7 Philippians 2:5–11 The humility of God

1. Introduction

a. In these 7 verses we have one of the greatest Christological statements to be found anywhere in the New Testament. Christology = the study of Jesus, his person, his nature and his role as the incarnate God.

b. Paul is not needing to counter any heresy or theological error in this letter. He is writing about a practical subject – how we can live in harmony with one another both in church and in home. To live in harmony, we have to learn to die to self and humbly live for others for Jesus' sake. Paul sets before us the person of Jesus as the ultimate example of supreme humility. Paul knows that only gaining a solid theological understanding about Jesus is the foundation for how we can get along with one another.

   i Paul sees this as being essential in our quest for right relationships in the church. For godly, harmonious relationships we must grow in humility in the same way that Jesus modelled in his incarnation and death.

Philippians 2:5-11 *Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, [6] who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, [7] but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. [8] And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. [9] Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, [10] so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, [11] and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

c. Paul has the ability to paint pictures with words that take us beyond mere information, to the place where God is able to impart revelation. Today's passage is concise, pared down to the very basics in order to highlight one fundamental aspect of Jesus' ministry: his humility. Paul also highlights a further truth, that humility brings the reward of exaltation.

2. What would Jesus do…?

a. Paul's focus so far has been on the church cultivating humility so that it is fully functioning in unity. Through his circumstances and his joy, his life is a model for the church to overcome any division and disunity. He has given them a framework to help them to work towards the kind of unity that will be needed for the church to grow and mature in the face of strong opposition.

Philippians 2:3-4 *Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. [4] Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.*

b. Jesus as the supreme example of this: his voluntary self-denial, his incarnation, and his obedience even to death on a cross. The passage is a combination of both doctrine and practice, so Paul is locking in the connection between the doctrine of having regard to the condition and need of others with its outworking in this supreme example of Jesus.

   i To grow in humility, we must first of all understand the incarnation and death of Jesus – he's not just our example to follow, he is our motivation that will enable us to press in and keep moving forward in our own journey in the faith.

c. Jesus voluntarily left the highest position in the glory of heaven as part of the godhead, and humbled himself by going to the very lowest position on earth to rescue helpless, undeserving

people from the judgment of God. As we consider what Jesus did, it should fill our hearts with an unsurpassed wonder and love and devotion. No personal sacrifice that we make, no humiliation that we go through, no laying down of our rights could ever match what Jesus has done for us.

d. Paul begins, "Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus." What does that mean? It becomes clearer when we say it like this. "You should have the same attitude toward one another that Christ Jesus had." This tells us how we should treat one another. Paul prefaces his summary of Jesus' humbling of himself with a directive that puts everything that follows into its proper context. This was Jesus' attitude and it should be yours too.

1 Corinthians 2:16 *"For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?" But we have the mind of Christ.*

e. How do you get the mind of Christ? How do you train your mind to be more Christ-like? By getting to know Jesus better. You do that by discovering Jesus in the Word – what he said and did, what the prophets said about him, how to live out what he taught us, his leadership and authority in the end times. As you do so, you will gain insight into how Jesus thinks, how he relates to people, how he loves, what makes him sad, what pleases him, what are his priorities? These encounters raise a question – do I see things the same way he does?

3. Jesus the infinite God

a. As Paul sets out the example Jesus' humility he begins before the incarnation: "though he was in the form of God." Seeking to highlight Jesus' unchanging nature, he says Jesus was in the form of God, meaning Jesus was essentially and unalterably God. He was not created, always existed, part of the godhead.

   i Before coming to this earth, Jesus dwelt in the indescribable glory and perfection of heaven, one with the Father and the Spirit, in the perfection of the divine being. He willingly left that glory to come to earth. In his pre-incarnate state, he possessed all the attributes of God. Jesus has always existed in the form of God. Elsewhere (Colossians 1:15) Paul describes him as "The image of the invisible God."

Hebrews 1:3 *He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature…*

b. In v6 is Paul says that Jesus *"didn't count equality with God a thing to be grasped."* Some translations say it differently referring to robbery – eg. the NKJ says *"…did not consider it robbery to be equal with God.*" The word Paul uses – ***harpagnos*** – has two distinct meanings: i) something that is unlawfully seized, as in a robbery, and ii) a treasure to be prized and retained. So which is it?

c. When a Greek word has more than one meaning, the rule of biblical interpretation is to take the one that agrees with the context. Theologically, both translations are true. In the first translation, Jesus didn't regard it as robbery for him to be equal with God, he is declaring his rightful ownership of everything that equality with God bestowed upon him. But, the idea that Paul is seeking to convey in this passage is the humility of Jesus. So Jesus asserting his right to equality with God doesn't really fit the context. The understanding that Jesus didn't consider his equality with God as something to be retained at all costs, meaning that he was willing to waive his right to that privilege if the necessity arose, fits the context completely.

   i There are two reasons why Jesus didn't regard equality with God as something to be grasped and held on to at all costs. First, He already had equality with God, so striving for it was

unnecessary. Second, the Father would exalt Jesus and restore him to his full glory in the future, so he wouldn't have to strive for that either.

d. The point Paul is making is that Jesus is God. You can't comprehend the humility of Jesus if you don't first understand who he is. We have to begin with his status as God to understand his humility as the suffering servant. Jesus as God is infinite in relationship to time, space, knowledge and power. This speaks of his nature as being eternal, omnipresent, omniscient and omnipotent. He is not like us. He knows you better than you do. Consider his supremacy and sovereignty over everything, carrying out his will as he desires; his holiness, his purity, his faithfulness, his goodness, his justice, his mercy, his grace and his love. It's only in contrast to his position as God that we can begin to understand his humility.

4. The suffering servant

Philippians 2:7-8 *...but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. [8] And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.*

a. "He made himself nothing." Some translations say "He emptied himself." The word that Paul uses means "to pour out" in the sense of being poured out as an offering. It comes from the Old Testament practice of bringing a drink offering to the Lord which was poured out in front of the altar.

b. What does "he emptied himself" mean? Jesus didn't empty something from himself, but he emptied himself from something. What Paul is saying is that Jesus emptied himself of his divine glory, but not of his divine nature, his equality with God. Elsewhere Paul tells us that Jesus clothed himself with humanity. He was like a king who clothed himself in the garments of a peasant – though outwardly he appeared different, he was still the king with all of his authority. In the same way, Jesus didn't empty himself of his deity – God cannot cease to be God – but what did change was its outward manifestation.

c. This meant leaving the glory and splendour, the holiness and perfection of heaven and coming to dwell in the sinfulness of a corrupted earth among men whose hearts are only evil and wicked all the time. The glory of heaven is beyond our human ability to comprehend, so we have difficulty grasping the sacrifice that was required for Jesus to leave heaven and to live on earth. We think of Jesus's suffering as being limited to a few hours on the cross. But in reality, his "suffering" lasted all the years of His life on earth.

d. Paul describes the nature of Jesus' incarnation – he came as a servant, a bond-servant, he voluntarily adopted the nature of a servant. In v6 Jesus is described as being "in the form of God" and now in his incarnation he has come "in the form of a servant." He who is God has become a slave, without privileges, coming to serve others. We cannot comprehend the humility of Jesus, the creator and eternal God, in becoming a man, even more so in becoming a man with the nature of a slave. When Jesus was washing the disciples' feet, he was still the Lord of glory, even though he looked like a bondservant. Jesus surrendered his rights to the will of the Father. There is nothing in human experience that can begin to compare the height from which Jesus came to the depth to which he was willingly subject.

e. Jesus being born in the likeness of men means that you wouldn't have thought that he was anything out of the ordinary, he looked just like one of us. Born in the same way that each of us were, experiencing babyhood, boyhood, teenage years, finally growing into manhood. He had a

100% human body, flesh, blood, bones, heart, brain, DNA, just like us – with one crucial difference: he didn't inherit our sinful nature. Jesus did have a human nature, but it was uncorrupted by sin.

f. V8, which is the pivotal statement that Paul has been heading towards. He simply states that Jesus humbled himself by becoming obedient to death on a cross. The fact that Jesus came to die was not something that was obscure or hidden. The Old Testament pointed to the necessity for him to suffer before entering his glory. There were several attempts to kill Jesus in his lifetime, but none of them could be successful, he could only die when he laid down his own life.

g. Jesus' death paid the penalty we should have paid, by enduring the wrath of God we should have endured. This required that Jesus had to do something unprecedented – to give up his relationship with the Father so that we could have one instead. What caused Jesus to sweat drops of blood at Gethsemane? Not the prospect of a painful death on a cross – it was the thought of being torn away from the Father. The physical pain of the cross was nothing compared to the agony and devastation of being separated from his Father.

h. The text says that Jesus became obedient to the point of death. He didn't become obedient to death itself. That's an important distinction, because death was not the end for Jesus. Obedience to the point of death meant that death itself now became subject to his Lordship. Now for the righteous, death would no longer be a place of waiting, but the very entrance to paradise itself.

i. V8 says that Jesus wasn't just obedient unto death, but specifically to death on a cross. Sacrifices made in the tabernacle and the temple were carried so that that the animals were slaughtered as quickly and humanely as possible. But death on a Roman cross was quite the opposite, it was brutal and agonising and took a long time, adding to the distress of the victim. Why is the cross so important that Jesus had to die this way?

Deuteronomy 21:22-23 *And if a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, [23] his body shall not remain all night on the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is cursed by God…*

Galatians 3:13 *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."*

j. Jesus had to die upon a cross. It was the plan of the Father and Jesus was obedient to it. Crucifixion was reserved for criminals – thieves, killers, enemies of the state. It was a public affair, designed to inflict not just pain, but also great humiliation – naked and affixed to a stake or a cross or a tree, the victim was subjected to much ridicule by those who passed by.

k. For the eternal God to come to earth as a humble servant is amazing enough. It's almost beyond comprehension that he would go lower and die. And even more staggering that his death was that of a common criminal. This is what Paul is urging us to consider when he speaks of humility. We can have no greater example to follow than that of Jesus because there has never in the history of the world been a greater demonstration of what it means. He's not saying we have to go through what Jesus went through – but he's urging us to go low, to humble ourselves for the sake of our brothers and sisters in Christ.

5. Highly exalted

Philippians 2:9-11 *Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, [10] so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, [11] and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

a. But that's not the end of the story. Paul is keen to bring to our attention that Jesus has gained a significant reward because of his humility. Because Jesus was willing to leave the height of heights and lay aside the glory he had from before the foundation of the world, taking the form of a lowly servant – God has exalted him to the highest place.

b. There is a principle involved here and we see Jesus in his role as our forerunner showing us the way – and if we choose to follow, there is also a reward promised to us:

1 Peter 5:6 *Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you…*

James 4:10 *Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.*

i The kingdom of God doesn't function the same way as the kingdoms of this world – God's kingdom operates on completely different principles and with a different spirit. So we can see from these verses that the only way up is down! We go low. And there will be reward at the end of it. Maybe not in this life, but certainly in the age to come.

c. The words "highly exalted" only appears here, and literally it means "super-exalted." Jesus went from the height of heights to the depth of depths and then back again to the highest of heights. Jesus didn't exalt himself, it was God the Father who exalted him. The book of Hebrews tells us how Jesus has been raised up to sit at the Father's right hand in the place of supreme honour and authority.

d. What glory did Jesus have when God raised him to this exalted place that he didn't have before the incarnation? It was his humanity. When Jesus returned to heaven he didn't discard his humanity – he is the Son of God, he is also the Son of Man. His humanity will be part of who he is forever.

i When God created Adam he declared it was very good. Though Adam failed, in Jesus, the second Adam, the true potential of humanity as originally intended by God has been fully realised. Jesus' exaltation is your guarantee that redemption through his blood will not fail. He bears the scars in his resurrection body as evidence of God's acceptance.

Luke 24:39 *"See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me, and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have."*

e. And then God has given him a name that is above every other name. It's something that we often pray and sing about – the name above all other names. Does this refer to Jesus' actual name – Yeshua in Hebrew? Or is Paul meaning something else?"

f. I don't think Paul is referring here to the physical name as we think of it today. He is using "name" as it was used in Scripture to represent the total person. The Bible uses one's "name" to speak of the total person, the dignity attached to a person because of their position. Today we use a name as little more than a distinguishing mark or a label to differentiate one person from another. But in the world of the New Testament, the name concisely sums up all that a person is. So here "name" speaks not only of the total Person of Jesus, but also speaks to his title, or his status, which supersedes forever every title every given to anyone.

i Also, unusually in the Greek, the definite article is used before name – so it is adding emphasis – it's **THE** name – which elevates it in terms of its rank and status above all others.

ii Paul isn't referring to the name of Jesus specifically, but his authority – his ***Lordship***. This is what Paul says of him in v11 – "…every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord." What does Lord mean? Jesus has the right to ownership and authority, and holds the key to everything. Jesus has won this position because he unhesitatingly and unreservedly committed himself to complete the task his Father sent him to do.

Revelation 19:11-12 *Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. [12] His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems, and he has a name written that no one knows but himself.*

g. v10-11 says the name of Jesus ***should*** cause everyone to bow the knee and confess his Lordship. But some translations use ***shall*** or ***will*** rather than the more indefinite ***should*** – so which is it? The Greek is a bit technical, but the way we should understand this is that God has given Jesus this name above all names, ***in order that*** ultimately every knee ***will*** bow and every tongue ***will*** confess him as Lord.

h. Ultimately every knee ***will*** bow before Jesus. It's not the name "Jesus" that's the issue here, it's the Lordship associated with that name. For some it will be voluntarily, in this life, in confession of his Lordship, and to receive the gift of life and the mercy and grace that he offers. Others, including many of the mightiest, most powerful men who have ever lived – will bow against their wills, but they will bow. And under the earth all of those in Hades, as well as Satan and all his powerful demonic forces will bow before Jesus at the end of the age and confess him as Lord.

6. Conclusion

a. If Jesus is to be exalted as Lord in our lives, we've got to dethrone self. It would be wrong to think that Jesus was motivated to go to the cross by the thought of being exalted afterwards. He went out of love and obedience to the Father and for you and me. Being exalted was His reward. Our motivation to humble ourselves should be love for God and for others, because of His great love for us, and not for any kind of reward or exaltation that we may receive.

b. These verses put everything into perspective and we need to hear what they are saying to us. Let them both comfort and provoke us. We must let them permeate our souls and become the plumb-line against which we measure our submission to the Lordship of Jesus, and the catalyst that persuades us to go low in loving and serving one another in the body of Christ.

Luke 14:11 *For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.*