

## Prayer

Give us peace, Lord God we pray. Peace within our hearts to praise You, peace within our lives to serve You, and peace within our souls to live for You. Save us from the distress and trouble of selfish living, and help us live a life of active, peaceful and faithful service. Thank You Lord Jesus, AMEN

## Other Prayer Suggestions

### Weekly Theme: Manufacturing

*Pray today for the senior leaders of industry whose decisions affect the jobs of many people, and the union officials who represent people who work in industry.*

### On-going prayers

- *Pray for those who maintain the safety of our coastlines*
- *Give thanks for the carers who look after sick relatives*
- *Pray for those who suffer from Motor Neurone Disease*

## Meditation

Your work Lord God,

is to bring together what had been undone;  
to mend lives that have been broken;  
to restore order to what has been shattered;  
to heal those who have been suffering;  
to bring wholeness to what has been damaged;  
to bind up whatever has been torn apart;  
to release those who have been bound;  
to restore what has been lost or mislaid;  
and to complete what has been left undone.

You have been doing all this since the beginning of history,  
And You will continue to do it until the world is completed,  
When all things will be re-created by You and in You. AMEN

## Bible Study - Philippians 2:5-11

<sup>5</sup> *Have this same mind in common with Christ Jesus,* <sup>6</sup> *who, though being God by nature, did not consider equality with God as something to be held on to.* <sup>7</sup> *Instead, He gave up His own power, took the likeness of a slave and was born in the same way as everyone else. Then, being found to be like other people,* <sup>8</sup> *he made himself humble, submitting even to death, death on a cross.* <sup>9</sup> *For this reason, God raised him to the highest possible place and graciously gave him the name above all names,* <sup>10</sup> *so that at the name of Jesus everything in heaven, on earth and under the earth, should bow down in worship* <sup>11</sup> *and confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

## Review

This extraordinary and beautiful poem is one of the most significant hymns of the early church, and is one of the earliest known attempts to understand the nature and being of Jesus. It holds together in beautiful language the mystery of Jesus' incarnation and coming into the world, and describes this in a deep and awe-inspiring way, moving the hearts of readers more than can possibly be imagined. It is little wonder that in the last two thousand years of the Christian Church these words have done two things. Firstly, some regard them as the best and finest explanation of the mystery of Jesus' humanity; and secondly, they have been the subject of unceasing debate and extensive analysis. Scholars have poured over every word in search of their spiritual and theological riches; though in recent times some have gone so far they have forgotten the most obvious meaning of the text, which is the awesome mixture of human and divine in Christ Jesus.

In the last one hundred years, over six hundred major publications have been printed on this passage alone, and anyone attempting to come to terms with all this is therefore faced with a lifetime of reading. Therefore, the best recommendation I can make to those who wish to understand this text is to ask the Holy Spirit who inspired its writing to inspire them as they read. If we have access to other books that tell us some of the many conclusions of scholarly study, then we must treat these as partial maps into the territory of the unknown. These words are about God's identity and that of His Son Jesus, and they are holy to His people. One of the hottest arguments of recent times has been whether Paul himself wrote these words, or whether it was a hymn he quoted, and whether the original hymn was in Aramaic or Greek. The trouble is that studying this leads us to no conclusions, either for these questions, or for understanding the text generally. It is as if human study fails in the face of the mysteries of profound truth, but no-one wants to accept that little further can be added to its spiritual significance by more scholarship.

Those of us who read these words from the perspective of faith find that they represent the truths of the mystery of the Godhead. They tell us about God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and although it does not specifically mention the Holy Spirit, the passage tells us in powerful language about the nature of Jesus as a person and His divine calling. Within the letter to the Philippians, what Paul does is to condense into this poem what He wants to say about Jesus. He combines everything He has already said about fellowship in Christ (1:3-11), deliverance through suffering (1:19-26), unity amongst Christians (2:1,2), self effacement in Christian service (2:3,4), and explained them as the very characteristics of Jesus Christ, who died like a human being (2:8) but was also God!

The remarkable thing about this passage is that it describes all this as the extraordinary humility of Jesus. He came from heaven as the Son of God and was 'found to be like other people' (2:7), and subject to all the problems of living a human life. He brought salvation into the world by laying aside his power rather than by wielding it, and He accepted that the way of death was the only way by which people could be saved (2:8). God recognised this unique ministry, and gave Him victory over death and the right to return to heaven in glory (2:9)! Because of this, we worship Jesus for who He is, the very presence of God in our midst; and we make our 'confession of faith' in Him because He has won for us our salvation!

### ***Going Deeper***

In a quite remarkable way, Paul explained the nature of Jesus Christ not simply to give us a theological framework to understand God, but in order to tell the Philippian church about their own duties and privileges as followers of Christ. The characteristics of discipleship he had already explained in the first chapter of his letter were none other than the 'life of Christ', by which we copy and imitate the human qualities of Jesus. Yes, He was divine, but because of His humanity, He gives each of us an example to follow.

## Further Study

The passage begins *'have this same mind in common with Christ Jesus ...'* (2:5). If we had been writing this passage today, we might well be tempted to put *'have the same heart ...'* because we tend to think that *'the mind'* is not as *'spiritual'* a description of ourselves as, for example *'the heart'*. In the New Testament, however, whilst there was a fundamental difference between describing a person in terms of *'the flesh'* and *'the spirit'*, all the other main ways of describing humanity; heart, soul, mind, spirit, and body, for example were used without hierarchy to describe the whole person. Each word highlighted a different aspect of humanity. The word *'mind'* referred to the mental capacities of humanity, which, together with emotions, gave rise to actions. The mind combined thinking, intellect, conscience, expressions, reasoning and all other mental functions not *'locatable'* in the body (except as we now know, in the brain). The more we explore what was meant by the *'mind'*, the more we come to understand the breadth of Paul's appeal for us to have the same *'mind'* as Christ Jesus (2:5) and therefore live like Him.

Verses 6 to 11 cannot be divorced from this appeal, even if some would like to lift these verses out of scripture and examine them as a theological statement on their own. These words come alive when presented to a troubled fellowship or a divided group of Christians, or to disciples who have compromised their faith by insisting on their own way.

### ***Jesus, God and humanity***

In verses 6 and 7, Paul condensed into only a few words the relationship between Jesus and God. At the time of his writing, nothing like this had been put down in written form before. The Gospel of Matthew, for example, in which Peter called Jesus *'the Christ, the Son of the Living God'* (Matt 16:16) had not been written. Stories surrounding what had happened when Jesus was alive were passed on from one group of Christians to another, but it may well be that most of the Gospels had not yet been written. The insistence of John that Jesus was the *'Word'* who was *'with God ... and was God'* (John 1:1) may also have been in John's mind but not written down when Paul wrote to the Philippians. These words of Paul are therefore some of the earliest written statements which say that Jesus was God.

Paul said what he did in a way that was designed to help his readers, using words which would have helped them in their quest to understand their faith. He started by talking about Jesus as *'God by nature'*, emphasising that Jesus and God the Creator were the same. The Old Testament, through which people knew God as *'Lord'*, *'Lord God'*, *'Almighty God'*, to give but a few examples, linked the belief of the Israelite people back through their history to the God who had made the world and all things in it (Gen 1, Psalm 8 etc). Paul would not play the cultural game of describing Jesus as *'divine'*; this designation would have meant nothing in a Roman world in which people believed that everything they experienced was the result of the activities of many different divine beings. It was therefore important that Paul insisted to the Philippians that Jesus was by his very nature the one and only God who had made the world, and as such enjoyed absolute power and privilege within his own created order.

Paul then went on to say that the salvation Jesus won for us happened because He gave up the privileges of his divinity in becoming human, as we are. In other words, the greatest work ever done by anyone was paradoxically achieved by the giving up of power and authority, rather than taking hold of it (2:7). Of course, Paul was telling people about Jesus' nature, but by saying what he did, he was also telling them that God's ways and Jesus' ways were the same as those he had been already advocating in his letter, the ways of service and humility. Grasping at power has always been one of the most common traits of human behaviour, but Paul identified it as the very antithesis of Godliness (2:6). Giving up power and authority is

the opposite of how things are done in this world, but it was the way that God chose to work through Jesus.

### **Humility, death and victory**

The ultimate identification that Jesus could make with people was to die; for death, according to Genesis (3:22ff) was the result of sin and the fall of humanity, and it was what separated God from his fallen Creation. Death has always been the one thing that is certain for everyone who has ever lived, whatever fame, infamy or privacy people have lived with, and it is therefore the one thing 'par excellence' that unites all people. It is also called 'the great leveller', for the manner and timing of death is something that no-one can predict outside of war, murder or suicide. The fact that Jesus died was the proof of Jesus' overcoming the barrier between God and His fallen creation, humanity, whatever the cause and the circumstances of that terrible death.

Paul did not describe in this poem exactly how and why Jesus died on a Cross; if he wanted to he could have chosen to say much, but he did not. Most of what Paul had to say about this is written in his other letters (notably in Romans chapters 5 and 6), so the emphasis in this letter remains where it has been right from the beginning, on the humility of Jesus. Because of this, God was able to 'raise' (2:9) Jesus back to the heights of the glory of the Godhead again, and as is typical of Paul's writings, this poem expresses his belief that the death and resurrection of Jesus lies at the heart of the Gospel message. All else follows from this, including the teaching Paul is in the middle of giving to the Philippian Christians about humility and Christian living.

The poem concludes however, with a call to worship. This is something that Paul has not yet said anything about in his letter to the Philippian church, and therefore it comes as a surprise; but it is both welcome and appropriate. The work of Jesus, according to this great poem, has been completed and because of that, He is worthy of the worship of all Creation, throughout time and space. This was heresy to most Jewish people, who believed that God could not be understood in this way, even though their own scriptures contained references to the Messiah which were fulfilled in Jesus. The Old Testament also contained multiple names for 'God' which hinted, even in the story of Creation, at the multiple yet unified nature of the God they worshipped (Gen 1:26ff). According to Paul's poem, Jesus was by nature God, yet because of his earthly death and resurrection he was victoriously reunited with the Father in glory and therefore has become the subject of our praise; for the praise of Jesus is the praise of God Himself.

### **Application**

The glory of this great passage of scripture is not that it explains the relationship between God and Jesus. It helps us with this, but there are many other scriptures (such as Isaiah 53) which explain the relationship between God and the Messiah, and between the Father and the Son. What the hymn does is to show to the Philippian church that the qualities of humility and service Paul had been appealing to in his letter were the same qualities used by Jesus to do His great work of salvation. What greater reason could Paul give to the church at Philippi to follow his advice? Every Christian is called to follow what Jesus has first done Himself; Jesus was genuinely humble, united with his father, lived a life of servitude and refused to act with worldly power and authority, and we should not presume to know any way that is better.

If you read around this famous passage of scripture, you will find much more in these verses than I have explained here. Yet the simple message that this poem contains still appears to go over the heads of many Christians today. If unity of fellowship in the Lord, service, humility, powerlessness and even death were good enough for Jesus to win Salvation for the whole world, then surely there is a secret here for how to go about living and managing the life of the church today. Nevertheless, it never ceases to amaze me that

these fundamental qualities are laid aside by people otherwise regarded as 'godly' in pursuit of good management of the church, for example. I have heard it said bluntly that the only way the ... church (I will not say which) can survive is to employ proper current legal practices throughout its structures; for example. Is that really so? I was under the impression that the only way the church can survive is to put into practice the life of Christ, which is rather different. I am of the opinion that the Lord can teach us much through all manner of good things we find in His world, but there is no substitute for the 'life of Christ' being the supreme model for the church.

I could give similar example of attitudes within the church pertaining to music, theology, counselling, finance, mission, even local church structures, but I refrain from discussing the details; you can probably guess them. Unless our Christian life in every area and in every way measures up to the humility of the life of Christ as Paul identifies in this great poem, then there is little reason to call it Christian.

### **Questions** *(for use in groups)*

1. What did Jesus give up in order to become human? Can we understand this, or is the question unanswerable because of the limits of our knowledge?
2. When you read that Jesus 'submitted' to death, what does this mean?
3. What is the difference between worshipping Jesus and worshipping the Father or the Holy Spirit?

### **Discipleship**

#### **Personal comment:**

*The Christian church cannot survive in our day unless there is a renewal in which Jesus is given His place at the centre of the life of His Church again. Too much has happened in recent years in too many churches and denominations (I include all) by which the enemy has drawn us away from the example of Jesus Christ and His essential humility. The biggest danger of all is the temptation for people to ape the world's values of self-sufficiency and self aggrandisement in leadership; the results are dreadful. Let us each strive for the truth of the Gospel not the lies of the enemy.*

#### **Ideas for discipleship programme**

- *Think of an area of church life with which you are involved. Now read back through Philippians and this passage in particular and ask yourself whether what is done reflects the life of Christ as Paul expounds it?*
- *Fast and pray for the simple truths of the Gospel to penetrate the world in which we live by the power of God's Holy Spirit. Pray for the many good people who are doing a great work in faithfulness to the Gospel, and ask the Lord to fulfil His Word.*

### **Final Prayer**

Almighty God, Your wisdom reaches far beyond us. Teach us how to be wise, and make us wise enough to be taught; so that when we meet You face to face, we may be wise enough to call upon our Saviour, and know enough to confess our sin before the throne of grace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN