

Philippians in Ten

Week Three: Remapping our Idea of God

Readings:

Phil 2:6–11, Isaiah 45: 21-24

Recap

Paul's depiction in chapter 2 of Jesus as having the ultimate authority in the universe showed the Philippians that the exalted Jesus has infinitely more authority than that of the Emperor, who dictated life in Philippi.

The world has changed irrevocably and a crucified and resurrected Jew is now at the centre of the universe. He is the one who calls the shots and not the might of Rome. And crucially, his Lordship is based on something entirely different than the Emperor's.

In these verses known as the Christ hymn, Paul does two things:

- First, by pointing to Christ's ultimate authority, he is encouraging the suffering Philippians, to stand firm in the knowledge that Christ is the one who has the real authority.
- Second, He is showing that real authority and power come from humility and service, not self-promotion and grasping

Paul describes Christ as equal with God, in the form of God – meaning he had the nature of God. But Christ didn't think that was something to be grasped at or exploited. This is in complete contrast to the sort of rulers that the Philippians normally experienced or the Roman way of life.

Christ emptied himself of his pre-existent glory and became human, becoming like a slave. Christ became a person without advantages, with no rights or privileges; the Lord of glory, the one equal with God, became a servant of all.

The first phrase in verse 6 is usually translated as "although he was in the form of God." But we could translate it as "because he was in the form of God." – it is in God's very nature to give himself in such a way. Christ's self-humbling in his incarnation and death reveals the very essence of God—utter, self-giving love.

The cross is the end point of the self-emptying of God—here we have the stark expression of who God is—the cross shows God's nature to be utter love, naked, selfless self-giving.

Unlimited obedience and humiliation give way to unlimited vindication and exaltation. God highly exalted him, says Paul, using a verb that occurs only here in the New Testament and means God "super-exalted" him. A similar word is used of Israel's God in Isaiah 52 and Psalm 97. And here we begin to see the remarkable way in which Paul identifies Jesus with Yahweh, the most high, the highly exalted, the God of all.

In this superstitious world, the gods did not love people – they were capricious, you feared what they could do to you. But the God Paul presents – actually the God of all gods – his very nature is love.

And God in Jesus models a way of being human that Paul holds up to the Philippians as the model of how they are to behave and live. So Paul turns all the expectations about what God is like and what human life is like on its head.

The Philippians were used to a world where might was right, where the poor and vulnerable were taken advantage of, where hierarchy, status and the seeking of power was the norm.

Now they see that the universe works on fundamentally different principles. Although our world is very different from the first century in Greece, we see the same forces at work. Politics, celebrity culture, extreme capitalism all say that the way up is through force, through pushing, through striving for position and notice. But Jesus shows us the way up is down. Through humble, self-giving service.

And just as the Philippians needed to know that the God of the universe loved them utterly and completely, so too, do we.

Questions to Consider

Do you find translating v6 as “because he was in the form of God” helpful? How does this affect our understanding of God?

What are the stages of Christ’s downward trajectory?

How would describing Christ as a slave echoed with the Philippians?

How different is this God / this Messiah (ruler) from the rulers and gods the Philippians were used to?

The Philippians (and us too!) were used to a world where might was right, where the poor and vulnerable were taken advantage of, where hierarchy, status and the seeking of power was the norm. How radical is the Christ story that Paul tells here?

Why does Paul tell this part of the story of Christ in this way? What is he hoping to achieve with the Philippians?

When Paul references Isaiah 45, what is he saying about Christ?

“Jesus shows us the way up is down.” What are the ways that we can practically live this out? Think about all the areas in which you operate: home, work, sport, social media, politics...etc.

If God’s very nature is utter love, what difference does that make to our lives? – our sense of worth, our joy, etc.