

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
August 3, 2025

Stick to the Story

Philippians 2:5-18

Today we come to the fourth sermon in our series on Paul's letter to the Philippians. During the first three messages, we've gotten a growing sense of the relationship between Paul and this particular community of Christians. In the process, we've been listening for how God is speaking to us, individually and together, especially as we move further into this season of transition in our congregation's life.

So far we've witnessed Paul's gratitude and prayerfulness for the Christians in Philippi. We've noted their shared confidence in God's faithfulness to complete the work of salvation that he has begun among them through the gospel. This gospel, the good news that Jesus is Lord, is progressing in their lives and in the world, often in spite of, and actually through, Paul and the Philippians' mutual suffering and hardships. With Christ as their main subject, the Philippians are called to practice their loyalty to Jesus in the midst of resistance and opposition, living in unity with one another by exhibiting humility. Last Sunday's text ended with Paul exhorting the Philippians, "Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others" (2:4).

One of the ways the Philippians can be formed spiritually and grow in unity is by learning from others who model this kind of self-giving, rather than self-protecting, behavior. The chief exemplar is Christ himself, which brings us to today's text, 2:5-18. In the first main section of this passage, Paul challenges the congregation to continue its obedience and its participation in the work of God by following the pattern of Christ himself. "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus," says Paul (v. 5). The Greek term translated as "attitude" has to do with the way one "thinks." Paul used the same word a few verses earlier when he spoke of being "like-minded" (v. 2). He's talking about a mindset, a particular attitude or orientation, a way of thinking and acting that should be typical of people who confess Jesus as Lord.

To describe this mindset, Paul doesn't offer the Philippians a PowerPoint outline of a carefully structured argument. Instead, he draws upon something more poetic. In verses 6-11, Paul presents them with a brief narrative, often called the "Christ hymn." We don't know if this passage is something Paul created himself, or if it was composed by someone else and was already in circulation among Christian communities. It has a kind of rhythm and flow that point to its being a Christian hymn, perhaps used in worship in the early church. Even the way that these verses are laid out and presented on the printed page of your Bible indicates its unique character.

For our purposes, we don't have to know the exact origins of this Christ hymn and the history of its transmission. We simply need to recognize that Paul decides to employ it here at this point in his letter, to help forge the Philippians into a more cohesive unit of believers, living in a way that follows the pattern of Christ himself.

The hymn itself falls into two major parts, verses 6-8 and verses 9-11. It opens with an affirmation that even before time began, Jesus was part and parcel of the divine nature. He was "in very nature God" (v. 6). But Jesus didn't use this equality with God to his own advantage, to protect himself. It wasn't "something to be grasped" (v. 6). Rather than hold on to this divine status at all costs and for dear life, Jesus "made himself nothing" (v. 7). He "emptied himself" of his divine prerogatives, "taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness" (v. 7). The term translated as "servant" is the word for "slave." In other words, Christ demoted himself to the lowest rung on the social ladder. He entered our history as a person without power and privileges. Christ took on flesh, became fully human. And "being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death" (v. 8). And not just death, Paul emphasizes, but "death on a cross!" The most cruel and shameful form of punishment that the Romans could carry out. This is how far Jesus lowered himself for the redemption of humankind.

But this isn't where the song ends. Calvary isn't the conclusion of the story. After tracing Jesus' descent to the darkness of crucifixion, Paul uses this hymn to describe what God has done in response to Christ's faithfulness and obedience. "Therefore God exalted him to the highest place" (v. 9). The one who emptied and humbled himself was raised up to a status and station that he did not seek. He was given "the name that is above every name" (v. 9). This probably isn't a reference to the name Jesus, but rather a way of echoing the Old Testament use of "the Name" to refer to God and his character, which comes through in the Greek as "Lord." In this way, "Lord," God's name, became the primary way that believers spoke of Jesus.

Paul continues, "that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow" (v. 10). "Bowing/Bending the knee" is a common idiom for doing homage, recognizing the authority and power of the god or person before whom one is kneeling. There may be echoes here of the passage read earlier in our service, from Isaiah, in which God declares, "Before me every knee will bow; by me every tongue will swear" (45:23). The honor and homage due to God in Isaiah are now, here in Philippians, accorded to Jesus. What's more, Jesus' sovereignty is over the whole created order. His lordship will be acknowledged by all created beings. Recall what we've noted earlier in this sermon series about the rule of Rome and the reign of Caesar in a colony like Philippi, and you can begin to see how the Christian confession, "Jesus Christ is Lord" (v. 11), and by implication, "Caesar is not," would have been counter-cultural in the minds of many.

In the end, says Paul, all this is "to the glory of God the Father" (v.11). The cosmic veneration of Jesus is inseparable from the cosmic sovereignty of God. God and Jesus are integrally related. The work of one is the work of the other. The kingdom of one is the kingdom of the other. What Jesus has done, and what God has done through him, is ultimately to the praise of the Father.

So that's the Christ hymn. It's a song about Jesus, and most of all a song about God. Paul isn't saying that Jesus' coming into this world was God's way of putting on humanity, like a form of clothing, for just a little while, and then discarding it to return to being a God far removed from the brokenness, lostness, and messiness of this world's life. No, we're singing about a God who descends into human flesh in order to unite us with himself. I know that Christmas is still nearly five months away, but we who confess that Jesus is Lord are always praising and glorifying the God who became human, who came down to us for our salvation. For the God of the universe to empty himself and take the form of a servant goes against our instincts and preferences about how a god should behave in order to exercise power and authority.

George Buttrick, former minister at Harvard University, recalls that students would sometimes come into his office, plop down in a chair, and declare, "I don't believe in God." Buttrick would answer, "Sit down and tell me what kind of God you don't believe in. I probably don't believe in that God either." Then he would proceed to talk about Jesus, whose life, death, and resurrection challenge some of our misperceptions of God.¹

The God whom Paul, the Philippians, and we, still sing about, doesn't wait until we can ascend to where he is through good behavior, personal determination, or human progress, and then releases his love into our lives. No, God descends to us in self-giving, self-emptying, self-sacrificing mercy and forgiveness, most of all at the cross, where he redeems us and reconciles us to himself and to one another. He brings our mortal, broken lives into his divine life, by taking our sin and its consequences upon himself, by entering into our dying, so that we may be raised. This is why the cross, and the God it reveals, remain so scandalous in a world that thinks of power, prominence, and prestige with such a different mindset.

But step back and remember why Paul has included this Christ hymn at this point in his letter. "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus" (v. 5). In order to cultivate the kind of unity they need in their congregation, they need to exercise humility and obedience. And in order to be formed in this kind of humility and obedience, they need exemplars. And the chief model of this mindset is Christ, who lowered himself for the sake of others, demoting himself into our humanity. Those who follow this kind of Lord will take on a downward mobility attitude toward life.

This story of Christ's descent and exaltation, his life, death, and resurrection, is *the* story. It's our story. In a world where so many other stories can define us, form us, and empower us, this story is the core of who we are and how we live. That's why we keep this story at the center of our lives, individually and together, past, present, and future. So as we go further into this season of change in our church's life, remember that this story doesn't change. And we're called to stick to it. We'll continue to preach it, teach it, sing it, pray it, and share it.

And woven into all these, we'll practice it. We'll live this story of a Lord who took the downward way that leads to life. That's why Paul makes a final appeal in the other main section of today's text, verses 12-18. He brings full circle what he began in 1:27: "Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ." In your life together, and in the midst of a watching world, live according to this good news story of Jesus Christ. Stick to this story in your thinking and your action. This song that's on your lips must also be evident in your lives.

"Therefore," says Paul, "my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose" (vv. 12-13). Note that before he starts giving them admonitions about how to behave, Paul reminds the Philippians about his affection for them. Whether he and they are together or apart, he cares for them. And out of his care for them, he tells them to persevere in the hard work of obedience, participating faithfully in what God is doing among them. "Work out your salvation with fear and trembling."

Paul thinks of salvation as an ongoing, progressive kind of experience that begins with confessing Jesus as Lord and culminates with the coming of the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. Until the Savior appears, believers are to live out their commitment "with fear and trembling," a reverential, humble bowing of their lives to the one before whom the whole

creation will one day bend the knee. Paul doesn't mean that we're supposed to earn our salvation, but he does mean that we're supposed to exercise and embody, by the power of the Holy Spirit, the deliverance that we have in Christ. As one commentator has summarized it, "While the Philippians are meant to *work out* their salvation, they are not to *work for* it."² And so it is for us. I'm not sure of the history of our church's name, but they picked a good one: *Grace Baptist Church*. Our salvation in Christ is by God's grace, God's initiative, and God's work. But along with God's unmerited mercy comes our responsibility to work out that grace in our lives, individually and together.

This is instructive for us as we go further into this period of transition in our church's life. We have been and still are *Grace Baptist Church*. But we're called to continue to grow into, to live into that name, going forward, trusting that "it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose" (v. 13). That closing expression can also be translated as God's "good pleasure." This doesn't mean that God is a self-absorbed being, but that he will accomplish what is for our good and for his glory. So in the days and weeks ahead, we as a congregation will need to guard against idleness and inactivity, just standing still or sitting back, waiting to see what's next. Yes, you'll need to wait upon the Lord and his guidance. But wait actively. Wait by continuing to put in the hard work, the strenuous labor, and the time-consuming effort that's required of people who have experienced the grace of God, with confidence that he will continue to work in you according to his good purposes for our church.

In the closing portion of today's text, Paul admonishes the Philippians further. As we've noted before, though their bond in Christ is strong and their joy abundant, the congregation is far from perfect. They still fall short of the Lord's intention for them, that they "become blameless and pure, children of God without fault" (v. 15). For now, they need to push back against any attitudes and actions that would weaken or compromise their fellowship, not just for their own internal cohesion, but also for their external witness. Paul says that over against the moral commitments of their surrounding culture, they need to stand out. They need to "shine like stars in the universe," illuminating a darkened world (v. 15). Then he adds that the Philippians need to "hold out the word of life," which can also be translated as "hold on to/hold fast the word of life." Either way, the emphasis is on living out the gospel in ways that affirm and offer an alternative way of life in the midst of a culture that resists the way of Christ.

Here at *Grace Baptist Church*, the way of Christ, the story of Christ, still defines us. It shows us who God is and what God is like, which determines who we are and what we're like. God's ultimate purpose is to reproduce his character, his way, in us, giving us the mind of Christ, forming us into the likeness of Christ. This means we're called to imitate Christ, not just as a helpful example, but as one to whom we're joined by faith, and who lives and works in us and through us. And we can be assured that he'll keep doing that in the days and weeks ahead, so that our fellowship with each other remains strong and our witness in the world remains vibrant.

¹ Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995) 264.

² Todd D. Still, *Philippians and Philemon*. Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 2011) 75.