

EXEGETICAL STUDY OF PHILIPPIANS 2:1-11  
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The purpose of this paper is to perform a thorough exegetical analysis of Philippians 2:1-11. In order to accomplish this purpose, the basic contents of the passage will be surveyed. In addition, any relevant issues from the background of the letter will be examined. This passage will be interpreted in its context so that its meaning will fit into the overall meaning of the letter. Most importantly, a verse by verse exposition of the text will be given which will trace the author's flow of thought. Finally, a summary of this studies findings will be given along with some points of personal application.

**Overview of Passage**

Philippians 2:1-11 consists of two main sections. The first section (vv. 1-4), contains a twofold exhortation to unity and humility. In verses 1-2, Paul issues his appeal to unity. This appeal is based upon four parallel clauses describing four shared experiences of the Philippians. In verses 3-4, Paul issues his appeal to humility. This appeal is to regard others more highly their own selves. In the second section (vv. 5-11), Paul illustrates the kind of humility to which he is exhorting the Philippians by the example of the condescension of Christ. In verses 5-8 a series of clauses are strung together which detail Christ's humble descent from the throne of God to the death of the cross. Verses 9-11, however, leave the example of the humiliation of Christ to glory in His new highly exalted position as the enthroned Lord over all creation. Verses 6-11 have

been recognized as an early Christian hymn dedicated to the person and work of Christ.

### **Background of Philippians**

The city of Philippi was formally established in 356 B.C. by Philip II of Macedon (O'Brien, 3). Philippi was established as a Roman colony after a famous battle was fought there involving Mark Antony, Octavian, Brutus and Cassius. Philippi was governed by Roman law with its citizens having all the rights of property ownership and the right to civil lawsuits. Everything about Philippi was modelled after its mother city, Rome (O'Brien, 4).

The church at Philippi was established by the Apostle Paul on his second missionary journey between A.D. 49 and 52 (O'Brien, 5). The story of the church's origin is found in Acts 16. The first convert was a woman named Lydia "whose heart the Lord opened" (Acts 16:14). More dramatically, the Philippian jailer and his household were converted after Paul and Silas were thrown into jail after being beaten publicly. When God miraculously opened the jail doors and released the prisoners' shackles, the jailer came in ready to take his own life. Paul shouted out that all the prisoners were present and the jailer then asked, "What must I do to be saved?" (Acts 16:30). To which Paul famously replied, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved and thy house" (Acts 16:31).

Interestingly, Paul wrote his letter to the Philippians from another incarcerated situation. There are three basic theories concerning where Paul was imprisoned at this time: Rome, Ephesus, or Caesarea. The traditional view regards Rome as the location from which Paul wrote to Philippi and this author believes the internal evidence is too strong to overturn this

traditional understanding.

### **Context of Philippians 2:1-11**

As in the interpretation of any passage of Scripture, the correct interpretation of Philippians 2:1-11 rests upon a careful examination of its context. Paul is writing the letter to the Philippians in order to thank them for their gift which they sent by Epaphroditus to him in prison. Although some scholars have argued that the current Epistle to the Philippians was originally several separate letters, based upon the sharp change of tone in 3:1, the οὖν “therefore, then, accordingly” in 2:1 clearly connects chapter two with chapter one. The immediate context of 2:1-11 is the exhortation to unity in 1:27-30. In this section, Paul urges the Philippians “to live as ‘citizens’ worthy of the gospel by standing firm in one Spirit against the opposition” (Fee, 175). Paul continues this theme into chapter two where he continues to exhort the Philippians to humility. The section which follows (2:12-18) is also connected to this text by the use of ὡστε “therefore” in verse twelve. Verses 12-18 are part of the larger parenthetic section of 1:27-2:18 (Hawthorne, 97). In this section, again, the Philippian believers are being exhorted to unity and mutual consideration.

### **Exposition of Philippians 2:1-11**

**2:1** As noted above this paragraph is linked with the previous one by a “therefore.” Therefore, Paul is continuing his appeal to unity begun in 1:27. This verse consists of four clauses, each beginning with εἴ τις or τι “if any.” Each of these four clauses refer to the shared experience of the Philippians and the Apostle. These common experiences are introduced to promote unity among these Christians. These four “if” clauses, though, should not be interpreted

as a mere possibility, but as an assumption of the truth of the statements (Melick, 93). All four of the clauses found in verse one introduce the command found in verse two.

**2:2** In verse two the second half of Paul's conditional statement is given. It is a command based upon the assumed common experiences of verse one. The command is to πληρώσατέ μου τὴν χαρὰν "fulfil my joy." The means of fulfilling this command is then given in four clauses which emphasize unity by synonymous expressions (O'Brien, 177). The way in which the Philippians can "fulfill" Paul's joy is by having τὸ αὐτὸ φρονῆτε "the same mind," τὴν αὐτὴν ἀγάπην "the same love," being σύμψυχοι "one-souled," and by being τὸ ἓν φρονοῦντες "intent on one purpose" (O'Brien, 177-179). The command is for unity.

**2:3** In verse three Paul introduces an appeal to humility as the means to promote unity. As Hawthorne notes, "Unity is impossible if each is out for himself, each is promoting his own cause, each is seeking his own advantage" (Hawthorne, 68). Therefore, Paul exhorts the Philippians to do μηδὲν κατ' ἐριθείαν μηδὲ κατὰ κευοδοξίαν "nothing according to selfishness nor according to conceit." Instead they are to τῇ ταπεινοφροσύνῃ ἀλλήλους ἠγούμενοι ὑπερέχοντας ἑαυτῶν "in humility consider each other surpassing yourselves." When everyone in the church values everyone else's needs and desires above his or her own needs and desires, the result will inevitably unity.

**2:4** In verse four Paul clarifies what he means by his command to "consider each other as surpassing yourselves." The participle σκοποῦντες "looking out for" is the way in which believers can esteem others as superior to them (Fee, 190). This verse contains no new command, merely a clarifying of the command of verse three.

**2:5** In verse five Paul offers an illustration of the kind of humility to which he is exhorting the Philippians by pointing them to the condescension of Christ. The mindset of Christ is the “mindset” φρονεῖτε which believers are exhorted to emulate. In the following verses Paul either composes or utilizes an already existent hymn to detail the humiliation of Christ.

**2:6** In verse six Paul describes how that although Christ preexisted in the μορφῇ θεοῦ “form of God,” He did not regard His position as a highly prized possession. In this verse the participle ὑπάρχων is used to indicate that although Christ was pre-existing in the form of God (ὁς ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ ὑπάρχων), He did not regard his equality with God to be “robbery” ἀρπαγμὸν. The difficulty of translating this word (the KJV incorrectly translates it as “robbery”) comes as a result of it only appearing once, in this passage, in the entire New Testament (BDAG, 133 and Kittel, Vol. I, 473). Vincent argues that, instead of “robbery”, ἀρπαγμὸν should be translated “a highly prized possession” (Vincent, Phil. 2:6). Christ, therefore, did not regard His equality with God as a “highly prized possession” to be held onto. Instead, “He counted *humanity* His prize, and so laid aside the conditions of His preexistent state, and became man” (Ibid.).

**2:7** In verse seven Paul describes the first of two successive actions of Christ in His humiliation. The first action is explained by the verb ἐκένωσεν “made himself nothing.” The verb ἐκένωσεν literally means “he emptied himself.” Some scholars have argued that this term means that Christ emptied Himself of His divine nature. However, New Testament Greek scholar A. T. Robertson argues, “That was impossible. He continued to be the Son of God” (Robertson, 444). Instead, Robertson argues “Christ gave up his environment of glory. . . . He took upon himself limitations of place (space) and of knowledge and of power” (Robertson, 444).

In fact, the text tells us exactly what Paul means by ἐκένωσεν. The text goes on to explain that Christ was μορφήν δούλου λαβών “taking the form of a servant” and was ἐν ὁμοιώματι ἀνθρώπων γενόμενος “becoming in likeness of a man.” Therefore, Christ’s “emptying” of Himself is simply His assumption of human flesh with all of its limitations without ceasing to be God.

**2:8** In verse eight Paul describes the second of two successive acts of Christ in His humiliation. Here we see His final step downward. He ἐταπείνωσεν ἑαυτὸν “humbled himself” to “death” θανάτου. But not just any death, even the “death of a cross” θανάτου δὲ σταυροῦ. The word ἐταπείνωσεν implies “voluntary humiliation” (Robertson, 445). Vincent argues that ἐταπείνωσεν “humbled” in verse eight defines ἐκένωσεν “emptied” in verse seven. This word shows “how the self-emptying manifests itself” (Vincent, Philippians 2:8). Similarly, Kittel states that “The ἑαυτὸν ἐκένωσεν of the incarnation becomes a concrete historical event in the ἐταπείνωσεν ἑαυτὸν” (Kittel, Vol. VIII, 18).

**2:9** In verse nine Paul describes the last step in Christ’s round trip journey from glory to glory, His exaltation by the Father. The verse begins with διὸ “therefore” which ties together verses 9-11 with verses 5-8. This simply means that Christ’s voluntary humiliation described in verses 6-8 is the basis for His high exaltation in verses 9-11. The word translated “exalted” ὑπερύψωσεν means to “raise someone to the loftiest height” (BDAG, 1034). Likewise the Father has given the Son τὸ ὄνομα τὸ ὑπὲρ πάντων ὀνομα “the name above every name.”

**2:10** In verse ten Paul explains the purpose of God in giving Christ “the name above every name.” This verse is connected to the preceding one by the subordinate conjunction of purpose

ἵνα “in order that.” God’s purpose is first that πᾶν γόνυ κάμψη “every knee will bow” to the Lord Jesus. This universal authority extends to those ἐπουρανίων καὶ ἐπιγείων καὶ καταχθονίων “in heaven and on earth and under the earth.” The verb κάμψη, like ἔξομολογήσεται in verse eleven, is in the subjunctive mood. Normally the subjunctive mood refers to potential action. However, this use of ἵνα with verbs in the subjunctive mood indicates not only intention, but also its sure accomplishment (Wallace, 473). Therefore, Paul is not merely arguing God’s desire that πᾶν γόνυ κάμψη i.e. “every knee should bow” and πᾶσα γλῶσσα ἔξομολογήσεται i.e. “every tongue should confess”, he is declaring the intention that God will most certainly carry out. “The fulfillment of this divine intention will take place at the parousia” (O’Brien, 239).

**2:11** In verse eleven Paul continues to explain the purpose of God in giving Christ “the name above every name” (v. 9). Not only will “every knee bow,” but as noted above, “every tongue will confess” πᾶσα γλῶσσα ἔξομολογήσεται “that Jesus Christ is Lord” ὅτι κύριος Ἰησοῦς Χριστός. The verb ἔξομολογήσεται has the idea here of “frank, open confession” (Vincent, Philippians 2:11). It means “to declare openly in acknowledgment” (BDAG, 351). Every tongue will one day confess openly that Jesus Christ is Lord and all the glory will go to the Father ( εἰς δόξαν θεοῦ πατρός ).

### **Summary and Application**

The purpose of this paper has been to perform a thorough exegetical analysis of Philippians 2:1-11. These eleven verses consist of two main sections. The first section (vv. 1-4), contains a twofold exhortation to unity and humility. In verses 1-2, Paul issues his appeal to

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The main application of this passage should be obvious at this point. Since Philippians 2:1-11 is part of a larger parenthetic section in which Paul is exhorting the Philippian believers to unity through humility. Paul's great desire is the same as any true man of God's: to see his followers walk in unity. The means to that unity is a humility that regards others as more valuable than one's self. Believers are urged to follow the example of Jesus who although He really held a valuable position, willingly relinquished that position in order to become man and die on the cross to purchase our salvation. Since none of us possess as lofty a position as did the pre-incarnate Christ, none of us will ever have to humble ourselves to the extreme which He did. Therefore, we should be all the more willing to humble ourselves in a way that is by far inferior to the humiliation which He experienced and which Paul holds forth as an example to us in this passage.



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