

# DeeperStudy Newsletter

Issue 14

The Bible Study e-Zine



Issue 14 is a study of Philippians 2:5-11, a passage fundamental to understanding what Jesus Christ has done in our behalf. Once again, please read all of the footnotes of the main article if you want some meat **(be sure to turn off temporarily any pop-up blocker you might have running)**. I hope you spend some of your precious holiday time "going deeper" in the Word of God.

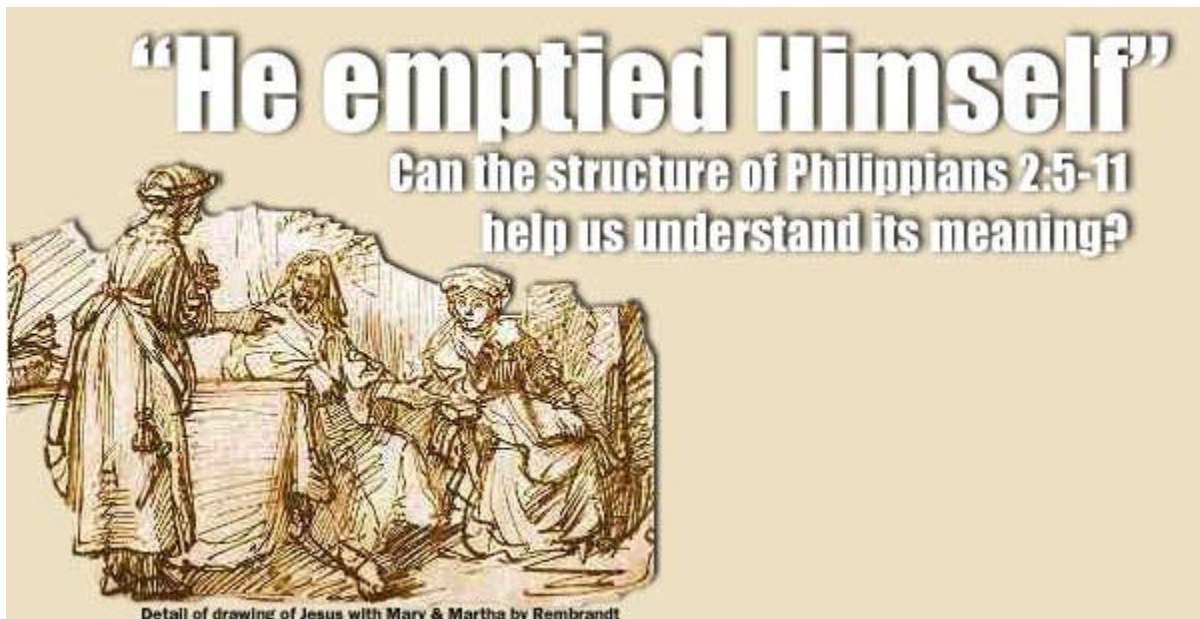


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## Thirsting for God: "He emptied Himself"



Anyone who proposes to "go deeper" in their thinking about the person and work of Jesus Christ must confront what the Holy Scriptures say about His deity. Was He a great religious teacher, perhaps even the greatest human being that has ever lived? Or is He more: an eternal Person who assumed human flesh to live among us and redeem us

from sin and its consequences?

A number of passages make the biblical teaching of Christ's deity and pre-existence unambiguously clear, including John 1:1-18 and 17:3-5; 2 Corinthians 9:9; Colossians 1:15-20; and Hebrews 1:2-4, among others. Perhaps the most significant of these passages is Philippians 2:5-11. This passage will be the focus of this study.

The appeal Paul makes at the beginning of Philippians 2 suggests that though the Philippians are dear to Paul and receive his praise for their loving support of him, he is deeply concerned about squabbles within the congregation. Paul likely selects the grounds of his appeal in verse 1 (encouragement of union with Christ, the comfort of His love, the sharing in the Spirit, tenderness and compassion) to be exact antidotes to the problems they are experiencing with one another.<sup>1</sup> If so, then among the Philippian Christians he is confronting disunity, disturbing discord, contentiousness, harshness, and hardened hearts. From Philippians 4:2-3, we know that at least Euodia and Syntyche are having difficulties getting along, and not enough is being done to help them resolve the conflict. It is likely that others are also wrangling.<sup>2</sup>

Paul points out that the Philippians need a change of attitude; specifically, they need to strive for unity of mind and love, repudiating selfish ambition and conceit, and developing a humble attitude that involves valuing others above self and seeking their needs over one's own (Phil. 2:2-4). Then Paul points to Christ as the perfect model for this attitude. Since they all are members of His body and spiritually united to Christ Himself, it is entirely fitting that the attitude of the Head should direct the actions of the individual body parts.<sup>3</sup>

Then follows the well-known Carmen Christi, the hymn to Christ (Philippians 2:6-11). The creedal nature of this passage, together with its rhythmic cadence, has led some scholars to believe that Paul incorporated a preexisting hymn composed and sung among Christians.<sup>4</sup> It is also possible that Paul himself composed this poem, either earlier or on the occasion of the writing of Philippians. Even if he used a pre-existing hymn, he made it his own by how he applied it to the Philippian problem.

A careful analysis of the hymn assists greatly in ferreting out its meaning, because of mutually defining synonymous and antonymous parallels:

	<b>A</b> Pre-Incarnate State 2:5-7a	<b>B</b> Incarnate State 2:7b-8	<b>C</b> Glorified State 2:9-11
<b>1</b>	In form of God existing	in likeness as a man becoming	God highly exalted him
<b>2</b>	Did not regard <i>harpagmos</i> the equality with God	and in appearance as a man being found	Gave him the name above every name
<b>3</b>	Emptied himself	He humbled himself, becoming obedient	(God intends what is due only to God) obeisance of every

		unto death	knee, confession of every tongue
4	form of servant having taken	death on a cross	to the Father's glory

We can go further in analyzing the grammatical and logical relationships between lines and columns:

	<b>A</b> Pre-Incarnate 2:5-7a	<b>B</b> Incarnate 2:7b-8	<b>C</b> Glorified 2:9-11
1	"form of God"	antonym of 1-A	synonym of 1-A
2	synonym or antonym of 1-A?	synonym of 1-B	synonym of 1-C?
3	Emptied of 1-A	synonym of 3-A	synonym or antonym of 3-A?
4	result	result	result

If this analysis is going in the right direction, it can suggest answers for several of the crucial questions involving this passage. [\[TOP\]](#)

1) Was the pre-existent Christ really deity? The parallelism between columns A and B would indicate that the answer is yes. 1-A's "form of God" corresponds to 4-A's "form of a servant." We can ask of 4-A, was the incarnate Christ a servant or not? The answer that He was seems obvious. Then the parallel expression "form of God" must mean that he was God.

2) Was He, in His pre-incarnate state, equal with God? In columns B and C, the second line is synonymous with the first. This creates a presumption that the second line of column A is likewise synonymous with its first line: He was existing as God, and He did not consider the equality with God a *harpagmos*. What does *harpagmos* mean? The participial use of the articular infinitive would suggest that this hapax legomenon<sup>5</sup> refers to something He already possessed rather than something just out of reach.<sup>6</sup>

3) Did He really become a human being, or only appear to be human? The antonymous parallelism between columns A and B, lines 1 and 2 (in other words, they are opposites), would indicate that if "form of God" means God, then "likeness of men" means human (the death described in B, lines 3 and 4, confirms this). "God" and "human" are the only two categories Paul contemplates.<sup>7</sup>

The question remains whether 3-C (commanded obeisance and confession) should be understood as antonymous or synonymous with 3-A (emptied). 3-B's synonymity (humbled) with 3-A would lead us to expect the synonymity of 3-C, which on the surface

seems antonymous. But this is only on the surface, for 3-C does not describe the Son's action, but the Father's. The Father desires obeisance and acclaim for the Son, but the Son does not demand this for Himself. And, as line 4-C makes clear, the result of this obeisance is ultimately the glorifying of the Father—an indication of the ongoing humble, submission of the Son. Paul states this more explicitly in 1 Corinthians 15:28, in which he anticipates the submission of the Son to the Father in eternity.

The most perplexing issue of the passage concerns what was involved when "He emptied Himself." If we take the term for "emptied" (*ekenôsen*) literally, then during the emptying process He must have surrendered certain things that He possessed before the emptying took place. Did He completely abdicate His divine nature? That would make nonsense of the passage and contradict other passages that affirm His deity during his incarnate state, as found in Paul and elsewhere in the New Testament.

One theory (Forsyth and Mackintosh) is that he gave up the relative attributes of deity (e.g., omniscience, omnipotence, and omnipresence), while holding on to the essential attributes (love, holiness, etc.).<sup>8</sup> This may be true, as least so far as omnipresence is concerned,<sup>9</sup> but it seems to be alien to the context of Philippians. How could the divestiture of His omnipresence, for example, provide a model for the quarrelling Philippians?

Other suggestions of what was emptied go fairly far afield: becoming subject to demonic powers (no confirmation in the text), pouring out his soul unto death (unjustifiably anticipates the later reference to His death), and pouring out His lordship to take on servanthood (confusing the cause of taking on the "form of a slave" with the action of doing so).

If the term *ekenôsen* is taken metaphorically, as elsewhere in Paul (Romans 4:14; 1 Corinthians 1:17; 2 Corinthians 9:3), it would seem to refer more to His attitude than to any specific attribute He poured out. "He emptied Himself" would mean that just as He refused to exploit His equality with God, He refused to put Himself first, to make self-interest His highest priority—"look out for Number One." This understanding fits well with Paul's desire that the Philippians, in following Christ's example, "do nothing from selfishness or conceit" (Philippians 2:3).

Seeing our desperate need for a Savior and knowing He alone could do the job, He chose love's course, for love "does not insist on its own way" (1 Corinthians 13:5). Once He chose that path, His ongoing emptying of self-interest took Him day by day, step by step toward the cross. Even after His resurrection, He did not exalt Himself, but received this honor from the Father, to whom He willingly, and eternally, submits.

The Philippians 2 "Hymn to Christ" tells the Gospel Story, including Christ's pre-existence, His incarnation, His life of service, His lowly death, and His exaltation through the spheres. As deep as its theology is, Paul makes the application so practical that it challenges us daily. Note also that Paul does not just ask WWJD, but WWJT (What would Jesus think?).<sup>10</sup> The ideal he sets before us calls us to greater service with a better attitude. The "mind of Christ" is something we can strive for, and though our results can only be imitative and not a duplication,<sup>11</sup> the effort will lift us out of our pettiness and self-serving smallness. At the same time, the "mind of Christ" is something God wants to build into every one of His adopted children, and He will achieve it, unless we resist or

neglect cooperating with Him in what He wants to do with us.<sup>12</sup>

The gospel inspires us with humility as we learn of our own sinfulness and the great price Christ paid for our redemption. As we turn to Him, trusting His righteousness instead of our own, accepting His lordship over our lives, confessing His name before others, and through faith participating in His death and resurrection in water baptism, we become clothed with Christ. In fact, Christ becomes our life. Christ in us becomes our hope of glory and our mindset.<sup>13</sup>

With Paul, we can say, "I want to know Christ...."—to experience what He experienced, to view life and to value people as He did, to walk "in His steps," to "follow the Lamb wherever He goes."<sup>14</sup> It is a path of humility every step of the way—putting others ahead of yourself, thinking of their needs, honoring and caring for them. Such people, who humble themselves before God, He has promised to exalt. But even in their exaltation, they will, like their Lord, be humbly submissive to the Father's ultimate sovereignty. [\[TOP\]](#)

### All Greek to me: "faith of Christ"

On the surface, Romans 3:22 seems to contain a redundancy: "This righteousness from God comes through faith in Christ to all who believe." The role of faith is mentioned twice, either one of which could stand on its own. But there is another way to understand this verse, and it makes more sense of the passage. The NIV's rendering of the verse above falls short of literal. A literal translation would be: "Now a righteousness of God through faith of Jesus Christ unto everyone believing" (the verb must be supplied). The NIV supplies the verb "comes" and understands "faith of Jesus Christ" as an objective genitive: "faith *in* Jesus Christ."

But the genitive case of "Jesus Christ" can also be understood as a subjective genitive (the thing in the genitive case in the subject of the verb lying behind "faith"). And the word "faith" can mean "faithfulness" as well as "trusting." This understanding would justify the rendering, "Now God's righteousness [comes] through [the] faithfulness of Jesus Christ unto everyone believing." This would eliminate the redundancy and emphasize the truth that our salvation is uniquely Jesus Christ's achievement. Verse 24 would repeat this same emphasis: "...and are justified freely by His grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus."

God's part in our salvation is grace. Christ's part is His faithfulness. Our part is trusting His part. Making the decision to believe in Christ, turning from sin, confessing Him, and participating in his saving death and resurrection, and yielding to His lordship is all "trusting Christ"; it is "from faith, to faith" or "faith first to last" (Romans 1:17).

**Want to go deeper?** One writer supporting this interpretation suggests a parallel in Romans 4:16 in which "faith of Abraham" certainly does not mean "faith *in* Abraham, but the faith (or faithfulness) that Abraham himself exercised. On the other hand, "faith of Jesus" is almost certainly faith *in* Jesus. If that is what it means in 3:22, then Paul is making a double emphasis on the believer's faith, which is certainly possible. A few scholars even believe that Paul made the phrase intentionally ambiguous so that with an economy of words, Paul could have the fullness of meaning that Christ's faithfulness and

our trust in Him is fundamental to receiving the righteousness of God.

Take a look at these other passages, where context must decide the meaning of "faith of Jesus Christ" (and variations, "of Jesus Christ," "of Christ," etc.): see Galatians 2:16, 20; 3:22; Ephesians 3:12; and Philippians 3:9. See also "faith of God" in Romans 3:3.

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