

Philippians: Rejoice in the Gospel of Jesus Christ - Study Guide

Christ the Exemplar - Philippians 2:5-11

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Abstract:

In this lecture, Dr. Matthew S. Harmon examines **Philippians 2:5-11**, a passage often called the **Christ hymn**, which portrays Jesus as the ultimate **exemplar of humility**. The text highlights how Christ, despite being **equal with God**, chose to surrender His status by adopting **human form** and submitting to **death on a cross**. Harmon explains that this **act of service** led to Christ's **divine exaltation**, where He received the highest name so that every creature would eventually acknowledge His **sovereign lordship**. The discussion connects these themes to **Old Testament prophecies** in Isaiah and Genesis to affirm that the early church recognized Jesus' **divine identity**. Ultimately, the source encourages believers to let this **theology drive their actions**, motivating them toward **self-sacrificial service** and a deep longing for **Christ's return**. This study emphasizes that our **union with Christ** empowers us to reflect His mindset in our daily lives.

Briefing Document:

Briefing: Christ the Exemplar (Philippians 2:5-11)

Executive Summary

This briefing analyzes Dr. Matthew S. Harmon's examination of Philippians 2:5-11, a passage frequently referred to as the "Christ Hymn." The text serves as the ultimate archetype for the Christian life, moving beyond mere imitation to spiritual empowerment through union with Christ.

The core narrative follows a "checkmark" pattern: Christ, possessing the nature of God, refused to exploit his divine status for selfish gain. Instead, he "emptied" himself by taking on human form and the status of a servant, culminating in his death on a cross. Consequently, God the Father highly exalted him, bestowing a name above all names and ensuring universal recognition of his Lordship. This transition from extreme humiliation to supreme exaltation provides the theological foundation for Christian humility, service, and the expectation of Christ's return.

1. Literary and Historical Context

The Nature of the "Christ Hymn"

Philippians 2:5-11 is characterized as "elevated prose"—a heightened form of description that sits between standard prose and formal poetry. While often called a "hymn," there is no direct evidence it was a song; however, it functions as a definitive statement of early Christian belief.

- **Origins:** Scholars debate whether Paul authored the hymn or borrowed it. Regardless of its origin, Paul's inclusion of it indicates these were accepted, non-controversial truths among early Christians.
- **Early Dating:** Because Paul wrote Philippians around 60–62 AD, and likely used an existing hymn, this provides evidence that the deity of Christ was a foundational belief within the first few decades of the church, countering theories that it was a late-first-century development.

Connection to Previous Context

This passage is inextricably linked to Philippians 2:1-4. While the earlier verses describe joy rooted in a shared life produced by the Gospel, verses 5-11 provide the "mindset" (Greek: *phroneō*) necessary to achieve that unity.

2. The Humiliation of Christ (Verses 6-8)

The first movement of the passage details Christ's descent from divine status to the lowliest human death.

The Divine Status

- **"Form of God" (*morphē theou*):** This refers to the visible outward appearance that matches an inward reality. To be in the "form of God" is to be, in fact, God.
- **The Rejection of Exploitation:** Paul argues that Christ did not consider equality with God a "thing to be grasped" (*harpagmos*). In contrast to Greek and Roman gods—who used power for selfish agendas—Christ refused to exploit his status for individual benefit.

The Act of "Emptying" (*Kenosis*)

Theologically, Christ "emptied himself" not by losing divine attributes, but by "taking something on."

Action	Description
Taking the Form of a Servant	Christ assumed the status of a <i>doulos</i> (slave/servant), echoing the "Suffering Servant" of Isaiah 53.
Born in Human Likeness	This stresses the reality of the incarnation; Christ was fully human.
Found in Human Form	Christ's outward appearance and physical presence were undeniably man.

The Ultimate Obedience

Christ's humility reached its nadir in "death on a cross."

- **Social Context:** In the ancient world, the cross was a symbol of brutal execution and social shame, not jewelry. It was a topic forbidden in polite conversation.
- **Significance:** Christ's obedience was so complete that he accepted the most gruesome death possible, which included taking the punishment for sin.

3. The Exaltation of Christ (Verses 9-11)

The second movement of the passage describes God the Father's response to Christ's obedience.

The Checkmark Pattern

Unlike a "V" pattern where one returns to the starting point, this is a "checkmark." Christ's exaltation results in a status higher than his initial state in terms of universal recognition.

The Name Above All Names

God bestowed upon Christ the "name above every name."

- **Theological Math:** Paul applies language to Jesus that Isaiah 45:22-23 applies exclusively to Yahweh. By stating that "every knee should bow" to Jesus, Paul identifies Jesus as Yahweh in the flesh.
- **The Great Name:** This fulfills the biblical-theological thread starting from the Tower of Babel (where men tried to make their own name great) and the promise to Abraham (where God promised to make his name great).

Universal Recognition

The totality of creation—those in heaven, on earth, and under the earth—will acknowledge Christ's reign.

- **The People of God:** Will bow the knee in joyful celebration.
- **The Enemies of God:** Will bow the knee in terror and fear as judgment is executed.

4. Old Testament Foundations

The Christ Hymn is the fruit of deep reflection on the Old Testament, particularly the works of Isaiah and the Book of Genesis.

OT Reference Parallel in Philippians 2:5-11

Isaiah 52:13; The "Suffering Servant" who is "highly exalted."
53

Isaiah 45:22- The declaration that every knee will bow and tongue confess to God alone.
23

Genesis 1:26- The "likeness" of man (Christ as the successful Adam).
28

Genesis 11-12 The contrast between the prideful name-seeking of Babel and the God-given name of the descendant of Abraham.

5. Practical Application

The purpose of this "rich theology" is not merely intellectual curiosity but the transformation of the believer's life.

- **The Use of Power:** Believers are called to use their privileges and power to serve others, directly contradicting the worldly expectation of using power for self-advancement.
- **Gospel Motivation:** The reality that every person will one day bow before Christ—either in joy or terror—should motivate the sharing of the Gospel.
- **Longing for the Return:** There is a call to recapture the "anticipation and eagerness" for Christ's return, which is often diminished by earthly comfort.
- **Self-Sacrificial Service:** Believers are encouraged to identify specific acts of dying to self, such as sacrificing time or resources to serve others, thereby demonstrating the reality of Christ to the world.

Study Guide:

Study Guide: Christ the Exemplar (Philippians 2:5-11)

This study guide examines the "Christ Hymn" found in Philippians 2:5-11, based on the analysis by Dr. Matthew S. Harmon. The session explores the theological depth of Christ's humiliation and subsequent exaltation, framing it as the ultimate pattern for Christian living.

Overview of the Literary Context

Philippians 2:5-11 is inextricably linked to the preceding verses (2:1-4). While often treated separately for deep study, these sections form a single literary unit. Verses 1-4 establish the need for a shared life produced by the gospel, while verses 5-11 provide the theological foundation and the ultimate example—the **Exemplar**—to motivate and empower such a life.

Key Theological Themes

1. Empowerment through Union

The command in verse 5, "Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus," is not a call to mere imitation. It is a call to **empowerment**. This mindset is only possible because of a believer's union with Christ. It is an invitation to live out a reality that already belongs to the believer through their relationship with Jesus.

2. The Nature of Christ's Divinity

The passage uses specific terminology to describe Christ's status:

- **Form of God (*morphe*):** This refers to the visible outward appearance of an inward reality. It signifies that Jesus was, in fact, God.
- **Equality with God:** Paul equates being in the "form of God" with being "equal with God."
- **The Concessive View:** Dr. Harmon argues for a concessive understanding of verse 6: *Although* Jesus was in the form of God, he did not use that status for selfish gain. This stands in contrast to Greek and Roman gods, who typically used their power to advance selfish agendas.

3. The Kenosis (The Emptying)

Verse 7 states that Christ "emptied himself" (or "made himself nothing"). This is often misinterpreted as Christ giving up divine attributes. However, the text explains that Christ emptied himself by **taking something on**:

- **Taking the form of a servant (*doulos*):** Matching the inward reality of a slave/servant.

- **Likeness of men:** Stressing the reality of the incarnation and Jesus' full humanity.

4. Humiliation and the Cross

Christ's obedience reached its nadir in his death on a cross. In the ancient world, the cross was a symbol of extreme brutality and a forbidden topic in polite society. Paul emphasizes that Christ's obedience was so complete that he accepted the most shameful form of execution available, while simultaneously bearing the punishment for sin.

5. Exaltation: The "Checkmark" Trajectory

Rather than a simple "V" pattern (descending from heaven and returning to the same status), the passage suggests a "checkmark" pattern. Christ is exalted to a point of universal recognition that surpasses his previous state, receiving "the name that is above every name."

Concept	Description
The Name	Potentially refers to "Yahweh," the divine covenant name.
Universal Bowing	Every knee in heaven, on earth, and under the earth will acknowledge Christ's reign.
Universal Confession	Every tongue will confess Jesus Christ as Lord, either joyfully (believers) or in terror (enemies).

Short-Answer Quiz

Instructions: Answer the following questions in 2-3 sentences based on the source context.

1. What is the relationship between Philippians 2:1-4 and 2:5-11?
2. How does the concept of "empowerment" differ from "imitation" in the context of verse 5?
3. What does the term "form of God" signify regarding Christ's identity?
4. Explain the scholarly debate regarding the translation of *harpagmos* ("a thing to be grasped").
5. In what way is the "emptying" of Christ in verse 7 considered ironic?
6. Why was the mention of "death on a cross" particularly shocking to Paul's original audience?
7. How does the "checkmark" pattern describe Christ's exaltation differently than a "V" pattern?

8. What is the significance of the Old Testament connection between the Tower of Babel and Christ's "name"?
9. How does Paul use Isaiah 45:22-23 to argue for the deity of Christ?
10. What evidence does this passage provide against the theory that the deity of Christ was a "late" theological development?

Quiz Answer Key

1. **Relationship:** These sections are considered a single literary unit where verses 1-4 set the stage for the communal life of the gospel. Verses 5-11 then provide the "Christ Hymn" as the ultimate example and motivation for the behavior described in the first four verses.
2. **Empowerment vs. Imitation:** Imitation is simply trying to live up to a picture of Jesus, whereas empowerment means being enabled by Christ to live a certain way because of a union with him. Verse 5 stresses that this mindset already belongs to believers because they are "in Christ Jesus."
3. **Form of God:** The term "form" refers to the outward appearance that matches an inward reality. In this context, it indicates that Jesus was fully and truly God, rather than a separate or lesser being.
4. **Harpagmos Debate:** Because the word is rare, translators suggest it could mean "something to be grasped," "something to be exploited," or "robbery." The core idea is that Christ did not view his equality with God as something to be used for his own selfish advantage or individual benefit.
5. **Irony of Emptying:** Conventionally, emptying implies losing or giving something up. In this passage, however, Christ "empties" himself by taking something on—specifically the form of a servant and the likeness of human flesh.
6. **The Cross as Taboo:** In the ancient world, crucifixion was a gruesome execution method that was forbidden as a topic in polite conversation. For early Christians to celebrate the crucifixion of their leader would have seemed morbid and bizarre to typical Greeks and Romans.
7. **Checkmark Trajectory:** While a "V" pattern suggests Christ ended up exactly where he started, the "checkmark" indicates he was exalted to a higher point of recognition. He is now universally recognized as the "name above every name" in a way that manifests his sovereign reign to all creation.
8. **Babel and Abraham:** In Genesis 11, humanity tried to make a name for themselves through the Tower of Babel and failed, but God promised to make Abraham's name great. Paul

identifies Jesus as the descendant of Abraham who receives the ultimate name, regathering the nations scattered at Babel to worship one name.

9. **Isaiah 45 Connection:** Isaiah 45 states that every knee will bow to Yahweh alone as the true God. By applying this specific language to Jesus, Paul uses "theological math" to show that if what is only true of Yahweh is true of Christ, then Christ must be Yahweh.
10. **Early Christology:** Paul wrote Philippians around 60-62 AD, and he likely borrowed an even older hymn. Since he presents the deity of Christ as an accepted belief rather than a controversial argument, it proves that the early Church believed Jesus was God long before the end of the first century.

Essay Questions

1. **The Servant Motif:** Discuss how Paul utilizes the "Servant Songs" of Isaiah (specifically Isaiah 52-53) to construct his portrait of Christ in Philippians 2. How does this background deepen the reader's understanding of Christ's "emptying" and "exaltation"?
2. **Greco-Roman Contrast:** Compare the behavior of Christ as described in the "Christ Hymn" with the contemporary expectations of Greek and Roman gods and leaders. How did Paul's description of power and privilege challenge the social norms of the Philippians?
3. **The Mechanics of Kenosis:** Analyze the theological implications of verse 7. How does the text support the idea that Christ remained fully God while becoming fully man, and why is this distinction vital to Paul's argument?
4. **Universal Sovereignty:** Explore the significance of "every knee bowing" and "every tongue confessing." Distinguish between the experience of the believer and the enemy of Christ in this future event, and explain why this motivates Christian mission.
5. **Union with Christ as Motivation:** Explain the relationship between the theological heights of the Christ Hymn and the practical applications of self-sacrificial service. Why does Paul believe that understanding Christ's nature is the key to changing human behavior?

Glossary of Key Terms

- **Christ Hymn:** A common scholarly term for Philippians 2:5-11, referring to the elevated prose or poetry used to describe Christ's nature and work.
- **Doulos:** A Greek term meaning servant or slave; used to describe the form Christ took during the incarnation.
- **Exemplar:** The ultimate model or picture of a specific type of life; used by Paul to describe Christ as the pattern for the Philippians to follow.
- **Form (Morphe):** The outward expression of an underlying inward reality.

- **Harpagmos:** A rare Greek word translated as "a thing to be grasped" or "exploited"; it refers to Christ's refusal to use his divine status for selfish ends.
- **Incarnation:** The act of the eternal Son of God taking on human flesh and becoming the "likeness of men."
- **Kenosis:** Derived from the Greek word for "emptied," referring to Christ making himself nothing by taking on the nature of a servant.
- **Mindset (*Mind*):** The internal disposition or way of thinking that Paul commands believers to adopt, rooted in their union with Christ.
- **Yahweh:** The divine covenant name of God in the Old Testament; likely the "name above every name" bestowed upon Jesus in his exaltation.