Paul's Letter to the Philippians

Session Five April 22, 2020

Philippians 2:5 – 2:11

Considered the heart of the Philippians letter, Paul uses a piece of poetry – either previously used by the Christian church or penned by Paul – to address the theological truths about Jesus – His relationship to God, as human, as a suffering servant, and as Lord.

Paul also used this poem as the bridge for the Philippians church between living a life of unity (Chapter 1 and the beginning of Chapter 2) and a life of holiness (end of Chapter 2).

Opening Questions...

(1) What's your favorite poem, song, or work of art? Why is it your favorite?

(2) Who in your life has most clearly embodied the character of God?

Last week we ended with Paul sharing the importance of living a life of unity for the Philippian church, both personally and publically so others in their community could see what true Christian unity looks like. This emphasis on unity serves as an introduction into the theological heart of Paul's letter to the Philippians, which can be found in verses five through 11. The very fact that it is contained in the form of what Christian scholars believe is a poem, either penned by Paul or an early Christian leader, makes it even more fascinating. Some scholars would argue that if you were to line up the Christian poetry from the New Testament from valuable/impactful on down that this poem would be at the top of the list.

Why? In this poem, we have so many streams of truth that are coming together at once. Only through the poetic context can we begin to comprehend the deep theological sentiments that Paul (and whoever the poem's author might be) is trying to get across. What are some of the truths or stories that are contained in this poem? Just to give you a short glimpse before we dive in... (1) Jesus before Human, God; (2) Jesus as Suffering Servant; (3) Jesus as Man; (4) Jesus as Exalted Lord; and (5) Jesus and the World.

Paul understood that for the Philippians, and for any Christian, to fully comprehend who God is and what God has done for us, that you must understand the very nature of Jesus. That is the heart of the Christian story. This is the reason why Paul made it the heart of the Philippians letter.

2:5 – Attitude of Christ Jesus

Picking up on the theme from last week, Paul encouraged the Philippians to look beyond themselves and remember the group – the fellowship first. Let this group mentality transform the way you think and the way you work. This Messianic mindset transforms all! Paul is setting the table for what this Messianic mindset is...

2:6 – “Who...” – The beginning of the poem about Jesus...

To describe this hymn, one could say it's a “downward journey of love.” Again, going against the flow of what society desires, Jesus' decision was an act of love. Verse 6 emphasizes a theological point that was debated later on, but in Paul's time was not an issue – that Jesus was with God in the beginning. (Later some would argue that Jesus “adopted” this role as Messiah.) However, from this early hymn, we can see Paul shares that from the beginning, he existed in the form of God.

However, he did not “exploit” or did not see equality to be “grasped” depending on your translation in your Bible. Scholars debated what did Paul mean by this. Did Jesus stop being God when he took on human form? NO! Of course not. Remember who is writing this! Paul! And some of the themes he has already addressed. Status! Act of love! Jesus simply lowered himself in an act of love... (This is part of the Jesus Before Human story and Jesus as Man story.)

2:7 – Jesus as Servant – Shades of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah

Jesus' choice to become human was a choice to become a servant. (This echoes Paul's writings in chapter 1.) Paul also emphasizes that Jesus was made in the likeness of man, fully human in all earthly glory. Even though he still had the ability to call down legions of angels (i.e. Garden of Gethsemane), he chose to be the servant unto death. Paul saw this as a reflection of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah. We will see this more in verse 10. One thing to hold onto from this verse (unlike what we see in many other New Testament writings, even other letters from Paul) is the emphasis on Jesus choosing to empty himself and becoming fully human, rather than God sending Jesus to save the world. A different nuance than is often seen in the New Testament writings. (This is part of the Jesus as Man Story and Jesus as Suffering Servant story.)

2:8 – Climax of the Poem – Obedience to the Cross

Jesus' obedience was a vocation that led to the cross. He knew it. The obedience was not to death, the obedience was to God. It was a divine vocation, knowing that the result was not death, but rescue (there is that word again!) for humanity and all creation. Jesus had humbled himself to be a part of creation, and now his obedience was going to restore it. Basically, Adam's story was being reversed! Where Adam had failed creation, Jesus was restoring it. Did Jesus have to go this route? Of course not. He is God. Could he exploit his divine nature? Yes. Instead, he chose the cross. What was intended to be an instrument of shame becomes his greatest accomplishment. (This is part of the Jesus as Man Story and Jesus as Suffering Servant Story.)

Verses nine through 11 see a shift in the poem that begins with the word “Therefore” or “For this reason”. This gives pause in the poem to catch our breath, think about what we just read (realize we are at the peak of the poem) and slide to the end...

2:9 – “Therefore” – Why did God exalt Jesus?

Why did God exalt Jesus? To put it plain and simple, Jesus did what only God can do. The divine vocation! If anyone questions whether Jesus was divine or not, here is your answer. What Jesus did was a “God thing”! In doing so, God exalted Jesus and bestowed upon Him the name that is above all names. Diving back into our Old Testament history, the personal name of God was the name – “I Am who I Am”, “YHWH”, “Yahweh” – which we have translated into “Adonai”, which means “Lord”. Jesus is Lord. (Jesus as Exalted Lord story.)

2:10 - 11 – “Heaven and on earth and under the earth, all will confess”

Paul quotes in verse 10 a passage from Isaiah 45:23, a piece of Old Testament scripture about the Suffering Servant. In Isaiah, there are fifteen chapters that focus on the Suffering Servant and specifically the monotheistic nature of God in a very polytheistic time period in the Old Testament. In referencing this passage in Philippians, Paul is sharing that he sees Jesus Christ as this suffering servant referenced in Isaiah, most notably, that the waiting of the return of this servant has now come in the person of Jesus. Paul is also referencing this passage emphasizing that Jesus and God are ONE GOD – monotheistic. Along with the Holy Spirit, the Trinity is THREE IN ONE.

God proclaims that all will bow to Jesus – heaven, earth, and under the earth. Jesus has fulfilled the divine and human vocation – all prophecies have been fulfilled. Everyone will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. (Jesus as Exalted Lord Story and Jesus and the World story.)

Paul’s emphasis to the Philippians and to all Christians through this poem...

Jesus humbled himself, became a servant, took on the cross, went into darkness for humanity and creation, and was exalted on high.

We must be willing to humble ourselves before Christ to do the same – in unity, living a life of holiness and even suffering – to spread the message of love.

Follow Up Questions...

How does the story of Jesus reshape your personal understanding of God?

How does the downward, cross-shaped journey of Jesus challenge modern notions of love?

What might the Lord be asking you to lay down for the sake of others?