

Philippians: Rejoice in the Gospel of Jesus Christ

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Session: Session 7: Christ the Exemplar (Philippians 2:5-11)

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Abstract

In this session, Dr. Matthew S. Harmon examines Philippians 2:5-11, commonly referred to as the "Christ hymn," as the definitive portrait of Jesus Christ as the ultimate exemplar of humility. The lecture unpacks the passage's three movements: the command to adopt the mindset of Christ, Christ's voluntary humiliation and servant-hearted obedience to the point of death on a cross, and God's subsequent high exaltation of Jesus as Lord of all creation. Dr. Harmon demonstrates that this rich theological text is not merely an intellectual treatise but a practical call for believers to live self-sacrificially through their union with Christ. Ultimately, he highlights the deep Old Testament roots of the hymn—particularly in Isaiah and Genesis—and challenges readers to pattern their lives after Christ's model of self-sacrificial service.

Outline

I. Introduction

- A. Session Title: Session 7, "Christ the Exemplar" (Philippians 2:5-11)
- B. Relationship to Previous Session (Philippians 2:1-4)
 - 1. Chapter 2:1-4 sets the stage ("Joy as Rooted in a Shared Life Produced by the Gospel")
 - 2. Verses 1-11 constitute a single literary unit split for in-depth analysis
- C. Purpose of the Description of Christ (vv. 5-11)
 - 1. Stir delight, joy, and love for Christ in believers' hearts as a motivator
 - 2. Not merely external imitation, but empowerment
 - 3. Mindset belongs to believers due to their union with Christ (v. 5: "which is yours in Christ Jesus")
- D. The Nature of the "Christ Hymn"
 - 1. Lacks direct historical evidence of being an actual song sung by early Christians
 - 2. Written in elevated prose rather than strict Greek or Hebrew poetry
 - 3. Scholarly debate on authorship: whether written by Paul or adopted from an existing early Christian source
 - 4. Reflects widely accepted, uncontroversial early Christian beliefs (c. 50-62 AD), proving early belief in Jesus' deity

II. The Structural Breakdown of Philippians 2:5-11

- A. The Command (v. 5): Have the mindset of Christ
- B. Christ's Action (vv. 6-8): Humbly obeying as a servant
- C. God's Action (vv. 9-11): Highly exalting Christ and bestowing the name above every name

III. Exegesis of the Christ Hymn

- A. The Divine Identity and Mindset of Christ (v. 6)
 - 1. "In the form of God" (morphe theou)
 - a. Outward appearance reflecting inward reality (cf. John 1:14; Hebrews 1)
 - b. Affirmation of Christ's full deity
 - 2. The Greek participle nuance (concessive vs. causal)
 - a. Most English translations treat it as concessive: "although he was in the form of God..."
 - b. Contrast with Greco-Roman mythology where gods used their power for selfish advantage
 - 3. "Did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped" (harpagmos)
 - a. Rare Greek term occurring only here in the New Testament
 - b. Interpretations: "something to be grasped," "something to be exploited for personal benefit," "something to cling to"
 - c. Christ refused to exploit His divine status for selfish gain
- B. The Emptying and Incarnation (v. 7)
 - 1. "Emptied himself" / "made himself nothing" (kenosis)
 - a. Interpretive debate: does not mean giving up divine attributes
 - b. Paradox: Christ emptied Himself by taking something on (the form of a servant)
 - 2. "Taking the form of a servant" (doulos)
 - a. Servant/slave terminology
 - b. Alludes to the "Suffering Servant" of Isaiah 52:13-53:12
 - 3. "Born in the likeness of men... found in human form" (vv. 7-8)
 - a. Possible allusion to Genesis 1:26-28 (creation in God's image and likeness)
 - b. Highlights full humanity and the historical reality of the Incarnation
- C. The Humility and Obedience to Death (v. 8)
 - 1. Humbled Himself by becoming obedient to death
 - 2. "Even death on a cross"
 - a. In the ancient world, the cross was a horrific execution tool, not a decorative symbol
 - b. Crucifixion was too brutal and shameful to be spoken of in polite society
 - c. Physical suffering of the cross: slow suffocation, intense agony
 - d. Spiritual/theological suffering: bearing the punishment for human sins

D. The Exaltation of Christ (vv. 9-11)

1. Shift to what God did: "Therefore God has highly exalted him"
 - a. "Highly exalted" echoes Isaiah 52:13 regarding the Suffering Servant
 - b. Status transition: a "checkmark" pattern rather than a simple "V" (final status is higher than the initial state, recognized as Lord)
2. "Bestowed on him the name that is above every name" (v. 9)
 - a. The name represents the ultimate authority (Yahweh, the divine covenant name)
 - b. Biblical-theological theme of the "name":
 - i. Genesis 11 (Babel): humanity trying to make a name for itself and being scattered
 - ii. Genesis 12: God's covenant to make Abraham's name great
 - iii. 2 Samuel 7: Covenant with David regarding a great name
 - iv. Galatians 3: Jesus as the promised descendant of Abraham
 - v. Pentecost and Revelation 7: Nations regathered and united around the name of Jesus
3. Universal submission and confession (vv. 10-11)
 - a. "Every knee should bow... and every tongue confess"
 - b. Citation from Isaiah 45:22-23 (where Yahweh declares all will bow to Him alone)
 - c. Theological implication: if what is true of Yahweh is applied to Christ, Christ is Yahweh in the flesh
 - d. Universal scope: "in heaven and on earth and under the earth" (total creation)
 - e. Acknowledgment will be either joyful (by believers) or out of terror/judgment (by His enemies)
 - f. Goal: "to the glory of God the Father"

IV. Summary and Practical Application

- A. The Big Idea:** "Christ made himself low so that God would lift him high"
 1. Verses 5-8: Christ made Himself low
 2. Verses 9-11: God lifted Him high
- B. Personal Application**
 1. Mind / Understanding: Recognize that Jesus used His divine power and privilege to serve, contrasting with contemporary and ancient views of leadership
 2. Desire / Longing: Recapture an eager anticipation for Christ's physical return, resisting complacency brought on by earthly comfort
 3. Action / Deeds: Identify and perform one specific act of self-sacrificial service (sacrificing time, energy, or resources) for someone else