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Week 5 Scripture Guide | Philippians 2:1-11

Biblical Context

For a brief recap of the previous section, in Phil 1:12-30, Paul speaks about how the message of Christ moves in spite of opposition. He states that his imprisonment has actually advanced the Gospel (1:12) and that even preaching Christ out of envy and rivalry is good and advances the Kingdom (1:18). Finally, he even says that not even death is a hindrance to him, as the famous verse states, “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain” (Phil 1:21). Paul uses these scenarios to illustrate to the Philippians that suffering accompanies following Jesus.

To expound on how to live a life worthy of the gospel and this upside down kingdom advancement, Paul begins in chapter 2 by asking the Philippians to be “united with Christ” (2:1). Paul pleads for the Philippians to be unified with Christ by taking his love and spirit and being unified with each other, all sharing in the same love and mercy Christ has shown them. Love (agape), common sharing (koinonia), affection (splanchnon), and compassion (oiktirmos) are the virtues that Paul lays out that come from Christ (2:1) for the believer. Paul asks the church to make his joy complete (pleroo) by being unified with exemplifying these traits.

To this point, unity is the central idea that Paul is writing about in this passage. Unity is the “sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved - and that by God” (Phil 1:28). Unity is an idea the Philippians would know all too well, with their city being the battle ground of a pivotal battle after the assassination of Julius Caesar, where Mark Antony and Octavian (later Caesar Augustus) would defeat the forces led by Brutus and Cassius to secure the divided empire.¹ The idea that a new “kingdom” needing unity would not fall on deaf ears with the battle scars of such a pivotal battle of a divided empire being right outside their window.

He also has to combat the Hellenism of their time by imploring them to “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or or vain conceit (2:3).” Hellenism placed the metaphorical center of the universe upon the individual and created a creed of Greco-Roman people who made it their goal in life to climb the ladder of success. To show humility and put others above yourself was not the way the world worked at the time. The Philippians would also have a personal context for this idea as well, from the writer himself. Paul in one of his missionary journeys would stop and convert two people to the faith. The founders of the church at Phillippi were a Gentile jailer and a woman named Lydia (Acts 16:11-40). These were not the figureheads the ancient world would have wanted. This movement in the world does not share the same views of hierarchy and prestige as the sinful world. Humility between all people groups must be preserved. In order for the body of Christ to have healthy, light-giving relationships, there must be unity, love, and humility. If these things are missing, then the church will not be able to advance through adversary and persecution.

¹ Grant, Michael. “President and Vice-Chancellor, Queen's University of Belfast, Northern Ireland.” *Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Augustus-Roman-emperor/Personality-and-achievement>. Accessed 24 4 2021.

In order to further explain how to have correct, God-fearing relationships, Paul quotes a poem which was possibly sung as an early church hymn.² This section at least, seems to be a summary of who Christ was and what his life, death, and ascension on earth with parallels to a passage of the Old Testament like Isaiah 53, detailing the suffering servant of Israel now shown through Jesus. This prophet intends to give hope to a despondent and persecuted nation in captivity, which is very relatable to the church. The hymn begins with an ode to Christ's equality with God (2:6) before his descent to humanity (2:7) and lastly with his descent to the grave (2:8). Within this section, Paul uses Christ's humble descent from divine to worldly to explain to the Philippians how they should view themselves and others. There is no more patrician and plebeian, or more Jew and Gentile, just Christ (similar to Col 3:11). His humility is put on display again, with His obedience to the Father, submitting as far as to be put to death.

The hymn then changes from the death of Christ to his ascension, exultation, and the consummation of the heavenly kingdom that stretches over all of the Earth (2:9-11). To the Jews in the congregation, this is the culmination of God's promise to Abraham back in Genesis 12:1-3 where through Abraham, God will bless all peoples on the Earth. To the Gentiles, this hymn is a message of hope, that through Jesus every tongue (glossa) or language will acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord. Through Jesus, the Gentiles have been brought forward to the God of the Jews. Together, Jew and Gentile are brought in to be united with Christ and partake in the same Spirit and need to act in unity in order to live out the Gospel.

A major disagreement in the early church was concerning the humanity and divinity of Jesus.³ If he was fully God, then he must be without the corrupting impacts of sin, and if he was fully man, then he must be corrupted by sin. This poem gives insight on how the early church viewed the dynamic between God and Jesus. The word translated as "form" in verse 6 (morphe) indicates a relation with reality (devoid of the spiritual realm) that Christ was fully God. Yet later in the poem we see that Christ was "born in the likeness of man" and "found and human form." (2:6-7). Going into the context and meaning of the Greek, we can dissect this apparent discrepancy. In verse 7, Paul uses a phrase "in the likeness of men." The same word is used in Romans 8:3 ("in the likeness of sinful flesh") to denote that Christ came in the appearance of flesh, but is different from them, meaning that he lacks a sinful nature.⁴ The next phrase "found in human form" (2:8) agrees with the idea that Jesus appears in human form and does not assume the sinful aspects of humanity. Christ "made himself nothing" merely means that Jesus merged His Godhood into a human body, without compromising on either one (2:7). This poem communicates the idea that Jesus is both God and man, allowing Him to be a perfect mediator between holy God and man.

Connection and Application

The unity of the church and love shared between believers is easily the most important factor for the potential to spread Christ's love outside the church. As Christ said, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another (John 13:35). Without love, the whole church will not be able to live up to Jesus's teaching. Divisions should not be tolerated. In order to have this sacrificial love, humility is required, and we obtain our humility by looking towards our savior who showed humility through his life.

² Zondervan. *Life Application Study Bible*. Grand Rapids, Michigan, Tyndale House Publishers, 1997.

³ For more on the heresies surrounding Jesus during the early church, check out "Christological Controversies in the Early Church" by *The Gospel Coalition*. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/christological-controversies-in-the-early-church/>

⁴ "Philippians 2." *NET Bible*, Bible.org, <https://netbible.org/bible/Philippians+1#>. Accessed 1 May 2021.