

Let's keep our Bibles open right there at Philippians chapter 2. On December 23, 1783, General George Washington stood before the United States Congress and shocked the world. After leading the continental forces to victory over England, accumulating unparalleled power and prestige, many assumed Washington would rule over the new nation as king. But instead, Washington told Congress, "Having now finished the work assigned to me, I retire from the great theater of action... [and] take my leave of all the employments of public life." He stepped aside, willingly surrendering the army to the governing body that originally appointed him commander in chief, and returned to life as a private citizen. He refused to hold on to power, because he believed this was best for America, and people were astonished by this act of humility.

The American painter, John Trumbull found the news hard to comprehend. He wrote that Washington's actions were "inconceivable to people, who, far from giving up powers they possess, are willing [to do anything] to acquire more." Over in England, King George was stunned as well. When he heard that Washington was considering resigning his position, he said, "If he does that, he will be the greatest man in the world." Well Washington did it. And in 1797 he did it again, willingly stepping down from the role of President after serving two terms.¹ Two times, he humbled himself, leaving the army and then the presidency, resisting the temptation to cling to power for the good of his country. Now that, historically speaking, is astonishing, it is admirable, and it is worth remembering as a bright spot in our nation's past.

But, in our passage today, we read of something even more astonishing, even more admirable, and always worth remembering. In Philippians chapter 2, we read how the eternal Son of God laid down his rights, left the glories of heaven and humbled himself to the point of death, even death on a cross. No one has ever descended from a position so high to a position so low. And Jesus was not coerced or forced into this. As Philippians 2:8 say, *he humbled himself*. He came willingly. He died willingly. And he did this for you and for me. He did this—not only for one nation—but for people from every nation on the earth.

All of that is here in Philippians 2:5-11. And my plan is to look at verses 5-8 this morning and then verses 9-11 next week on Easter Sunday. In verses 9-11 we see Jesus exalted, but in the verses we're looking at today, we see Jesus humbled. As we prepare our hearts for what we remember on Good Friday, I want us to try and take in something of the magnitude of what Christ has done. How he descended from glory into humility into death, and what this means for us. Let's start with what Philippians 2 teaches us about...

1. The Glory of Christ

Look at verses 5-6: *Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God...* (Philippians 2:5-6).

As you can see, Paul is writing to help the Philippian believers grow in humility. Just before these verses, he writes, *"Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to*

¹ <https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/resignation-of-military-commission>

the interests of others.” And then he says, *“Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus.”* Notice those last three words, *“In Christ Jesus.”*

Paul is reminding these believers that when God saved them, he united them to his Son. Their old life in bondage to sin is over, their new life in Christ has begun, and now their responsibility, and their privilege, is to live accordingly. Living in union with Christ involves living like Christ in words, deeds, desires, even thoughts. And here, Paul is saying, think the way Jesus thinks! The NIV says, *“Have the same mindset as Christ Jesus.”* The CSB says, *“Adopt the same attitude as that of Christ Jesus.”* And what is Christ’s mindset? What is Christ’s attitude? It is one of humility.

But you can only understand the extent of Christ’s humility if you first understand Christ’s identity. So, Paul reminds us, *“He was in the form of God.”* What does that mean? The word Paul uses, which is translated “form,” typically refers to an outward appearance, something you can see with your eyes. And in one sense, no one can see God with their eyes. In 1 Timothy 6:16 we read that God *dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see.* This verse is speaking about God the Father, who is invisible, and whose all-consuming glory would obliterate finite and fallen human beings if we were to look upon him. That’s why, when Moses asks to see God’s glory, the Lord says, *“You cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live.”*

But at the same time, this does not stop God from revealing his glory in other ways. For example, after God tells Moses, *“You cannot see my face.”* He does allow Moses to get a glimpse of his glory as he passes by him on the mountain. Many of the prophets had glimpses of his glory too. Isaiah saw him as one seated upon a throne. Ezekiel saw him as one riding upon a chariot. Daniel saw him as one like a Son of Man. But when you turn to the New Testament, you see the final and ultimate revelation of God’s glory: God’s Son, Jesus Christ.

Colossians 1:15 says, *he is the image of the invisible God.* 2 Corinthians 4:6 says, *in his face we see the glory of God.* Philippians 2:6 says, *he was in the form of God.* Paul says *“he was in the form of God”* because in his mind he is stretching back before the creation of the world into ages past, and reminding us that for all eternity, Jesus was in the form of God, revealing the glory of God—because he was and he is and he always will be God!

In a message last year, I mentioned a 2022 survey in which professing Christians were asked to respond to the statement that “Jesus was a great teacher, but he was not God.” And 28% agreed. Friends, that is not Christianity! We do not believe Jesus was simply a great teacher, or a powerful miracle worker, or a mighty prophet. We believe what the Scriptures clearly reveal: That Jesus reveals the glory of God, because he is God. And the fact that Jesus has always possessed this divine status, with all the power and authority involved, makes his humble descent absolutely stunning. Consider next...

2. The Humility of Christ

Look at verse 5-6 again: *Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped* (Philippians 2:5-6).

What does that mean? He did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped. Well, someone could read that and think, “Oh, so Jesus isn’t God after all... and this verse is saying that he never tried to make himself equal with God.” But that’s not right. Just read the Gospels and you will read how Jesus clearly demonstrated his equality with God by doing things only God can do, like forgiving sins, and calling people to believe in him, and allowing his disciples to worship him.

Jesus is equal with God, and he has no problem showing people that he is equal with God. So again, what does this verse mean? Well, listen to the way a couple other English Bibles translate these words:

- The CSB says, “*he did not consider equality with God as something to be exploited.*”
- The NIV says, “*he did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage.*”

That captures it. Our God is a self-giving God, who overflows with love and generosity toward his creation, and especially toward his people. He is like a mighty king, who doesn’t stay shut up in his castle enjoying the luxury of his royalty by himself, but comes to his subjects—even the lowliest peasant—and invites them in to enjoy all that belongs to him. And so, D.A. Carson writes, “The eternal Son did not think of his status as God as something that gave him the opportunity to get and get and get. Instead, his very status as God meant he had nothing to prove, nothing to achieve. And precisely because he is one with God, one with this kind of God, he ‘made himself nothing’ and gave and gave and gave.”

Look at verse 7: *Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men* (Philippians 2:7).

As you can imagine that phrase “he emptied himself,” has been the source of endless scholarly debate. Is Paul saying that Jesus divested himself of his divinity when he came into this world, losing his divine status as he walked this earth, becoming only human and no longer God? And if not, what exactly did he empty? Something of his divine power? Certain divine attributes? And so on... ? Well, here’s a very simple principle for Bible reading: When you read something that confuses you, keep reading and see if the author clarifies things for you. In this case, that’s precisely what happens! Paul says, “he emptied himself,” and then he tells us how: “by taking!”

So, he’s not putting something off. He’s putting something on. As Augustine famously said, Christ “emptied Himself not by losing what He was, but by taking to Him what He was not.” He never lost his divinity, but he did take on humanity. And not just any humanity. He took on the form of a servant. And not just any servant. Jesus became the suffering servant described in Isaiah 53. The one who would pour out his soul unto death. And this is where Paul is taking us. He moves from the glory of Christ to the humility of Christ, and then to the ultimate expression of that humility:

3. The Death of Christ

Look at verse 8: *And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross* (Philippians 2:8).

This is where I want to spend the rest of our time. Many of us are very familiar with the death of Christ, but we must always guard against becoming so familiar with the cross that it no longer moves us. After all, this is the core of our faith, the reason for our hope, and the all-surpassing display of God's love. And as we approach Good Friday, I want us to consider afresh the horror Jesus faced at the cross, the curse Jesus bore upon the cross, and the reason Jesus went to the cross. Let's start with...

A. The horror

It's hard to overstate the horror of crucifixion. We put crosses on our steeples, we wear them around our necks, and for good reason. But before Christ, and all that his cross has come to mean, decorating a building with a cross, or wearing jewelry in the shape of a cross, would have been unthinkable. Crucifixion was likely invented by barbarians in the far corners of the ancient world and adopted by the Greeks and the Romans.

John Stott writes, "It is probably the most cruel method of execution ever practiced, for it deliberately delayed death until maximum torture had been inflicted. The victim could suffer for days before dying."² Because of its cruelty, Roman citizens were exempt from crucifixion, aside from the most extreme cases of treason. The Roman politician Cicero once said, "To bind a Roman citizen is a crime, to flog him is an abomination, to kill him is almost an act of murder: to crucify him is—What? There is no fitting word that can possibly describe so horrible a deed." Cicero also said, "The very word 'cross' should be far removed not only from the person of a Roman citizen, but from his thoughts, his eyes and his ears... the mere mention of [a cross]... is unworthy of a Roman citizen."

In the 1st century, the cross was the horrific punishment reserved for anarchists, rebels, and slaves, the lowest of the low. But this is precisely where Jesus went. He became a servant—a word that can also be translated slave—and he was crucified. So, Matthew Harmon writes that these verses in Philippians 2 "do not lift up our eyes to the heavens to see the wonders of creation; they do not even lift up our hearts by showing us wonderful miracles of healing and deliverance; they take us down, down, down to the deepest, darkest hellhole in human history to see the horrific torture, unspeakable abuse, and bloody execution of a *slave* on a *cross*." And added to this horror—which every Roman would have recognized—is the curse, which every Israelite would have recognized.

B. The curse

Back in the book of Deuteronomy—one of the key books of Jewish law—we read this in chapter 21, verses 22-23: *And if a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his body shall not remain all night on the tree,*

² Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, 29.

but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is cursed by God (Deuteronomy 21:22-23).

To be crucified on a cross of wood is to be hanged on a tree. Therefore, to be crucified is to be cursed—condemned—by God, which is the greatest punishment of all. Elsewhere, the Bible describes the curse of God like a cup. A cup full of his wrath, which his enemies will one day drink down to the very bottom.

One of the kids' books in our house is called *The Prince's Poisoned Cup*. It tells the story of a great king, who created people to live in his presence and enjoy his good gifts. Tragically, the people rebelled, hardened their hearts against the king, and fled from his presence. The king could have left them in their rebellion. Instead, he sent his son, the prince, on a mission. The prince was to travel to the city where the people lived and find a fountain in the center of the city, a fountain full of poison. But this was not just any poison, it was poison made up of the king's anger toward the people who had rebelled against him.

The prince's mission was to take a cup, fill it to the brim with the poison, and drink the whole thing. Which he did. And it burned him, and tormented him, until finally, it killed him. When Jesus prayed in Gethsemane, the night before he died, do you remember what he said? *My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will* (Matthew 26:39). On the cross, Jesus drank the cup of God's wrath down to the bottom. On the cross, he was not merely killed, he was cursed. Why? Well, here's...

C. The reason

In Galatians 3:13, Paul says, *Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree"* (Galatians 3:13).

This is why he humbled himself to the point of death, even death on a cross, with its horror and its curse. For us! To redeem us! Because he loved us, he gave himself for us! We had rebelled against God, hardened our hearts against him, and fled from his presence. But again, it is in the very nature of our God to give, and to give, and to give. He is slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and mercy. And so, the Father said to the Son, "Go, and get them back."

And the Son knowing full well what it would cost, though he was in the form of God, the radiance of God's glory, he did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, something to be used only for his own advantage, exploited for his exclusive gain. But instead, he emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

On the cross he endured the physical horrors and the spiritual curse that sinners deserve. Though he had no sin of his own, he stood in our place and drank that bitter cup. Which means, there is nothing left for us. We are redeemed, free, forever. This is the power of the Cross: Christ became sin for us! He took the blame. He bore the wrath. And we stand forgiven at the cross.

Conclusion

Now, in light of all this, in these last moments, let me offer two applications. And they come right out of the beginning of verse 5, which says, *Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus* (Philippians 2:5).

First, believe in Christ Jesus. John Calvin once said, "We must understand that as long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value to us."³ Unbelief keeps Christ at a distance, it rejects his deliverance, and it ends in destruction. If you refuse to believe in Jesus, that bitter cup, that awful curse, still awaits you.

But if you will put your faith in him, you will find grace in him, redemption in him, and everlasting life in him! After all... spoiler alert for next Sunday... Jesus didn't stay dead. He conquered sin on the cross and he conquered death in his resurrection, and he leads all his people into the same victory. So, believe in Christ Jesus. Today. Do not delay. Go to him right now in prayer. Thank him for what he has done and ask him to deliver you. Believe in Jesus.

And second application: be done with pride. We've seen the humility of Christ. Philippians 2:5 is telling us to adopt the same attitude, to have the same mindset. To look upon the cross and see just how much it cost Christ to save us, to see how low he stooped to serve us; to realize all he gave for us, and to say...

*When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the Prince of glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride.*

That means pouring contempt on all our self-righteous pride, because when we look at the cross, we remember we never could have saved ourselves. It took the death of the Son of God to save us! There's no room for boasting, only for gratitude. And this means pouring contempt on all our self-serving pride. Because when we look at the cross, we remember how much Jesus endured to serve us. So, why would we ever hold back from serving others? What would we hold back? May the humble, sacrificial service of Jesus be our example this week as we serve one another in this church, in our homes, in our schools, in our workplaces, and wherever we go.

³ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:537.