

Answers to tough questions in Philippians

1. What can we learn about Jesus from the great eulogy in 2:6-11?

This is a classic passage in the NT, summarizing the divinity, character, and incarnation of Jesus Christ. It stands so clearly as a unit that it was probably sung as a hymn in the early church. This meditation begins by focusing on the eternal nature of Christ (2:6). The common Greek term for being is not used here. Instead, Paul chose another term that stresses the essence of a person's nature — his or her continuous state or condition. Also, of the two Greek words for form, Paul chose the one that specifically denotes the essential, unchanging character of something — what it is in and of itself. The fundamental doctrine of the deity of Christ has always included these crucial characteristics (see also John 1:1, 3-4, 14; 8:58; Col 1:15-17; Heb 1:3). Although Christ had all the rights, privileges, and honors of deity— for which He was eternally and continually worthy— His attitude was not to cling to His position but to willingly give it up for a time.

Next, the passage describes the process that Christ underwent in order to carry out the Incarnation. First, He “made Himself of no reputation” or better, “emptied Himself” (2:7). The Greek root word used here, *kenosis*, is now used as the theological term for the doctrine of Christ's self-emptying in His incarnation. This step did not mean that Jesus emptied Himself of deity. Jesus did, however, renounce or set aside His privileges in several areas:

- Heavenly glory (John 17:5)
- Independent authority — during His incarnation Christ completely submitted Himself to the will of His Father (Matt 26:39; John 5:30; Heb 5:8)
- Divine prerogatives — Christ set aside the voluntary display of His divine attributes and submitted Himself to the Spirit's direction (Matt 24:36; John 1:45-49)
- Eternal riches (2 Cor 8:9)
- A favorable relationship with God — Christ felt the Father's wrath for human sin while on the cross (Matt 27:46).

Next, Christ took on the “form of a bondservant” and the “likeness of men” (2:7). The same Greek word for form occurs here as in verse 6. Christ became more than just God in a human body; He took on all the essential attributes of humanity (Luke 2:52; Gal 4:4; Col 1:22), even to the extent that He identified with basic human needs and weaknesses (Heb 2:14, 17; 4:15). He became the God-man: fully divine and fully human.

Next, Christ carried out the full purpose and implications of His divine action. He experienced every aspect of life as a human being. This included the ultimate obedience of dying as a criminal, following God's plan for Him (Matt 26:39; Acts 2:23).

Christ's utter humiliation (2:5-8) is inseparably linked to His exaltation by God (2:9-11). Jesus was honored in at least six distinct ways:

1. His resurrection
2. His coronation (His position at the right hand of God)
3. His role of interceding on our behalf (Acts 2:32, 33; 5:30, 31; Eph 1:20, 21; Heb 4:15; 7:25, 26)
4. His ascension (Heb 4:14)
5. His acknowledged role as the ultimate and perfect substitute for sin

6. His given title and name as Lord, which identifies Him fully as the divine and sovereign ruler (Is 45:21-23; Mark 15:2; Luke 2:11; John 13:13; 18:37; 20:28; Acts 2:36; 10:36; Rom 14:9-11; 1 Cor 8:6; 15:57; Rev 17:14; 19:16). Scripture repeatedly affirms Jesus' rightful title as the God-man.

2. How do the words joy and rejoice capture Paul's central message to this group of believers?

Paul uses the word joy four times in this letter (1:4, 25; 2:2; 4:1). The word rejoice appears in the text nine times (1:18 twice, 26; 2:17, 18; 3:1; 4:4 twice, 10). In the early chapters, these terms are used primarily to describe Paul's own experience of life in Christ. The beginning of chapter 3, however, is a transition point, shifting to a section of spiritual direction. Paul's expression "rejoice in the Lord" (3:1) is the first time in this letter for the phrase "in the Lord," signifying the reason and the sphere in which the believers' joy exists. Unrelated to the circumstances of life, the believer's joy flows from an indisputable, unchanging relationship with the sovereign Lord.

The theme of joy reaches a peak in 4:4 with the double command, "Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice!" The verses that follow spell out the external behavior and the internal attitudes that characterize a person whose joy is genuine. Paul also included God's promise to supply both His presence and His peace to those who live rejoicing in the Lord.