

FIVE FORKS BRETHREN IN CHRIST CHURCH

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SERMON: *The Greatest Hymn*

SERIES: *Letter from a Roman Prison*

SCRIPTURES: *Philippians 2:1-11*

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**Credit to Darrell Johnson for insights/illustrations related to this passage!*

Well good morning and welcome to Five Forks Church this morning.

What is the greatest hymn ever sung?

It is Well with my Soul

Amazing Grace

Let's a play a little game. Name that hymn. I'll read the lyric to a popular hymn you tell me the name of the hymn.

And when I think that God, His Son not sparing, Sent Him to die, I scarce can take it in. (How Great Thou Art)

Watching and waiting, looking above, Filled with His goodness, lost in His love, (Blessed Assurance)

See from His head, His hands, His feet, Sorrow and love flow mingled down!
(When I Survey the Wondrous Cross)

Here I find my greatest treasure; hither by thy help I've come; (Come thou fount of every blessing)

His glories now we sing; Who died and rose on high; Who died eternal life to bring; And lives that death may die (Crown him with many crowns)

Great hymns. Inspirational. Significant.

But today we come to perhaps the greatest hymn ever written. A hymn that expresses the very center and core of our faith. A hymn that describes the heart of who God is.

Our series is called **“Letter from a Roman Prison.” (Series Title Graphic)** Looking at the book of Philippians. A letter that Paul wrote to the early church in Philippi.

And once again, it’s gonna be really helpful if you open your Bible to the book of Philippians and follow along...the hymn we are going to be looking at this morning is found in **Philippians 2:5-11**. Whether Paul composed this hymn as he wrote the letter or whether he wrote it earlier and just included it or whether some other person composed it we do not know. But this passage is one of the clearest expressions of the Christian Faith in all of Scripture. If you make it a discipline to memorize Scripture...this passage should be near the top of your list.

To understand the significance of this hymn we really need to understand again some of the language that Paul is using. Remember in this series you are becoming Greek scholars. The New Testament was written in Greek. We want to understand as best we can what Paul was trying to say. And kind of to help you out today, I’ve put some of the key words/phrases we’re going to look at, in your bulletin and then I’ve given you some space to write a definition for yourself or a picture that represents the meaning of the words, you can do that.

We’ll skip over the first four verses of chapter 2, but we’ll come back to them at the end of the message. Ok.

⁵ Let the same mind be in you that was^[a] in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, ⁷ but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, ⁸ he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. ⁹ Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

I. Understanding Paul's Hymn

Many scholars believe this section of Paul's letter was an early Christian hymn.

The hymn can be divided into three stanzas, coinciding with Jesus' "existence."

And you can think of the flow of the song, like a mathematical parabola.

Image of parabola and stanzas show up at top – bottom – top:

Stanza 1 (verses 5-6) – pre-earthly existence (before he entered our world)

Stanza 2 (verses 7-8) – earthly existence (that's his time on earth)

Stanza 3 (verses 9-11) – post-earthly existence. (after returning to his Father)

Jesus career begins (stanza 1) in the height of glory...descends into the depth of earthly conditions (stanza 2)...and because he accepted and fulfilled the descent... (stanza 3) he is exalted to the highest place.

And so we are going to follow Paul's train of thought through these three stanzas of the hymn. And then when we come to the end we'll hopefully see an incredible picture about the very nature of who God is.

A. Stanza 1

Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God

Two words here...

Was... the word was means to exist (to have being) or to possess...

In his pre-earthly existence, Paul is saying, Jesus existed in and possessed the form of God.

Form (morphe) – means outward shape of a thing that conforms to the inward reality. Which sounds complicated but it's really not.

We use this concept when we are wrapping Christmas gifts. Don't you often take oddly shaped items and put it in a box and then wrap it? It is partly to make it easier for wrapping. But it is also to conceal what is on the inside, what the real item is. If you just wrapped certain oddly shaped items without putting them in a box, people would be able to tell what was under the wrapping just by the outward shape.

(Pull out gift) Suppose I buy Jenny an early Christmas gift. You should be stopping me, right there. This hypothetical.

But suppose I were to buy her a vacuum cleaner. There are two ways I could wrap it. I could leave it in the box and she would not know what it is? (The outside shape would NOT match what is really underneath.) Or I could wrap it in the very shape of the object...in this case...a vacuum cleaner. And if I did, she would know what is under the wrapping because the outside shape would give away the inward reality. And then she would return all of the gifts that she had purchased me.

Paul says Jesus possessed the form of God meaning, “Jesus possessed inwardly and displayed outwardly the very nature of God.” **When you look at Jesus you are seeing God.** Which is why he goes on to say...

though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,

Equal with God...Jesus divinity was on the same level as God’s divinity.

One of the distinctives of the Christian faith is that we believe Jesus was fully God. Jesus career begins in the height of glory. But...let’s move to...

B. Stanza 2

The descent of Jesus.

He emptied himself...

Of what did Jesus empty himself?

- Did he empty himself of his divine nature?
- Did he empty himself of the privileges of being God?

You know we tend to think of God, first and primarily as “the most powerful being.” For many of us the first attribute we would assign to God would be “all-powerful.” What it means to be God is all-powerful. (**God=all-powerful**). Or we may add some of the omni words: omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent. And so we would think, Paul must mean Jesus emptied himself of some of that power. He let go of some of his “godness”.

But the hymn does not say he emptied himself of anything. Just that he emptied himself. In fact the hymn indicates that his emptying was not so much from subtraction (letting go of something, like power or grandeur) but rather from addition. He emptied himself “taking”...And what did he take?

He emptied himself...taking...the form of a slave.

Form - The word form is the exact same word as used above. In the same way that Jesus was in the form of God, he is now taking the form of a slave on earth. Jesus possessed inwardly and displayed outwardly the nature of a human slave.

Slave - There are two words in Greek for slave or servant. One is the word we talked about a couple of weeks ago “diakonos” (deacon) or “table-waiter.” This is the kind of servant who is able to come and go as they please, as long as the work gets done. Much more similar to how we think about “employees.”

But there is another word for servant or slave and that is the word **doulos**. A doulos has no rights. He or she does what the master wants, when and how the master wants it done. And it is this second term that the hymn uses. Paul says, Jesus becomes a doulos. He takes up the life of a slave.

being born in human likeness...⁸ he humbled himself and became obedient

One of the key characteristics of a doulos slave is that they are obedient to their master. Jesus becomes one who is obedient.

The hymn draws a deliberate contrast to the first human being (going back to the book of Genesis). Adam, was created in the likeness (image) of God, and chose disobedience and that disobedience resulted in the ruin of the world.

Jesus, in contrast, born in human likeness chooses obedience, which brings reconciliation and healing to the world.

But the descent continues for Jesus...he is not just one who is obedient...but is...

obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.

In the first century, death on a cross was the most degrading of all deaths. Death on a cross was reserved for criminals, vagabonds, worthless rubbish.

The descent for Jesus is total. **(Image of Parabola again, showing Jesus descent) From heaven to earth. On earth as a human. As a human, a slave. As a slave, obedient to death. And ultimately death of the most shameful kind.**

Why? Why would the all-powerful one...allow such a descent? Why not another way? We'll get to that in a moment. Let's look at...

C. Stanza 3

**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 acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.**

Now notice the ascent of Jesus...The doulos is exalted and given the name above all names. What name is Jesus given? Did you notice? He is given the name...

“Lord” in Greek, the word is **kurios**.

Now, why is kurios the name above every name?

In the Roman world, kurios is often how they referred to the **emperor**. The most powerful one. Especially as the emperors began to think of themselves even as divine. Kurios was that name.

In the Jewish world, kurios...was equivalent to **Yahweh**. The personal name of God.

Strict believers in Judaism, would not even utter God's name, in fear they would say it improperly and break the 3rd commandment, about taking the Lord's name in vein. And so, instead the Jews would substitute another word for Yahweh...the word "**Adonai**", and when Adonai is translated into Greek it is kurios, representing the Jewish God.

Paul is saying, "Jesus is given the name "kurios"...Lord...God."

What a remarkable claim to make for the rabbi from Nazareth. He is worthy of the same reverence and acclaim given to the emperor in Rome and truly the same reverence given to Yahweh, the God of the Jews.

The one who was completely obedient, must now be completely obeyed.

At the name of Jesus every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is "kurios"...Yahweh...to the Glory of the God the father. Notice the ascent of Jesus.

Why is Jesus given this exalted name? And why does it bring glory to God?

We are now ready to understand the magnitude of Paul's hymn about the nature of who God is. One last...

D. The Key Phrase

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

Exploited. Your translation may say “to be grasped”.

The Greek word is (harpagmos)...it's hard word to translate. This is the only place in the NT Paul uses it.

But the essence of the words is “not something to take advantage of or exploit.”

The idea is something like: **Jesus did not consider his Godness as something to take advantage of, but he considered his Godness to mean something completely different.**

NT scholar Darrell Johnson says, the language suggests the following picture: The son of God, Jesus in his pre-earthly existence is contemplating what it means to be equal with GOD. (We would say omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent first and primarily) Jesus comes to the conclusion that equality with God is not something to take advantage of...but rather equality with God MEANS emptying oneself and taking the form of a servant.

Jesus is contemplating what it means to be God...and comes to the conclusion that to be God is to be servant!

Godhood=servanthood

Lordship=footwashing

In his descent, Jesus does not lay aside the form of God or equality with God. Rather having equality with God is most essentially, most naturally, expressed in taking on,

inwardly and outwardly the form of a servant, accepting the powerlessness and dying the death of a common criminal.

To be most like God is not mostly to have more power, but to be most like the God of the Christian faith is to empty oneself as a *doulos* to the world.

CFD Muel writes, **“Divine equality does not mean getting but giving and it is properly expressed in self-giving love.”**

Darrell Johnson says, **“Against the age-old attempts of human beings to make God in their own arrogant, self-glorifying image, Calvary, the cross, reveals the truth about what it means to be God.”**

Having hurled galaxies into space...His most glorious moment is when he gives himself for us.

This is why the cross is often foolishness to a secular world.

Jesus understood that the best way to express being God was through a cradle, a towel and a cross.

And that is why the hymn sings, **“therefore God has highly exalted him.”** That is why the crucified servant is given the name above every name.

God the Father gives the name Yahweh, to Jesus...because in Jesus decision to give himself in self-emptying love Jesus has most fully expressed and revealed what it means to be Yahweh. It is because he becomes human...a slave...lays down his life for us...that he is worthy of the name Lord, Kurios.

Now, when you begin to understand that, it will help you to make sense of a whole host of other Scripture.

Mark 15 – There is this curious scene at the foot of the cross. A Roman soldier is looking up at the dying Jesus...and he utters the words, “Truly this was the son of God.” What made the soldier say that? By all of our definitions and aspirations, god’s do not die criminals deaths. This scene does not make sense unless you understand that the self-emptying love of Jesus is the fullest and clearest picture of what it means to be God.

For the Gospel writers the cross is not Jesus human misfortune, the cross is his decisive manifestation of his divinity.

In John’s Gospel we are told that on the night before Jesus was crucified, he dons the garments of a servant, with a towel and basin and lowers himself at his disciples feet. Often when this scene is described we will talk about, “what a great contradiction or paradox that Jesus (God) would stoop so low as to wash feet.”

Maybe Jesus is having an identity crises or some confusion about who he is. We might cry out with Peter, you’ll never wash my feet.

But it turns out Jesus knows exactly who he is. Washing feet was not a contradiction of his identity as God. It was a manifestation, an expression of who he truly is.

Friends, no matter how high we go, he will be higher still. And no matter how low you have to stoop in order to serve God will stoop lower still. (Johnson)

Jesus considered equality with God to be “self-emptying servanthood.”

Is it any wonder Paul’s opening line, as he identifies himself in Chapter 1 of this letter is not as APOSTLE, but as a doulos himself.

Is it any wonder that Paul can say “to live is Christ but to die is gain.” What else could he say, when the one He seeks to follow has emulated this very thing.

Jesus is given the name Lord because he understands that the essence of God is self-emptying love. This is the core of our faith. This is the God who so loved the world that he gave his life for you.

What a remarkable hymn Paul writes to those earliest believers.

II. So What?

Let’s close a few practical thoughts related to this great song that Paul wrote.

A. The songs we sing are important.

Our worship is important. I just wonder, sometimes if we get lazy with this aspect of our worship. Zone out. Allow our minds to wander. I would encourage you. Don’t skip out on this important aspect of our faith.

The early church understood the significance of musical worship as an expression of our faith. This song in Philippians 2 is one of many songs throughout Scripture that help us fix our eyes on Jesus.

Several examples:

Colossians 1:15-20 - ¹⁵ The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. ¹⁶ For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. ¹⁷ He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸ And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in

everything he might have the supremacy. ¹⁹ For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, ²⁰ and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

John, many scholars believe that the famous opening words to John's gospel we're an early Christian a hymn:

Book of Revelation...

Revelation 4 - ⁸ Each of the four living creatures had six wings and was covered with eyes all around, even under its wings. Day and night they never stop saying:

**“Holy, holy, holy
is the Lord God Almighty,^[a]
who was, and is, and is to come.”**

We too, must come to understand appreciate the significance of our musical worship as an expression of our faith. It doesn't mean we all have to enjoy the same style of musical worship.

But let us pay careful attention the words that we are expressing. Let us focus our minds on the lyrics and on Jesus.

B. Practice servanthood.

If being God does not mean “taking advantage of privilege” but rather means “emptying oneself,” can being human mean anything less? We were created in the image of this God. We are created to reflect the nature and character of this God.

Which means that we are most fully human, when we most completely reflect God's nature and character.

I told you we were gonna come back to the first 4 verses of Philippians 2...let me read them to you:

2 If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, ² make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³ Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. ⁴ Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.

⁵ Let the same mind be in you that was^{al} in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, ⁷ but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave,

We are most what we were created to be when we empty ourselves and take the form of a servant.

When we cling to our lives, clutch for our rights, protect our agendas and careers, insist on the fulfillment of our wish dreams, keep our lives for ourselves...then in the end we will lose because we are violating who we were created to be.

Paul's hymn to the church in Philippi was a reminder that at the beginning and end of everything is self-emptying servant love. Out of that servant love we were created and redeemed and for that servant love we were created and redeemed.

And now, may you have this mind in you that was in Jesus, who BECAUSE he was God did not consider equality with God something he used to his advantaged, but emptied himself.