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## **“The Great Condescension”**

### **Philippians 2:1-11**

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**(Philippians 2:1-11)**

Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, <sup>2</sup>then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. <sup>3</sup>Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, <sup>4</sup>not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

<sup>5</sup>In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

<sup>6</sup>Who, being in very nature God,  
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;

<sup>7</sup>rather, he made himself nothing  
by taking the very nature of a servant,  
being made in human likeness.

<sup>8</sup>And being found in appearance as a man,  
he humbled himself  
by becoming obedient to death—  
even death on a cross!

<sup>9</sup>Therefore God exalted him to the highest place  
and gave him the name that is above every name,

<sup>10</sup>that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,  
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

<sup>11</sup>and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father.

Let's begin by making some helpful observations. First, almost all scholars agree that verses 6-11 is an ancient hymn. Whether it was Paul who wrote this hymn or someone else, we can't know. Some scholars propose that it was Stephen, the first martyr. I think it's fascinating that the New Testament contains many hymns. This keeps in line with the long tradition that was begun in the Old Testament. One of the first hymns in the Old Testament was the song of Miriam, which she sang after the victorious deliverance of the enslaved Israelites. Of course, we all know that an entire book of the Old Testament was a compilation of 150 songs, the book of Psalms. It was the hymnbook of God's people.

When we get to the New Testament, the song writing continues. Zacharias, the father of John the Baptist and Mary, the mother of Jesus, and Simeon all wrote songs regarding the coming of the Son of God.

They say that Romans 11:36 is a hymn or song of sorts. We sing it at the end of one of our songs today. See if this rings a bell:

<sup>36</sup> For from him and through him and for him are all things.  
To him be the glory forever! Amen.

The book of Revelation contains songs that are sung in heaven to worship and praise God and his Son. Throughout the New Testament, scholars have pointed out many other poems or lyrics that are included among the writings of the Bible authors.

Second, this hymn is introduced as an example or as the foundation for why we should live in unity as a church community. From the end of chapter one, Paul began to address the subject of unity within the church. When we get to chapter two, Paul gives a full-blown teaching on the subject, which is what we looked at last time. If you remember, his teaching on unity led to its ultimate expression in that we should think of each other as better, as more important than each other, not just as equals. This climax of his teaching on unity segues into one of the richest teachings on the person of Jesus. Jesus serves as the supreme example of what considering others better than yourself is supposed to look like.

Third, this hymn is loaded with theology. This hymn contains propositional statements, truth statements, one after the other—which tells us that not all hymns or Christian songs have to be about my personal experience with God. The psalms, of course, have a perfect blend of personal experience and doctrine. When it comes to personal experience the psalms contain the full range of life experiences from exhilaration and great joy, to anger, to deep suffering and sorrow. Many of the psalms are just songs of crying out to God for help. At the same time, the collection of psalms has an almost complete theology of the person, nature, and activity of God. So, remember that singing worship songs and hymns have the dual role of worshipping God and teaching the Christian the great truths of God.

Fourth, let's look at the structure of the hymn. Now you'll have to follow along in your Bibles to see this. There are six stanzas to this hymn, indicated by the six verse numbers. Another thing to notice is that there is a very obvious turning point in this hymn. The first three stanzas describe the lowering or condescension of Christ. Paul starts at the very top, at the deity of Christ, then descends to his incarnation leading ultimately to his death. But when we get to the fourth stanza (verse 9), the direction changes. He's gone as low as he could go. Now, instead of Christ going down, Christ is going up. It moves from his condescension to his exaltation. So the passage flows like a V-shape. Christ is at the very top, descends to the very bottom, and ascends to the very top again.

The point of this passage is simple. Be like Christ. Be humble like Christ. Be other-centered like Christ. Think of the interests of others before your own interests, just like Christ. Let Christ be the example for how we should relate to others. Then from verses six to eleven, he tells us, through this ancient hymn, what the mindset or attitude of Christ was like. Let's take a closer look.

The hymn begins by stating the deity of Jesus Christ. He is in very nature God. He existed in the very form of God. This opening phrase is actually quite packed with meaning. This line expresses the true nature, the true essence of something or someone. Also, to possess the form of God, means that he possessed the glory of God. In the Old Testament, when God appeared among the people, whether to Moses and the Israelites, or to Isaiah in the temple, how did God, who has no form, reveal himself? The way the Bible describes this tangible experience of God is with the word 'glory.' When Moses wanted to experience more of God, he asked God, "Now, show me your glory (Exodus 33:18)." We cannot see God, but we can experience him, and in one sense 'see' his glory. This glory is his splendor, radiance, and magnificence; it's what emanates from God. Then consider what Paul writes about Christ in the New Testament.

**(2 Corinthians 4:4)** The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

Satan has blinded people from seeing this glory, but when our eyes are opened by the Holy Spirit to understand and believe the gospel, what is it that we see? The glory of Christ! And who is Christ? The image of God. Colossians 1:15 says,

The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.

And Hebrews 1:3 says,

The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.

Thus, the beginning of Paul's hymn is telling us the height and loftiness of Jesus. He is none other than God in all his splendor and glory, which he possessed for all eternity. There is none other like him. There is none higher, greater, more worthy, none more glorious than this Jesus.

Yet, he did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage. Now, this line is very similar to John 1:1, where it says, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the word was God." The Word who is Jesus, was with God the Father, implying he was other than God the Father, yet he was also God. When Paul writes that Jesus was in very nature God, but did not consider equality **with** God, he implies that Jesus is other than God the Father. To be equal to something implies there are at least two things that are being compared. Those two pizza slices are equal. Those two bags of sugar are equal. We can't say something is equal if there is only one of those things. So in the first line he's establishing the deity of Christ, and in the second line, he's affirming the otherness of the Son from the Father, but the equality of the Son to the Father. In addition to the John 1:1 passage, this is another verse that establishes the deity of the Son, Jesus Christ.

Paul is asserting that Jesus existed in all of eternity past, before his incarnation as God and equal to God, but at some point, in that past eternity, the Son made a decision. That decision was, "He did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage." What is meant by this unusual phrase? It means that Jesus made a choice, a decision, saying, though I am in very nature God, I will not use my equality with God for my own advantage."

The word for advantage (or in other translations 'grasped'), implies an advantage to exploit. Think of it like this. Christ possesses deity, a divine nature, god-ness. Because it is part of his nature, it is his by right, it's his by nature. He can use this divine nature to his advantage, he can grasp, take hold of what is rightfully his. He can use his deity in any way that he pleases, because he is God. As well, all glory is his, it is his by right; by nature, all glory and honor and respect and worship belong to him, yet he will not use it to his own advantage. This act was a divine act of self denial, which is a mind-blowing thing. The God who has everything, literally everything belongs to him. All power is his. All knowledge is his. All presence is his. Everything is his. The God who shouldn't have to deny himself anything, did! And before he did it, he decided he would do it.

Let's move on. Verse 7 begins with 'rather' or 'but'; rather, he made himself nothing. This has to be the greatest 'rather', the greatest use of the word 'but' in all of literature. What did the one who is God do? He made himself nothing, or he emptied himself. This is the greatest contrast ever depicted in the universe. The word for emptying or making oneself nothing, is used in four other places in the New Testament. It can mean "to be nothing" or "to be drained of power" or "rendered void" or "to be deprived of something" or "to be hollow". All of those translations in the NIV carry the sense of emptying.

Now, this emptying of Christ has generated three major theories over the centuries. Here's a simple summary from a respected commentary.

The **first** theory focuses on what Jesus gave up. He gave up his rights of divinity. In no way did Christ for even a moment lose his divinity, his god-ness, or his god-nature. What he did at his incarnation was to assume another nature, that of a man, thus now possessing truly two natures—the nature of God and the nature of man. That's the first theory of Christ's emptying of himself. The **second** theory focuses on what Jesus became? He emptied himself in becoming a man, a slave. He became the lowest of the low. Finally, the **third** theory focuses on his death, specifically referring to Isaiah 53:12, which says,

Therefore I will give him a portion among the great,  
and he will divide the spoils with the strong,  
because **he poured out (emptied)** his life unto death,  
and was numbered with the transgressors.  
For he bore the sin of many,  
and made intercession for the transgressors.

So, which is the right one? Theory 1, 2, or 3? Probably to some degree, all of them. Consider the first theory again. Jesus, in his incarnation, did give up his divine rights. And he also became a servant, a slave for us. Mark tells us that the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and give his life as a ransom. And finally, yes, he did empty himself by suffering a horrendous death on the cross. In all three of these ways, Jesus emptied himself.

Paul continues by explaining to us, what this emptying looked like? He says that Jesus took on the very nature of a servant or slave. The word for slave was used in the first verse of this letter, when Paul introduces Timothy and himself as ‘servants’ or ‘slaves’ of Christ. But now, the term is applied to Jesus. In saying that he took the nature of a servant, Paul was forcing us to see the stark comparison of the two forms, the two natures. Jesus was in very nature God, but now, he is in the very nature of a servant, or a slave. Jesus demonstrated this slave-like position when on the evening before his crucifixion, he washed his disciples’ feet, which acted as a picture of the ultimate sacrifice he would soon make.

What was he showing in doing this? He was showing us that he left the glory of heaven for the sake of others. He was thinking of our needs before he was thinking of his own needs. He was thinking that the only way to make these people his, was if he went down to earth himself to serve them. At the same time he was showing us how we are to act toward others. Jesus said, now that I’ve washed your feet, go and do likewise. And here too in Philippians Paul is using the example of Christ as a model for us to follow. No one can go as low as Christ, but he has indeed set the standard.

As I said when I gave the sermon on the introduction to this letter, we must not think that the designation of slave of Christ or servant of Christ as some put down or insult. Rather, it is the highest honor, for in doing so, we are reflecting, mirroring Jesus, the great servant, the great slave, who left heaven for us.

In the next line it says that he was made in human likeness. This means that he shared the full experience of what it means to be human. He didn’t just imagine to be human or pretend to be human. He didn’t send someone else, like an angel, to experience humanity on his behalf. He himself became human. He himself took on human likeness. Jesus was born of a mother, just like every other human. He had a physical body. He breathed air. He ate food and drank water. He grew up like every other child. He had human relationships. He worked. He went to the bathroom. He got tired. He slept. He learned. He felt real emotional pain, the pain of rejection and betrayal, the pain of being misunderstood. He felt acutely the strength and power of temptation. Except he was without sin. He felt physical pain. He experienced the moments right before he gave up his breath and finally, he experienced death itself. From birth to death and everything in between, he went through it all. He didn’t take any shortcuts; he didn’t cut any corners. Everything we experience in our lives, he also experienced, the full experience of humanity.

Let’s move on to verse 8 which goes like this:

<sup>8</sup> And being found in appearance as a man,  
he humbled himself  
by becoming obedient to death—  
even death on a cross!

The first line reiterates what Paul just said about Christ’s humanity. The phrase that this verse begins with, “and being found” means that it was unmistakable that he was human. If you were to look at him, observe him, watch his behavior, the only conclusion you could make was that he was human. When we think about the twelve disciples and their interaction with Jesus, it was never his humanity that was in question. It was his deity that was troubling for them. It was, how could this person, this man, be unlike any other man, and do things that only God could do? His humanity was never the problem. He was found, proved to be a man.

The next line says that he humbled himself. It’s easy for us to conclude that what Paul meant to say was that Christ was a humble person, a meek, kind, gentle person.

However, there's more to the word humble, isn't there? Humble is the positive side of the word, but the negative side of the word is humiliation. It's still the same word but seen in a completely opposite light. It's one thing to be humble; it's a completely different thing to be humiliated. So, what does it mean here? I think it means humiliation. Given the placement of the word—Paul doesn't introduce Christ's incarnation with humility, rather he inserts the word right before he speaks about the cross. And what was the cross, an act of humility? Yes, for sure. But more than that, it was a shameful act of humiliation. In other words, Paul is saying that Christ, in becoming a man, allowed himself to be utterly humiliated. We need only look to Isaiah 53, the chapter on the suffering servant to see the extent of his humiliation. The passage actually begins in 52:13. Allow me to read it for us.

**(Isaiah 52:13)** See, my servant will act wisely;  
he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted.  
14 Just as there were many who were appalled at him —  
his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any human being  
and his form marred beyond human likeness—  
15 so he will sprinkle many nations,  
and kings will shut their mouths because of him.  
*For what they were not told, they will see,  
and what they have not heard, they will understand.*

**Isaiah 53:1** *Who has believed our message  
and to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?*  
2 *He grew up before him like a tender shoot,  
and like a root out of dry ground.*  
He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him,  
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.  
3 He was despised and rejected by mankind,  
a man of suffering, and familiar with pain.  
Like one from whom people hide their faces  
he was despised, and we held him in low esteem.  
4 Surely he took up our pain  
and bore our suffering,  
yet we considered him punished by God,  
stricken by him, and afflicted.

This is a description of His humiliation. Now going back to Philippians, notice that Jesus humbled **himself**. Yes, what the Jews did to him was humiliating. Yes, what the Romans did to him was humiliating. They humiliated the Son of God. But let's not make a mistake here. In no way could they have humiliated Jesus, unless he first decided that he would allow himself to be humiliated.

Specifically, Jesus humbled himself by becoming obedient to death. What does that mean to be "obedient to death?" That's a strange phrase, isn't it? By becoming human, he entered the world of death. All humans are born in order to die. The fact that he entered this world means that he came to die. So that's one sense in which he became obedient to death. But of course, we know there's more to it than that. The death that he's really pointing to is the last phrase, 'even death on a cross.'

Christ's death was a result of his active, conscious, wilful obedience. He became obedient to death. But obedience to whom? Surely, this refers to the will of the Father. His entire life was lived in obedience to the Father, to honor and glorify the Father, to express his love for the Father. In the garden of Gethesemane, to whom did he cry out to have the cup of suffering removed? And to whom did he relinquish his will when he said, "Yet not my will, but yours be done." Jesus obeyed the Father's will. He became obedient to death. Even death on the cross.

The cross was the lowest point of his humiliation. He could go no lower than the cross. At the cross, he was stripped naked and hung with two other criminals. He was mocked, whipped and beaten. He agonized physically for six hours, from 9am to 3pm. He bore upon his body, upon his soul, the unbridled wrath of Almighty God. This is the place where the curse of God fell upon the Beautiful One.

And yet, at this lowest of lowest places, Paul says, “May I boast in nothing save the cross of Christ!” This is the great condescension, the great lowering, the great humiliation of the Son of God. Listen once again to this passage.

**(Philippians 2:6)** Who, being in very nature God,  
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;  
7 rather, he made himself nothing  
by taking the very nature of a servant,  
being made in human likeness.  
8 And being found in appearance as a man,  
he humbled himself  
by becoming obedient to death—  
even death on a cross!

Let me end with three applications.

First, Paul said in chapter 2:3, “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves.” Remember that this hymn was to serve as the example of how we are to treat one another. So, let’s lower ourselves to serve like Christ did. Ask, Is there any person that is undeserving of your service? Is there any task that is too low for you to perform?

Second, worship. This is a hymn!!! Worship Jesus, the God who became man, the man who went to the cross. Sing his praises. Pour out your heart, with all your affection, to worship and praise Jesus, the Savior King.

Third, go to him with your need. When you understand this passage of what Jesus did, our response should not be, “Well he’s done so much already, I feel bad and guilty asking him for more.” This should not be. Rather, we should have the exact opposite response, which is what Paul tells us to do. He says in Romans 8, If God gave us Jesus, the one that is most precious, doesn’t it follow that he will give us all we need in Christ Jesus? Of course, it does, so go to him, don’t hesitate, don’t fear, just go to him.

Also, if you’re not a Christian, you also go to him. Christ left heaven and came to earth, became a man, humbled himself, died on a cross, for you. But you might say, I’m too sinful. I’m too far gone. I’ve done so many bad things. Well, that’s good because that’s all he requires of you, to know your need of him. So, come. Here is the invitation he gives you.

**(Matthew 11:28)** “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. <sup>29</sup> Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. <sup>30</sup> For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

Let’s pray.