



Philippians

RBS
Philippians 1:27 – 2:11

Lesson 3: The Humility and Glory of Christ

“Have this mind among yourselves which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant” (Philippians 2:5-7).

Doctrinal Focus: *Our identity in Christ defines how believers must meet suffering imposed by external*

Read Philippians 1:27 – 2:11.

Paul continued to describe a Christ-centered response to outside persecution and internal dissension, changing the focus from his situation in Rome to his friends' situation in Philippi. He had shown them that making Christ his chief treasure had freed him to rejoice when Christ was proclaimed, even by those who saw themselves as Paul's competitors (Philippians 1:15-18c). He had also shown that the Christ-centered heart could meet the future with calm contentment, whether that future held violent death or ongoing life in service to others (Philippians 1:18d-26). The believers in Philippi must apply these lessons to their own experience by conducting themselves in a way that is *“worthy of the gospel”* (Philippians 1:27).

“Let your manner of life be” reflects a Greek word that is politically loaded, since it has the concept of citizenship embedded in it.¹ Ordinarily Paul referred to people's pattern of behavior with the Hebrew metaphor of “walking” (for example, Ephesians 4:1, 17; Colossians 1:10; 2:6; see Exodus 18:20; Deuteronomy 5:32-33). Only to the Philippians did Paul give the instruction, *“Let your conduct as citizens be worthy of the gospel.”* Later in this letter Paul described Christians' identity and hope in these terms: *“For our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ”* (Philippians 3:20). Since Philippi was a colony, its citizens were citizens of the city

opponents and friction arising from competition with brothers: with calm courage and humble love.

of Rome itself, with the rights and responsibilities of Roman citizens. Though they lived far from the imperial capital that defined their status, their conduct was to be controlled by their connection to Rome. So also heaven's citizens, though living on earth, must display behavior that befits our heavenly standing in Christ the Lord. What does “heavenly citizen” conduct look like?

First, it is *courageous unity in the face of opposition* (Philippians 1:27-30). Paul wanted to see or hear that his friends were “standing firm” (as he would repeat in 4:1) as a united army, neither crumbling nor retreating in the face of daunting opponents. The source of their unity was the “one Spirit” of God, since God had given them *“participation in the Spirit”* (Philippians 2:1). Because God's Spirit had drawn them together, they must *“with one mind strive side-by-side for the faith of the gospel.”* Many of Philippi's citizens (including the jailer?) were soldiers retired from military service. They knew from experience how vital it was for comrades in arms to put up a united front against an enemy force. Jesus' followers too were in a spiritual conflict that required their unity in the face of assault by opponents. Paul would later commend Euodia and Syntyche for having *“labored side by side”* with him in the gospel (Philippians 4:2).

Although we do not know the identity of those opponents, we know that their opposition tempted

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the believers to fear (Philippians 1:28). Paul compared the Philippians' suffering with the ordeal they had seen him undergo earlier (Philippians 1:30), so perhaps the opponents' weapons were slander, beating, and imprisonment (Acts 16:19-24). Whatever form the persecution took, believers must not be intimidated, for the opponents' aggression is actually a signal of a radical reversal to come. Jesus' followers, who seemed weak at present and were under orders not to retaliate (Matthew 5:38-42), were destined for salvation, whereas their persecutors, who seemed strong and victorious, were heading for destruction.

Moreover, Paul's friends should see their suffering in an even more positive light. Suffering was one of the twin gifts that God had graciously bestowed on them for the sake of Christ. By God's gift they had *believed* in Christ, and thus received "*the righteousness from God that depends on faith*" (Philippians 3:9). Trusting in Jesus is not a response that we generate on our own. Like every step in the process of salvation, when we are saved by grace through faith "*this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God*" (Ephesians 2:8). And faith is accompanied by its equally-gracious, equally-God-given twin: *suffering* for the sake of Christ. Paul's own goal was not only to know Christ and the power of his resurrection, but also to share in his sufferings (Philippians 3:10), for Paul knew that in his own weakness Christ's strength was most fully displayed (2 Corinthians 12:7-10). As unpleasant as suffering is, for those in Christ it becomes an instrument of his grace to keep us dependent on him daily and hopeful for his future return.

The second hallmark of conduct befitting heaven's citizens on earth is *others-serving humility* (Philippians 2:1-11). This is directly related to the unity that these Christians must display when attacked from without, as Paul implied by referring again to the Spirit and the unity of mind that would complete his joy in the Philippians (Philippians 2:2; see 1:27). Paul began his call to humility with a reminder of their "encouragement in Christ"—precisely what they needed in their suffering and received from Paul because he was encouraged by Christ in suffering (2 Corinthians 1:3-7).

With pastoral gentleness Paul prepared to place his finger on a "sore spot" in his beloved congregation:

their harmony was marred by rivalry and conceit, exhibited in preoccupation with personal perspectives and preferences, and a tendency to devalue others. Before naming the problem, he laid a foundation by reminding them how lavishly God had blessed them through the gospel. When he wrote "*If there is any encouragement. . .any comfort. . .any participation,*" he had no doubt at all that his friends were indeed enjoying these privileges. He meant, in effect, "*Since you have encouragement in Christ, comfort from love, participation (Greek *koinōnia*) in the Spirit.*" Those first three privileges reminded these Christians that each of the three Persons of the Trinity had shown them grace, and bringing them together with each other: Christ encourages them, the Father loves them, and the Spirit shares his presence with them. Upon the Corinthians Paul pronounced blessing from the triune God: "*The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship (*koinōnia*) of the Holy Spirit be with you all*" (2 Corinthians 13:14).³ To the Ephesians he based his call to unity in the persons of the Trinity: "*. . .maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit. . .one Lord. . .one God and Father of all. . .*" (Ephesians 4:3-6).

Because of the encouragement, comfort, and partnership of God the Son, God the Father, and God the Spirit, Paul could appeal to the deep bonds of "*affection and sympathy*" that tied the Philippians' hearts to his own. (He was yearning for them "*with the affection of Christ Jesus,*" Philippians 1:8.) So he boldly asked, "*Complete my joy*" (Philippians 2:2). That command might sound like a selfish reason to urge them to abandon selfishness. But Paul's joy had been radically reoriented by God's grace. It was no longer self-centered, but rather Christ-centered, and therefore others-serving. Paul's joy was not dependent on circumstances, so it could thrive in Roman chains. It was not at others' expense, so it was not threatened by others' success. Since his chief desire was to glorify Christ, his joy would be completed by seeing the Philippians thrive spiritually, caring for each other in Christ-like love and humility.

The changes that were needed in the Philippians' behavior were grounded in changes of attitude or mindset. Paul stressed this point by using one term three times in close succession: "*being of the same mind*," "*being . . . of one mind*," "*Have this mind among yourselves which is yours in Christ Jesus*" (Philippians 2:2, 5). The goal is not polite conduct based on pretense, but sincere love that honors and cares for others.

The Philippians could see others-serving humility in action most dramatically in the gospel of Jesus that had brought them salvation. (They could also see it, up close, in Paul and his colaborer Timothy, who did not seek his own interests—as some Philippians were doing—but genuinely cared for their welfare, 2:20-21.)

To reinforce his summons to others-serving humility, Paul "sang" the story of Christ's descent from his preexistent glory as the eternal Son, equal with the Father and the Spirit, to his incarnation and obedience even to the death of the cross, and finally to his ascent to the height of divine glory, bearing the name above all names and receiving worship from all creatures (Philippians 2:6-11). Most scholars today believe that this was an early hymn to Christ that the church was already using in worship, and that Paul, inspired by the Holy Spirit, embedded it in God's Word to teach them, and us, that the Christ who died and rose sets the pattern for the care for each other. This is one of the most majestic portrayals of the deity, incarnation, humility, death, and exaltation of the Lord Jesus Christ in the whole Bible.

Paul connected his exhortation to humility (Philippians 2:1-4) and his narrative of Christ's humility (Philippians 2:6-8) through a brief introduction: "Have this mind among yourselves which is yours in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 2:5). Paul meant that Christ is our example, but also that he is more than an example. Because believers are "in Christ," Christ has given us his way of thinking about everything, including other people. This others-focused mindset which "is yours" because you are in Christ must therefore be applied "among yourselves," in how you think about and treat each other.

Paul's poetic portrayal of the redemptive humility and resultant glory of Christ fell into three phases:

(1) Christ's deity before his incarnation (Philippians 2:6), (2) Christ's humility in incarnation and death (Philippians 2:7-8), and (3) God's exaltation of Christ to the heights of divine glory (Philippians 2:9-11). Christ is the active subject in the first two phases, in his descent from divine glory to assume humanity and to follow the path of servanthood all the way down to death on a cross. God the Father is the active subject in the final phase, exalting the suffering Servant and bestowing on him the matchless name that warrants the worship of Jesus by every creature everywhere.

Paul began with the divine glory that belonged to Christ before he became man. Only as we grasp (as much as finite, fallen creatures can) the majesty of the Person who was willing to be conceived in Mary's womb and laid as a newborn in a manger can we begin to appreciate what his humble condescension meant. Before his incarnation, Christ was "*in the form of God*"—that is, he was "*in very nature God*" (niv). He was equal with God, but he did not regard that equal status as "*a thing to be grasped*."

Christ "made himself nothing" by "taking the form (nature) of a servant" and "being born in the likeness of men," that is, "in human form." Paul's choice of words like "form" and "likeness" was not intended to suggest that the Son of God only *seemed* to be human when he came to earth as Jesus of Nazareth. Paul affirmed that the Son was *fully* human, but not *merely* human—a man like us (yet without sin), and yet a man so unlike us, because he was and is also God.

As a servant (the Servant of the Lord, Isaiah 53), Christ became obedient to death, and the most shameful form of death, not only in the view of Roman citizens but also in the verdict of God: death on a cross signified God's curse (Galatians 3:13, citing Deuteronomy 21:23). God the Son so cared for "the interests of others" that he stooped low to rescue them—to rescue us.

The fitting reward of Christ's humble love and sacrificial suffering was that God "has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name." In his resurrection and ascension to the Father's right hand, not only did the Son resume the open display of his divine glory, which had been veiled during his humbling

mission to earth (John 17:5), but he also received this glory as the divine-and-human Messiah, who calls us brothers and leads us to glory (Hebrews 2:10-11).

The new “name” that God bestowed on Christ for his perfect obedience is actually the *title* “Lord,” now and forever attached to the name “Jesus,” the name that had been given to him at birth (Matthew 1:21, 25). It was when God raised Christ from the dead that he exalted him “*above every name that is named*” (Ephesians 1:21).

The result of Christ’s exaltation is that he is henceforth to receive the universal worship that only the Lord, the Creator of all things, deserves to receive. Paul drew the words, “*every knee*

should bow. . .and every tongue confess,” from Isaiah 45:22-23, where the Lord calls the ends of the earth to turn to him to receive salvation, “*For I am God, and there is no other. . .To me every knee shall bow, and every tongue shall swear allegiance.*”² Every creature everywhere in the universe will acknowledge “Jesus Christ is Lord.” In this exaltation of his Son, God the Father will receive even greater glory.

Knowing that Jesus voluntarily traveled the painful path from lowliness to glory for us and that he will come to transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body (Philippians 3:21), believers must face suffering with courageous unity and serve each other in Christ-like humility.

Notes

1. The Greek verb is *politeuomai*, which appears in the New Testament only in Phil. 1:27 and in Acts 23:1.
2. To convey the idea of “swear allegiance,” the Septuagint (Greek translation of the Old Testament) had used the same term, “confess” (*exomologe*), that Paul used in Phil. 2:11.

Recommended Commentary

Philippians by Dennis Johnson (Reformed Expository Commentary)



Philippians Lesson 3

Questions for Discussion

Read Philippians 1:27 – 2:11.

1. Why would Paul's call to "*conduct befitting citizenship*" resonate with the residents of Philippi? How did their Roman citizenship affect their sense of identity? How did Paul expect Christians' citizenship in heaven (Philippians 3:20) and the Savior who rules there to affect how we see ourselves and how we conduct ourselves?
2. What clues does our text give to the type of opposition the Philippian Christians were facing?
3. What kinds of opposition or suffering have you experienced because you belong to Christ and seek to follow him faithfully?
4. Why is it important to maintain our unity with other believers when we encounter opposition because of the gospel?
5. Why are we sometimes tempted to react to outside pressure by turning in on ourselves (in self-centered indifference to others' troubles) or turning on other Christians in frustration?
6. How did Paul encourage the Philippians and us by reminding us that we have a future hope that puts present problems in perspective? What is our future hope? How can we know that it awaits us?

7. It is natural to be thankful that God gave us faith to trust in Jesus. Why can Paul claim that suffering also is a gift that God has given us for Jesus' sake? How can suffering serve God's good plan for our ultimate joy?

8. How have you received encouragement in Christ, the comfort of God's love, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit recently? Pause to ponder these gifts from our Triune God, and give him thanks.

9. Was it selfish for Paul to command, "Complete my joy"? Why or why not? Do you get as much joy from seeing other Christians grow spiritually as you do from having your own needs met?

10. In view of his introduction in Philippians 2:5, what was the main lesson that Paul wanted to teach through this majestic poem about the person and saving mission of Christ?

11. According to Philippians 2:6-11, who is Jesus Christ?

12. What erroneous ideas concerning the person of Christ does Philippians 2:6-11 correct?