

## ***Philippians – Philemon Session Two***



*St Paul in Prison* by Rembrandt Harmensz. van Rijn, 1627  
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### ***Imprisonment; On Suffering; Chronology of Paul's Life; Interpreting The Christ Hymn; The Imitation of Christ***

#### ***On Suffering***

“There remains an experience of incomparable value. We have for once learned to see the great events of world history from below, from the perspective of the outcasts, the suspects, the maltreated — in short, from the perspective of those who suffer. Mere waiting and looking on is not Christian behavior. Christians are called to compassion and to action.”

– Dietrich Bonhoeffer (*Letters and Papers from Prison*)

## ***Chronology of Paul's Life\****

Birth	6 b.c.e.
Conversion	33 c.e.
Arabia	34
Damascus	34 – 37
Jerusalem (1 <sup>st</sup> Visit)	37
Syria and Cilicia	37 -?
Antioch	Winter 45 – 46
Departure from Antioch	April 46
Journey to Galatia	April – September 46
Ministry in Galatia	September 46 – May 48
Journey to Macedonia	Summer 48
Ministry in Macedonia	September 48 – April 50
Journey to Corinth	April 50
Ministry in Corinth	April 50 – September 51
Journey to Jerusalem	September 51
Conference in Jerusalem	October 51
Antioch	Winter 51 – 52
Journey to Ephesus	April – July 52
Ephesus	August 52 – October 54
Macedonia	Winter 54 – 55
Illyricum	Summer 55
Corinth	Winter 55 – 56
Journey to Jerusalem	Summer 56
Jerusalem – Caesarea	57? – 61?
Journey to Rome	September 61 – Spring 62
Rome	Spring 62 – Spring 64
Spain**	Early Summer 64
Around the Aegean**	64 – 66?
Death in Rome	67

\* *Paul: A Critical Life* – Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, OP, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1996

\*\* Paul clearly intended to go to Spain and Murphy-O'Connor speculates that he did, but there is no clear documentation that he actually went – nothing in Paul's writing or in the *Acts of the Apostles*. *Nor is there documentation that he traveled around the Aegean in 64 to 66. He may have remained in prison in Rome during this period*

## *Interpreting the Christ Hymn*

### **Philippians 2:5 – 11**

<sup>5</sup> Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,  
<sup>6</sup> who, though he was in the form of God,  
did not regard equality with God  
as something to be exploited,  
<sup>7</sup> but emptied himself,  
taking the form of a slave,  
being born in human likeness.  
And being found in human form,  
<sup>8</sup> he humbled himself  
and became obedient to the point of death—  
even death on a cross.  
<sup>9</sup> Therefore God also highly exalted him  
and gave him the name  
that is above every name,  
<sup>10</sup> so that at the name of Jesus  
every knee should bend,  
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,  
<sup>11</sup> and every tongue should confess  
that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father.

*The Christ Hymn* used by Paul in the second chapter of Philippians has been subject to several interpretations. It is considered a precomposed hymn – that is, it was an existing hymn that Paul inserted into the letter to make a point. The hymn’s author is unknown.

Traditionally, the hymn has been interpreted as describing a preexistent Christ who was in some way equal to God, perhaps virtually God. The Christ emptied himself to become a slave, that is, to become human – mortal. He then made himself humble and therefore obedient, either to God or to human limitations – mortality. His obedience led to his death. That is, death is the content of obedience.

Because Jesus lowered himself, God raised him up – exalted him and gave him a new name – LORD. God’s honor above all, is vindicated in the triumph of the exalted Christ.

By inserting this hymn in the letter and adding a prescript (verse 5), Paul intends proposing the obedience of Jesus as a model to be imitated. Paul has taken a familiar hymn and given it new and expanded meaning.

A number of different interpretations have been given for various sections of the hymn, which could, of course, change the ultimate meaning of the hymn. In Carolyn Osiek's commentary she described several alternative interpretations. Of particular concern in traditional interpretations is how a preexistent Christ who was already equal to God, can be exalted by God to some new level, yet still not exceeding God. Below she describes a new interpretation that seeks to resolve that issue:

In recent years, a somewhat different interpretation has been suggested, based partly on the difficulty already raised at verse 9 – that Christ is there, to all appearances, raised to a new status that he did not have before. This verse does not fit smoothly with the paradigm of preexistence. Those who therefore look for a different explanation find it in discussions in the intertestamental period of the relationship between sin and death and new interpretations of the transgression of Adam as narrated in Gen 3, with Adam increasingly being seen at the typological human being. Wisdom 2:23 – 24 sums it up nicely: “God created us for incorruption, and it made us in the image of his own eternity, but through the devil's envy death entered the world, and those who belong to his company experience it.”

Paul picks up this new interpretation in Rom 5:12 – 21: sin came into the world through the sin and disobedience of one man – Adam, and death came as a result of sin, then spread throughout the human race because of the continued sin of all. The first human beings, in other words, were created immortal and were never intended to die. Death came only through their sin and continues to their descendants who reinforce the situation with their own sin. God's threat that the first man and woman would die if they ate of the forbidden tree was not a threat of retaliation but a prediction.

Joined to this background is Paul's statement in 2 Corinthians 5:21 that for our sake God made the one who knew no sin to be sin so that we might become righteous – a puzzling passage. It speaks of the idea that Christ was sinless, a commonly accepted Christological affirmation. But what does it mean that he was made to be sin? These considerations and others lead to the alternate interpretation that the Philippian hymn is not about preexistence at all but about Christ's voluntary assumption of mortality from the moment of his birth.

A reading of the text through this lens produces some different conclusions. In verse 6, his being in the “form of God” and being of the same status as God do not refer to preexistence but to the immortality that was ours and his by right until the sin of Adam destroyed it. Then the emptying in verse 7a is not a transformation from divine to human status, and the form of a slave he assumes is not humanity, an idea that goes against the grain of the doctrine of our creation in God's image. Rather both refer to his free embrace of mortality, the effect of sin that he, the sinless one, did not inherit and did not have to accept. He took on the full apparatus of humanity including

corruptibility (verse 7b – c), and his lowering of himself to death, even death on a cross (v. 8), spells out all the implications of that free acceptance of mortality that he took on for our sake.

Then the exultation (vv. 9 – 11) is more easily explained: the humanly born Jesus Messiah, because of his obedience not in becoming human, the only thing he was, but in embracing “the full catastrophe” of death, was raised up by God into the heavenly realm, seated at God’s right hand (Ps 110:1), where he was given all power and authority (Dan 7:13 – 14; see Matt 28:18).

– *Philippians Philemon, Abingdon New Testament Commentaries*,  
by Carolyn Osiek, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2000

### ***The Imitation of Christ***

If Paul’s intent in including the *Christ Hymn* in his letter to the Philippians, was that the community at Philippi attempt to **imitate** Christ in their daily life, he was not the last person to urge such imitation. In 1419, Thomas à Kempis published a compilation of 114 essays titled *The Imitation of Christ*. His book is second only to the Bible in sales and popularity among religious readers. While many Protestants may be unfamiliar with this work, it is commonly known among Roman Catholics. Following is the first of these essays, this one stressing the humility that Paul was concerned about in the opening verses of Philippians, chapter 2:

#### ***Of the Imitation of Christ, And Contempt of All the Vanities of the World***

*He that followeth Me, walketh not in darkness,*<sup>1</sup> saith the Lord. These are the words of Christ, by which we are admonished, how we ought to imitate His life and manners, if we would truly be enlightened, and delivered from all blindness of heart. Let therefore our chiefest endeavour be, to meditate upon the life of JESUS CHRIST.

The doctrine of Christ exceedeth all the doctrines of holy men; and he that hath the Spirit, will find therein *the hidden manna*.<sup>2</sup> But it falleth out, that many who often hear the Gospel of Christ, feel little desire after it, because they *have not the Spirit of Christ*.<sup>3</sup> But whosoever will fully and with relish understand the words of Christ, must endeavour to conform his life wholly to the life of Christ.

2. What doth it avail thee, to discourse profoundly of the Trinity if thou be void of humility, and art thereby displeasing to the Trinity? Surely profound words do not make a man holy and just; but a virtuous life maketh him dear to God. I had rather feel contrition, than know the definition thereof. If thou didst know the whole Bible by heart, and the sayings of all the philosophers, what would all that profit thee without the love of God, <sup>4</sup> and without His grace?

*Vanity of vanities, and all is vanity,*<sup>5</sup> except to love God, and to serve Him only. This is the highest wisdom, by contempt of the world to press forward towards heavenly kingdoms.

Vanity therefore it is, to seek after perishing riches and to trust in them. Vanity is also to hunt after honours and to climb to high degree. Vanity is to follow the desires of the flesh and to long after that for which thou must afterwards suffer grievous punishment. Vanity is to wish to live long, and to be careless to live well. Vanity is to mind only this present life, and not to foresee those things which are to come. Vanity is to set thy love on that which speedily passeth away, and not to hasten thither where everlasting joy abideth.

Call often to mind that proverb, *The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing.*<sup>6</sup> Endeavour therefore to withdraw thy heart from the love of visible things, and to turn thyself to things invisible. For they that follow their own sensuality, defile their conscience, and lose the grace of God.

Footnotes:

<sup>1</sup> – *John 8:12*

<sup>2</sup> – *Revelation 2:17*

<sup>3</sup> – *Romans 8:9*

<sup>4</sup> – *1Corinthians 13:2*

<sup>5</sup> – *Ecclesiastes 1:2*

<sup>6</sup> – *Ecclesiastes 1:8*

– Thomas à Kempis (*The Imitation of Christ*, originally published in 1418, Introduction and Suggested Reading Copyright 2004 by Barnes & Nobel Books). The translation from the Latin used here is from the Barnes & Nobel edition – the translation was done in 1900. Free online translations are also available as well as inexpensive Kindle-type editions.

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***Philippians Philemon***, *Abingdon New Testament Commentaries*, by Carolyn Osiek, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2000

***Philippians, A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition***, *New Beacon Bible Commentary*, By Dean Flemming, Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2009

***Paul: A Critical Life***, by Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *OP* Oxford University Press, New York, 1996

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**Session Three:** Philippians 2:12 – 3:11 *The Mystery of Christ*