

A HYMN OF CHRIST—PART 1

Philippians 2:5–11

primary source: David J. MacLeod, "Imitating the Incarnation of Christ:
An Exposition of Philippians 2:5–8," *Bibliotheca Sacra* (July–September 2001): 308–30

INTRODUCTION

- this is the central passage on the hypostatic union in the New Testament:

Jesus Christ is undiminished deity and perfect humanity inseparably united in one person forever

- presents a lot of truth about the person and work of Christ: preexistence and deity of Christ, equality with the Father, incarnation, true humanity, death on the cross, exaltation, and ultimate triumph over evil
- written to correct divisiveness, selfishness, and arrogance in the church at Philippi (Phil 2:2–4)

EXHORTATION TO FOLLOW CHRIST'S EXAMPLE (VERSE 5)

- transition from Paul's exhortation to his illustration ("this" points back to verses 1–4)
- they can develop the attitude of verses 1–4 by following Jesus' example—"the road by which we attain true glory" (Calvin)

STANZA 1: THE PREEMINENT PLACE HE ENJOYED (VERSE 6)

- *his preexistence in heaven in eternity past (6a)*: "being" (KJV) or "existed" (NASB) denotes prior existence
- the humble, self-sacrificing, self-denying, self-giving behavior of Jesus on earth shows what he has always been like
- *his essential deity*: "form" (*morphe*) indicates the character or nature of something—here the essence or attributes of God
- *his preincarnate choice (6b–c)*: "did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped" (NASB) is a hard clause to interpret
- "form of God" refers to the essence or attributes of deity; "equality with God" refers to the glories or prerogatives of his deity
 - together these are the strongest expressions of the deity of Christ in the New Testament
- "grasped" (*harpagmos*) is a rare word: active sense is an act of aggression or robbery (Latin fathers, KJV), passive sense is a prize or treasure (Greek fathers, NASB)—he did not regard the rank and privileges of deity as something to hang on to greedily
 - translate "He did not regard His divine prerogatives as something to use for His own advantage" (MacLeod)

STANZA 2: THE LOWLY PLACE HE ACCEPTED (VERSE 7)

- *his incarnation*: "he emptied himself" (*kenoo*) not of the "form of God" (= ceased to be God) but of "equality with God" (= he emptied himself of the prerogatives of deity, i.e., he lived on earth without the advantages, rights, and privileges of deity)
 - *his humiliation*: introduced by three participles ("taking," "being made," and "being found")—he became a slave (a person without advantage, no rights and privileges of his own, completely at the service of another)
 - as a slave he was dependent (John 5:19, 30; 14:10), deprived (Matt 8:20), discredited (Matt 26:61; John 2:19; 7:12); degraded (Matt 27:30; John 19:3), and demeaned (Luke 7:44–45) (R. T. Kendall)
 - *his true human nature*: "being made" refers to his birth and contrasts sharply with "existed" in verse 6

STANZA 3: THE ABSOLUTE ABASEMENT HE ENDURED (VERSE 8)

- *his earthly life*: "taking" and "being made" refer to the incarnation itself; "being found" refers to his life after his incarnation
 - *his resolute obedience*: "he humbled himself" (demeaning sense) by being obedient—you have to humble yourself to be obedient (to give up your own desires and submit to another's)—the opposite of humbling yourself is giving orders
 - he died the "slave's punishment"—shamefully by crucifixion (Heb 12:2; cf. 1 Cor 1:23; Gal 5:11)—and endured the ultimate humiliation: public execution of a naked criminal in a prominent place (crossroads, theater, high ground, place of his crime)
 - this stanza closes the first half of the hymn and the hymn reaches its lowest point and its turning-point (*peripeteia*)
 - "these three stanzas lead, in one great sweep, from the highest height to the deepest depth, from the light of God to the darkness of death" (Lohmeyer)