

Dr. Matthew S. Harmon, Philippians, Session 7, Christ the Exemplar - Phil. 2:5-11, 6-Min. Video Overview

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In the first century Greco-Roman world, physical architecture was designed to project authority. Colossal stone columns and elevated temples constantly reminded the average citizen exactly where power resided and who held it. Into this strictly hierarchical society, the apostle Paul sent a letter to the Christians in Philippi.

Hidden inside the second chapter, verses 5 through 11, is a section of elevated prose known as the Christ Hymn. It contains some of the densest theological claims in the entire New Testament. We can break this text into three distinct structural pillars.

First, there is the command in verse 5, establishing a specific mindset. Then, verses 6 through 8 map the descent, what Christ did. Finally, verses 9 through 11 map the ascent, what God did in response.

The text is precise, but modern readers frequently misinterpret the exact spatial and linguistic mechanics Paul uses to describe these actions. The first major point of confusion surrounds the concept of the descent. Specifically, readers misunderstand what it actually means when the text says Christ emptied himself.

The second misunderstanding involves the ascent. People naturally assume Christ's exaltation was simply a return to his original starting position, missing the actual architectural shape of the trajectory. By closely analyzing Paul's specific Greek syntax, combined with the Old Testament references he embeds in the text, we can extract the exact architecture of early Christian Christology.

Understanding this structure reveals a radical concept. In Paul's framework, supreme divinity is established not through the selfish exploitation of power, but through a calculated profound self-degradation. The mechanics of this text hinge on a single grammatical choice in verse 6. Paul writes that Christ was in the form of God, using a Greek participle that is almost universally understood in a concessive sense, meaning it is translated as although or though.

This specific grammatical structure is a setup. It tells the reader that a subject possesses a certain status, prompting an expectation of how that subject will act. Then the sentence subverts that expectation entirely.

For the Philippians, the expectation was obvious. The Greek and Roman myths they grew up and the political reality they lived under taught them that anyone holding supreme power would maximize that status for their own selfish gain. Roman emperors modeled this perfectly.

They leveraged every ounce of their authority, extracting wealth and demanding submission to expand their own personal glory and political leverage. Against that cultural backdrop, Paul introduces a rare Greek term to describe Christ's mindset, *harpagmos*. It appears nowhere else in the New Testament, and it translates to a thing to be grasped.

Paul states that Christ, although existing in the form of God, did not consider equality with God as *harpagmos*. He did not view his divine status as a tool to seize, exploit, and use for selfish advantage. This places Christ in direct, immediate opposition to the Roman emperor.

Where Caesar used his elevated status to crush those below him, Christ actively refused to leverage his supreme equality for individual benefit. The very foundation of this hymn is an absolute inversion of the ancient world's definition of divine privilege. Power is not defined by what you can extract from others, but by what you are willing to relinquish.

This 2D coordinate graph maps the trajectory of verse 7, which states that Christ emptied himself, a concept known in theology as *kenosis*. We start at the highest possible y-axis position, equality with God. When people hear the word emptying, a common theological fallacy occurs.

They assume emptying means subtracting divine attributes, resulting in a Christ who becomes somehow less than God. The Greek syntax dictates the exact opposite. Paul provides two modifying clauses that explain how this happened.

Paradoxically, Christ empties himself by taking something on, not by giving something up. The text uses the Greek word *morphe*, translated as form. This does not mean a costume or an illusion.

It describes an outward physical reality that perfectly matches an inward essential identity. This gives us our first downward plot point. Christ emptied himself by taking on the form of a servant or a slave.

The text immediately expands on this, giving us our second downward point. He was born in the likeness of men and found in human form. This represents the full, uncompromised reality of the incarnation.

Christ remained fully God while adding the complete experience of humanity to his nature. *Kenosis* is a descent achieved purely by addition. The true divine nature is uniquely capable of integrating supreme cosmic authority with ultimate human submission.

Dropping to the absolute floor of our graph, verse 8 maps the final destination of this descent. Christ humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Today, the cross is a decorative symbol worn as jewelry.

In antiquity, it was a symbol of state-sponsored execution, considered so gruesome that polite Roman society actively avoided mentioning it in casual conversation. The physical brutality was meticulously engineered. Victims suffocated slowly over hours or days, pinned to rough wood by iron spikes driven through bone and tissue.

For early Christians, to publicly celebrate this method of execution as the climax of God's earthly life seemed absurd to the average Roman citizen. Christ's obedience required the

willing embrace of ultimate social, physical, and cosmic degradation. On the cross, he was bearing the actual weight of the cosmic punishment for human sin.

This descent represents the extreme limit of humility, the creator of the universe submitting to the most shameful and painful end devised by his own creation. At verse 9, the text pivots sharply. The active verbs shift.

Christ stops acting, and God acts upon him. Therefore, God has highly exalted him. The trajectory is not a simple V-shape returning to the status quo.

The exaltation bypasses the original height, creating an asymmetrical checkmark. Christ is elevated to a recognized position he did not hold prior. God bestows on him the name above every name.

This focus on a name connects to a distinct thread in the Old Testament. In the book of Genesis, humanity gathered at the Tower of Babel, motivated by a specific desire, to build a tower to the heavens and make a great name for themselves. God scattered them for their hubris.

But in the very next chapter, he made a covenant with Abraham, declaring, I will make your name great. God establishes that he alone elevates names. Humanity cannot seize it for themselves.

The New Testament identifies Jesus as the promised descendant of Abraham. At Pentecost, rather than being scattered by disobedience, people from different nations are regathered by the Spirit under the single identity of Jesus Christ. The exaltation of Christ acts as the cosmic resolution to humanity's original pride.

By giving up his status, Christ is installed as a universal king, gathering together the fractured humanity that human ambition originally destroyed. Paul concludes the hymn by describing the ultimate result of this exaltation. At the name of Jesus, every knee should bow, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

This split-screen comparison shows exactly where Paul sourced this phrasing. It is a direct quotation of the prophet Isaiah, chapter 45, verses 22 and 23. In the original context of Isaiah 45, Yahweh is speaking.

He declares that he alone is the true God, and therefore, to him alone, every knee will bow, and every tongue will swear allegiance. Paul executes a precise piece of theological math here. He takes an action and a status that the Old Testament reserves exclusively for Yahweh, and he applies it directly to Jesus.

He invites the reader to draw the inevitable conclusion: Christ is Yahweh in the flesh. Paul wrote the letter to the Philippians in the early 60s AD. He presents these claims as accepted facts, expecting no pushback or confusion from his audience.

This thoroughly refutes the claim of critical scholars, who argue that Christ's divinity was a late-century invention, patched together decades after the crucifixion. The absolute highest view of Christ's divinity was hard-coded into the earliest Christian communities. This theology serves a deeper purpose than satisfying academic interest.

The entire hymn acts as the structural foundation for the command back in verse 5: have this mind among yourselves. The mechanics of Christ's ultimate descent and supreme exaltation provide a demanding blueprint. Believers are instructed to view their own privileges exactly as Christ viewed his, not as tools for selfish exploitation, but as resources to be emptied out in the sacrificial service of others.