

# RELIGION

Scripture of the Week

John 3:16

## Insight on the Word: It's Not Hard To Be Humble, When You Know the Greatness of Christ

BY MICHAEL LINDSEY  
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The Bible text for next week's Sunday School lesson is Philippians 2:1-11. We encourage you to study this scripture carefully--it is one of the most important doctrinal statements in the New Testament. Then plan to attend Sunday School this week and discuss the truth with other Bible students. You'll be glad you did!

This whole quarter (December through February) we have been studying a sample of the many songs and prayers in the Bible. In particular, the last two weeks we have examined two prayers given by the Lord Jesus himself: the well-known "Lord's Prayer," a model for us as believers; and the "High-Priestly Prayer," offered to the Father on the night he was betrayed.

At first reading in our King James Versions, this week's text might not seem to be a song or prayer at all. Unfortunately, the translators of the KJV did not use poetic convention (form) to translate the poetic Scriptures, though they knew which passages were originally poetry. In our scripture, the verses 6-11 were probably an excerpt from a hymn of praise to Christ Jesus, used in worship by the early church. The Apostle Paul quotes from hymns in other epistles

as well (1 Tim. 3:16; 2 Tim 2:11-13). To get the proper feel of our text, I would encourage you to read it in the NIV or the NRSV translation.

Paul did not insert this hymn of praise just to argue some doctrinal issue; that was seldom his style. Rather, he was giving practical advice to the Philippians church in their situation, and using the Person of Christ as a marvelous illustration. When we get involved in doctrinal questions, let's make sure we understand what difference it makes--in our own lives, and in our churches and community.

Paul knew there had been some disagreements in the Philippians congregation, which were serious enough to trouble the whole group (Phil 4:2-3). He wanted to teach them the virtue of *humility*, a vital character trait of Christian people: "in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves" (2:3). To the Greek culture, humility was not a virtue at all. It was a sign of weakness, a defect from the proper virtues of courage and self-assertiveness. To the disciples of Christ, humility expressed their dependence on God, and their desire to build other people up, honestly and unselfishly.

Today's culture has given us a flood of books and TV specials on self

esteem and assertiveness training, which I believe parallels the Greek pagan culture of Paul's time. We are told to be strong, to love ourselves, to be assertive, to look out for "Number 1." Some of this may be necessary for those who have been systematically abused and deprived of their dignity by the society. Unfortunately, this cultural norm often becomes a convenient pretext for greed, irresponsible lifestyles, even racist propaganda and violence. We won't find the solution to these social problems in more self esteem classes; we need to learn the Biblical pattern of humility under the protection of the Almighty God.

Paul told the Philippians that they needed to be different from the surrounding world--they should consider others' needs as well as their own, and work to meet them (2:4). This is the message we still need today: "do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit" (2:3, NIV). Ambition doesn't have to be selfish, if we see our own success as a means to bless others, not just glorify ourselves. We have the negative examples of unprincipled lust for money and power in the corporate empires of America, and we see thousands of people now losing their jobs as a direct result.

But Paul set before his friends in Philippi--and before us as well--a positive example of power and glory, tempered and strengthened by humility. He bids us look carefully at the Person of Christ Jesus, to observe his "mind" or attitude (2:5), and to be like him. He uses a hymn of praise which the Philippians probably knew well, to sum up teachings about Christ which we can confirm from the Gospels and other epistles as well.

From the very beginning, Christ existed "in the form of God" (2:6). This "form" (Greek *morphe*) means a manifestation of reality, not just appearance or resemblance. In other words, before he came to earth in human flesh, the Son was really and fully God, with all the majesty and glory and adoration of the heavenly hosts which he deserved as God.

Yet he "thought it not robbery to be equal with God." This word is unique in the Greek Scriptures (both Old and New Testaments), but its meaning can be seen in related words, and in its use here. The word for "robbery" here means "something to be grabbed, or seized by force, or held onto." The hymn asserts that Christ did not think he had to hold onto his position and prerogatives in glory; he took his es-

sential glory as a truth, something he could not lose by becoming a human being.

So he "made himself of no reputation," which is a misleading translation. We would better translate it, "he emptied himself," he gave up all the trappings of glory in heaven, so that those who saw him would not recognize his divinity: "he hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him" (Isaiah 53:2).

He did this by taking on "the form of a servant," again, the manifestation of reality--a real Servant, "in the likeness of men." No one would have suspected by his appearance that he was anything more than a man. Jesus did not use his divine attributes to force people to receive his kingdom and believe his message. His miracles were always attributed to God the Father; he was content to minister as God's Servant.

Then "he humbled himself," even further, by submitting to the will of the Father for the sake of the human race. He was "obedient unto death," which was necessary for our salvation, and "even the death of the cross." We today simply don't feel the horror of such a death. It combined some of the worst torture known to man, with the public

spectacle and ridicule from pitiless on-lookers. For the Jews, it had the added shame of being a sign of God's special curse, a death by hanging (Deut. 21:23). But he obeyed the Father's will, and accomplished his divine purpose, by that death on the cross.

"Wherefore," for this reason, "God also hath highly exalted him," by the resurrection (Romans 1:4) and ascension to heaven (Heb. 1:3). The glory which followed the humiliation of Christ demonstrates the virtue of humility for Christ's followers. For the Father gave him "the name which is above every name," (literally, from the Greek), which can only be the name Yahweh, the Lord God Almighty. Only God should be worshipped, and confessed as Lord--and now God has bestowed that honor on his only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ!

The Word says to us today, if we call ourselves "followers" of Jesus Christ, that we should follow in the steps of his humility. When we see the needs of others, we ought to seek out the Father's will, and then do it, no matter what the cost. Such humility will often not be honored among humanity, but the Father will reward us in his perfect way. "Humble yourselves therefore, under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time" (1 Peter 5:6).

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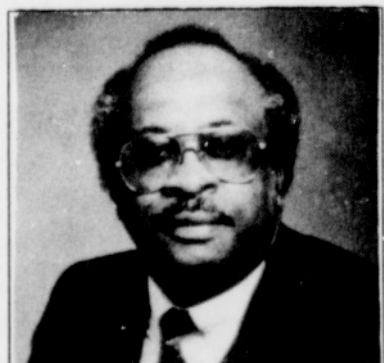
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Theme: Whatever you're going to do for the Lord, do it now

1 Peter iv. 11

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