

Philippians 2: JESUS

*Notes by Dr Trevor R Allin for a sermon he delivered
at Bunyan Baptist Church, Stevenage on 10th December 2017¹*

Today's Bible passage is Philippians 2:5-11

It is a well-known passage,

but I think that today we may see some new things in it

– and of course we may see some things that are not new,

but that sometimes need repeating, because they are so important.

First, let's read it:

⁵ Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:

⁶ Who, being in very nature God,

did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,

⁷ but made himself nothing,

taking the very nature of a servant,

being made in human likeness.

⁸ And being found in appearance as a man,

he humbled himself

and became obedient to death —

even death on a cross!

⁹ Therefore God exalted him to the highest place

and gave him the name that is above every name,

¹⁰ 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. (NIV 1984)

Now let's look at what it means.

v 6

NIV 1984 has: “Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped”.

What does this mean?

NIV 2011 translates this as: “Christ Jesus: ⁶ who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage”.

THE MESSAGE paraphrases this as:

“He had equal status with God but didn't think so much of himself that he had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what.”

(from THE MESSAGE: The Bible in Contemporary Language © 2002 by Eugene H. Peterson. All rights reserved.)

The NRSV translates this as:

¹ The style and the layout are therefore designed to make it easy for the preacher to read and easy for the hearers to absorb, understand and remember.

“Christ Jesus ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited”

The leading Greek expert and academic Daniel Wallace comments:
“although Christ existed in God’s form, he did not feel compelled to maintain his equality with God” (“Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics”, p. 635 fn 56).

We could paraphrase Philippians 2:6 in the following way:
“Christ was by very nature God – equal to God the Father.
And he didn’t consider this as being something undeserved, unmerited.
He didn’t consider being God something to which he wasn’t entitled.
He knew it was his right
something he had always had
something that he by very nature was.”

v 7

In the Greek, this says ἀλλ’ ἐαυτὸν ἐκένωσεν [all heautón ekénōsen]
That means, “but he emptied himself”.

He emptied **himself**.

It doesn’t say, “God the Father emptied Him, humiliated Jesus, against His will.”

He – Jesus – emptied **himself**.

v 8

And v 8 says ἐταπείνωσεν ἐαυτὸν [etapéinōsen heautón]
That means, “he made himself humble.”

Again, this was something that **He** did **to himself**.

He had to do this himself.

The Father did not do this **to him**.

He – voluntarily – became a human being,
with all the limitations and weaknesses of a human being.

That meant that Christ – who had created all food at the beginning
– would suffer hunger.

Christ – who had created water and had separated the waters in the sky from the waters on the earth [Gen 1:6-7] – would suffer thirst.

Jesus was the source of all energy, for we read,

“Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made (John 1:3, NIV)

– yet he – the source of energy – would become tired.

John 1:4 tells that “In him was life” (NIV)

– yet he chose to make himself vulnerable

he chose to make himself into a human being who could be killed

– killed by the creatures that he had made.

But first, **he had to empty himself** to make all that possible.

And he did it.

He *really* did!

It wasn't a pretence or a simulation.

He couldn't suddenly whip off a mask and say

“Just pretending! I'm really invincible: you can't really hurt me.”

He really became **a real human being**.

No wonder he said,

“I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does.” (John 5:19, NIV)

He knew **who** he was – but he had **given up** his divine power.

No wonder he said,

“By myself I can do nothing; I judge only as I hear, and my judgment is just, for I seek not to please myself but him who sent me.” (John 5:30, NIV)

The Jehovah's Witnesses love these verses.

They say, “See! He's just a man!”

You bet he was. It was *real*. It wasn't a façade.

But they don't recognise that **before** Jesus said that,
he had chosen to empty himself.

“Empty himself” **of what?**

vs 6 says that he was “by nature God”.

verse 7 that “he took on the nature of becoming a servant”

And the Greek uses the same word in both verses – **μορφή** [morfē]

He really was God.

And he really became human.

This is why Philippians 2:5-11 is one of the most important passages in the Bible.

It helps us to make sense of all the rest.

What may seem – out of context – like contradictions between different passages are not contradictions.

He really was what the Bible calls “the author of life” (Acts 3:15).

But he emptied himself.

He divested himself of his mighty power.

In the words of the song, “He laid aside his majesty”.

He made himself vulnerable.

He made himself human.

And it was **a one way journey**.

So he no longer had the power to raise himself. That's why Acts 3:15 says:

“You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead.” (NIV)

God the Father had to raise him and restore to him the glory that he had had with the Father before the creation of the world, *because he no longer had the power to do it himself.*

That is why, shortly before his death, Jesus prayed:

“And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began.” (John 17:5, NIV)

And God did it! Look at Philippians 2 verse 9.

v 9

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name

Jesus is given a name that is above **every** name

[The Jehovah’s Witnesses add the word “other” here: “gave him the name that is above every **other** name”. (NWT 1961 & 2014)

This enables them to say that Jesus is inferior to God, whom they call “Jehovah”.

But Philippians 2:9 doesn’t say that.

It says that God “gave him the name that is above **every** name”.]

That name is “Lord” – the same word that was used for **God** by the Jews in their Greek translation of the Old Testament.

vv 10-11

This is the most amazing:

¹⁰ 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.

This didn’t come out of nowhere.

This came out a great statement by God in the book of Isaiah:

Isaiah 45:22-24

²² "Turn to me and be saved,

all you ends of the earth;

for I am God, and there is no other.

²³ By myself I have sworn,

my mouth has uttered in all integrity

a word that will not be revoked:

Before me every knee will bow;

by me every tongue will swear.

²⁴ They will say of me, 'In the Lord alone
are righteousness and strength.'"

All who have raged against him

will come to him and be put to shame. (NIV)

I like the way Eugene Peterson puts this in THE MESSAGE:

everyone, whoever and wherever you are.

I am God,

the only God there is, the one and only.

²³ I promise in my own name:

Every word out of my mouth does what it says.

I never take back what I say.

Everyone is going to end up kneeling before me.

Everyone is going to end up saying of me,

²⁴ 'Yes! Salvation and strength are in God!'"

All who have raged against him

will be brought before him,

disgraced by their unbelief.

(from THE MESSAGE: The Bible in Contemporary Language © 2002 by Eugene H. Peterson. All rights reserved.)

The NIV is of course closer to the original text:

Before me every knee will bow;

by me every tongue will swear. (Isa 45:23)

This is quoted twice in the N T – here in Phil 2:10-11

– and also in Romans 14:10-12

Here is Romans 14:

“we will all stand before God's judgment seat. ¹¹ It is written:

“As surely as I live,' says the Lord,

'every knee will bow before me;

every tongue will confess to God.”

¹² So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God.” (NIV)

So these phrases

– 'every knee will bow before me;

every tongue will confess

– are talking about GOD in Isa 45:23

and they're talking about GOD in Rom 14:11

And in Philipians 2:10-11 this prophecy is applied to JESUS.

And this isn't a one-off.

The New Testament is full of examples of quoting Old Testament passages which originally have to do with God, and applying them to Jesus.

Hurtado gives a string of examples in his book “Lord Jesus Christ” on page 112.

[Hurtado, Larry W., “Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity”, Grand Rapids, Michigan and Cambridge, U.K.: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005]

This is who Jesus is:

– not a misguided rabbi

– not a wandering preacher with mistaken ideas of grandeur.

but the one who is described in vs 6 as “by very nature God”

but the one who is described in vs 6 as ἴσα θεῷ [isa theō], which means “equal with God” the Father.

ἴσα [isa] also means “the same as”.

Jesus was and is God, just like God the Father.

That is what it says.

We can accept it and believe.

Or we can reject it and refuse to believe it.

But we can't change the meaning of the words on the page in the Bible.

That is what they say,

and that is what they mean.

This worship of Jesus as divine **exploded on the world** of the first century, in the very first decades after the resurrection of Christ.

This wasn't some *innovation* that was first thought up centuries later.

There is evidence within 2 or 3 years of the resurrection that it was there – and this is probably why the devout religious Jew Saul fanatically persecuted the church – until Jesus himself stopped him and told him, “It’s me you’re persecuting!” (Acts 9:5)

Hurtado says

‘It is God who now requires that Jesus be revered as the divine *Kyrios*, and one reverences Jesus “to the glory of God the Father” (Phil 2:11).’

(“Lord Jesus Christ” p. 52)

This is in line with Jesus’ own words:

“that all may honour the Son just as they honour the Father.

He who does not honour the Son does not honour the Father, who sent him.” (John 5:23, NIV)

1 John 2:23 gives a clear message to the Jehovah’s Witnesses and everyone else who denies the deity of Christ:

“No one who denies the Son has the Father;

whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also.” (NIV)

The first Christian declaration of faith was

“Jesus Christ is Lord”

For instance, in Romans 10:8-10 we read: [Here is] “the word of faith we are proclaiming: ⁹ That if you confess with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” (NIV)

1 Corinthians 12:3 says that it is God’s Holy Spirit who prompts us and enables us to say, “Jesus is Lord,” (NIV)

Of course, Jesus himself had said:

‘Whoever acknowledges me before others, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven. ³³ But whoever disowns me before others, I will disown before my Father in heaven. (Matthew 10:32 NIV, 2011)

But Jesus didn’t cling on to that divine nature and status (v. 6).

He emptied himself (v 7).

(The NIV translates this [he] “made himself nothing”.)

He took on the very nature of a servant.

He took it upon himself.

And the Greek word translated “servant” in the NIV actually means “a slave”:
A slave to humanity

He went hungry, but he fed the hungry.

He was thirsty, but he told people that he is the water of life.

He worked with dangerous people who were demon-possessed, and healed them.

He touched people with infectious diseases – people that no-one else would touch – and he healed them, too.

He told his followers

“I am among you as one who serves.” (Luke 22:27-28, NIV)

and he demonstrated it by doing what only a slave would do in that culture:
he washed the feet of his disciples.

And he didn't stop there.

He humbled himself further.

When the mob came in the darkness of night to kidnap him, he said to his disciples:

⁵² "Put your sword back in its place ... for all who draw the sword will die by the sword. ⁵³ Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? ⁵⁴ But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way?" (Matt 26:52-54, NIV)

He even fulfilled the divine plan of salvation to the point of suffering
a travesty of justice
in a show trial

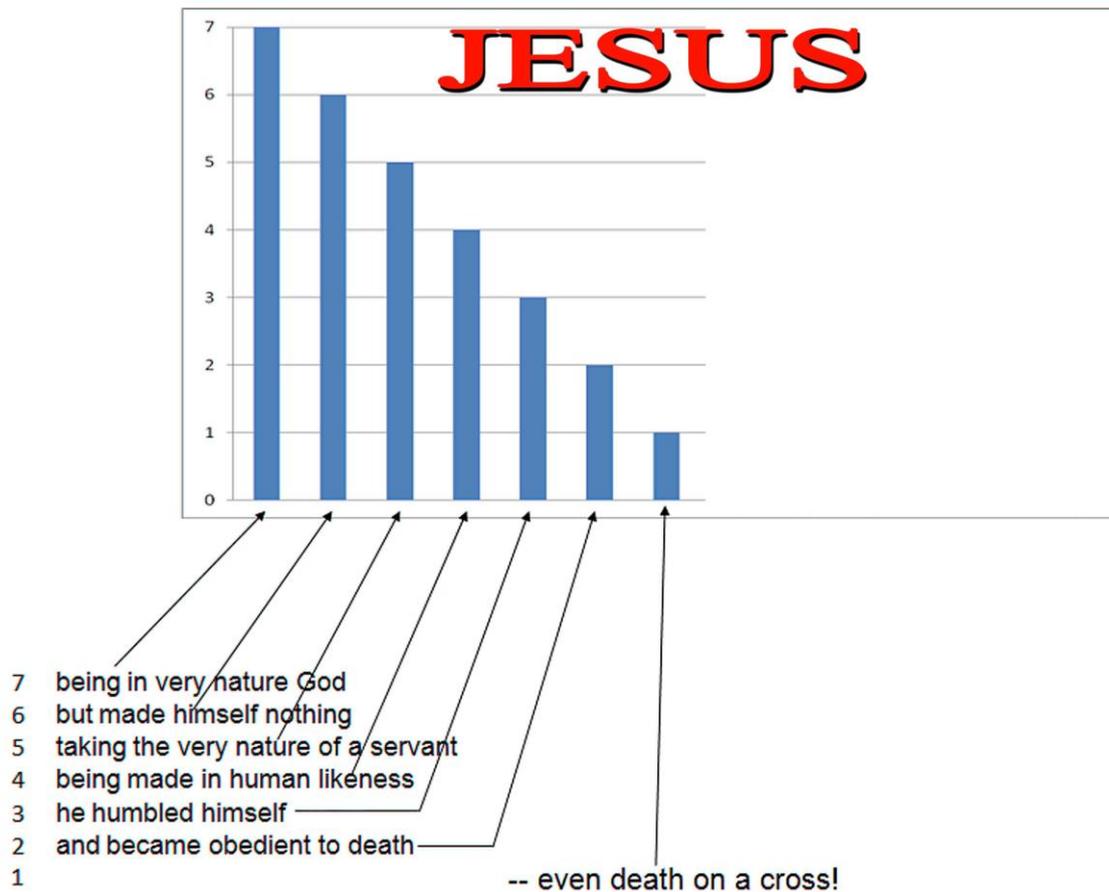
where his supposed “guilt” – and his punishment – had been determined in advance.

That punishment was death
and not any death
Not a merciful death
but a humiliating death,
a death by torture – death by crucifixion.

From the glories of heaven where he started, it was down – down – down
From the highest position – “being in very nature God” –, there are **six steps down** in this passage, and I have tried to represent this with a graph or a bar chart.

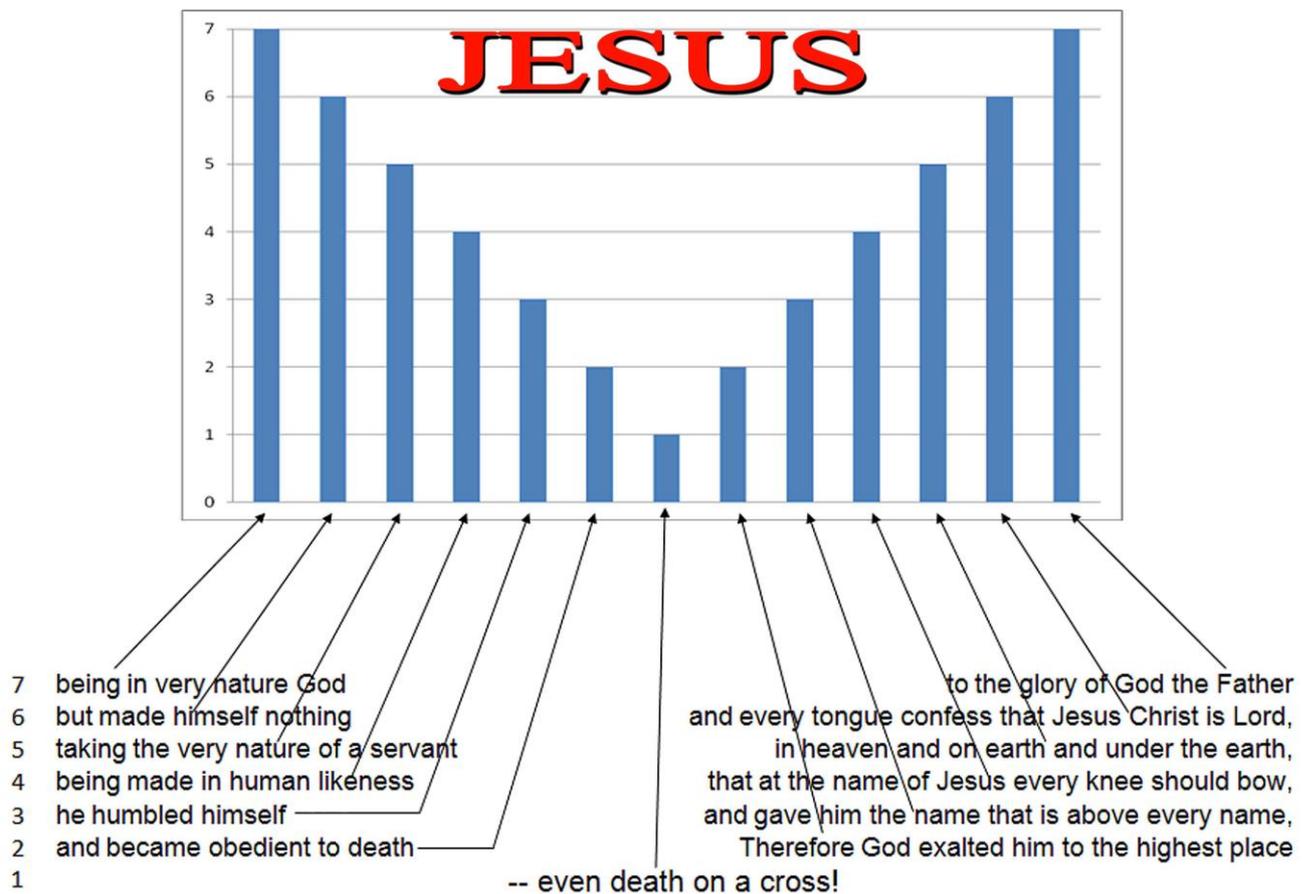
As there are six steps down, I have called the highest position, where he was at the beginning, “Level 7”.

From there we read, “made himself nothing”, which I have called “Level 6”. And from there on it was down, again and again, until he reached the lowest level, not just death, but “even death on a cross!”



But then, amazingly, in this passage after the reference to Christ's death on the cross, there are a further **six phrases** that show Christ's exaltation.

They contrast with the steps down.



It is so symmetrical and clear. For every step down that Christ made, there is a phrase that shows his restoration up to the highest place in heaven.

So this passage shows that initially Jesus was by very nature God. And just as he went down, down, down, so he was exalted up, up, up, to the point where everyone will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

➤ This belief that Jesus is Lord is at the heart of Christianity in the New Testament.

Applying this divine title to Jesus was **not controversial** among the Christians of the first century.

The New Testament shows us that at that time there were Christians who argued about whether the followers of Jesus should also keep the Jewish law.

There were Christians who argued about whether followers of Christ should eat meat that had been dedicated to a pagan god.

But no-one argued about whether or not Jesus was God.

When the resurrected Jesus appeared to the Apostle Thomas, Thomas – who up to that point had refused to believe – reacted by saying to Jesus, “My Lord and My God” (John 20:28).

And Philippians 2, like many other passages in the NT, describes Jesus as God.

So this belief that Jesus is God is not something that developed gradually over centuries. It is not something that was introduced or imposed by church councils, centuries later.

Larry Hurtado speaks of “the eruption ... of early Jesus-devotion” in the early days of Christianity.

(in his blog dated 21st September 2017, here:

<https://larryhurtado.wordpress.com/2017/09/21/selected-essays-on-jesus-devotion/>)

Remember that the letter to the Philippians was written in about the year 60 A.D.

That is within about 27 years of the death and resurrection of Christ

and that in this passage Paul was not introducing some new doctrine.

What he describes is what the Christians in Philippi – and everywhere else! – already believed.

No wonder Hurtado says:

“what makes this passage so remarkable is that it also reflects the sort of regular, corporate devotion that featured Jesus and that characterized the religious practice of Christian circles already within the first decades of the Christian movement.”

(“Lord Jesus Christ”², p. 40)

This was during the lifetime of the Apostles
during the lifetime of the more than 500 people at one time who saw the
resurrected Christ
during the lifetime of the thousands who had heard Jesus preach and seen him heal
the sick.

None of them said that Paul had got it wrong.

None of them said that Philippians chapter 2 was wrong.

In other words, this worship of Jesus as God was a basic belief of
the first generation of Christian believers.

So it is no surprise that, a mere 50 years after the letter to the Philippians was written, even **non-believers** were writing about what the Christians believed about Jesus Christ.

In about AD 112, the Roman administrator Pliny the Younger wrote to the emperor in Rome³
the following report about Christians:

“They were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day [i.e. Sunday] before it was light, and they sang hymns to Christ as God.”

This is what the first Christians believed.

This is what they taught,

and this was how they worshipped.

² Hurtado, Larry W, “Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity”, Grand Rapids, Michigan / Cambridge, U.K.: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003

³ This quotation from Pliny is found in many places. Here I quote from Green, Michael, “Jesus for Sceptics”, Bath: UCCF: The Christian Unions, 2013, p. 20.

Anyone who claims that this belief was dreamt up centuries later is ignoring the undisputed facts of history.

I hope that with the six steps **down** in Christ's descent and the six phrases **up** that reveal his glorification I have not *exaggerated* the structure of Philippians 2.

There is always a danger that we will read into the Bible what we want it to say – whether it says it or not. (That is the basis of all the false doctrines that are taught by the Jehovah's Witnesses, false doctrines that have no support in Scripture, no matter how many Bible references they may print at the end of an article or at the foot of a page.)

But it doesn't really matter whether we notice the *symmetrical structure* that I have shown, or not.

The fact is, this passage says that Christ was in the form of God before he emptied himself and came down to this earth.

And the fact is, this same passage tells us that Christ has returned to heaven, where he has the same divine nature that he started off with.

So what is our response?

1) Where did this passage start?

Remember verse 5:

“Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus”:

It goes on to tell us that Jesus humbled himself – again and again and again.

Is our attitude the same as that of Christ Jesus?

Or are we proud, arrogant and selfish?

One American pastor⁴ wrote on an on-line devotional⁵ a few weeks ago⁶

“The Son of God chose humility so he could serve other human beings. Instead of taking advantage of His divinity for Himself, He emptied Himself for the sake of us. ...

The humility of Jesus is the standard we aspire to as followers of Jesus.

... humility is the gateway to grace: for God gives grace to the humble, but He resists the proud ([James 4:6](#)). ... Humility happily defers in love, “How can I honor you above myself?” We walk in humility as we value others above ourselves, quietly listening and learning.

“Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves” (Romans 12:10).”

2) More important than all this is one thing: **how do we react to Jesus?**

The Bible says that we should worship him.

The Bible says that we should obey him.

⁴ Boyd Bailey

⁵ <http://www.wisdomhunters.com/humility-listens-and-learns-from-others/>

⁶ September 20, 2017

Possible songs for a service in which a message on Philippians 2:5-11 is delivered:

“You laid aside your majesty, gave up everything for me.”

“Meekness and Majesty”

“From heaven you came, helpless babe”

“Jesus is the Name We Honour”