

Philippians 2:14-30

“Shine among them like stars”

1. In 2:4-11 Paul uses Jesus as the paradigm of humility. Jesus (a) at times spoke harshly to others (e.g. the scribes and Pharisees); (b) only minimally worked within the established ecclesiastical structures (as an itinerant rabbi); (c) didn't just comment on the laws using prior precedent (as did even the foremost rabbis) but spoke with authority *over* the law; (d) rarely used language to put others at ease; and (e) was not shy in describing his status and qualifications (“the Father and I are one”). We have no trouble understanding why Jesus did these things, and they are perfectly appropriate and even necessary for the divine Son of God. But they may not fit into our profile of a humble person.

What is humility, for you and for Paul?

2. Listen also to the excerpt from Lynn Cohick's Wheaton College sermon, “Obedient Unto Death”¹, 9:32-13.16. How does “humiliation” better describe Christ's *kenosis*, his emptying of himself in his life and death?
3. Paul uses some heavy OT allusions in our passage:

¹⁴Do all things without **murmuring** and arguing, ¹⁵so that you may **be blameless** and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a **crooked and perverse generation**, in which you shine like stars in the world.

“**murmur**”: Paul uses the same Greek as used in the LXX of those passages where Israel grumbles (e.g. Ex 16:7-12; 17:3; Num 14:27-29; 16:41; 17:5); see also 1 Cor 10:10, the only other place where this phrase is used.

“**blameless**” is the term used by God in his call of Abraham (Gen 17:1), ‘When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to him and said, “I am God Almighty; walk before me faithfully and be **blameless**.² Then I will make my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers.”’

“**crooked and perverse generation**” echoes Deut 32:5 (LXX), “yet his degenerate children have dealt falsely with him, a perverse and crooked generation.”

“**shine like stars**” is a quote from Dan 12:1-4, “everyone whose name is found written in the book—will be delivered² Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt.³ Those who are wise will **shine** like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, **like the stars** for ever and ever.”

How would the background of Israel's story continued into the end times have affected the Philippians' understanding of Paul's exhortation not to be whiners? How does it impact our reading of this passage to recognize that it is not just about individual piety, but equally about God's forming a people who bear his name and with whom he dwells?

4. Paul says he is being poured out “like a drink offering” (v. 17). The drink offering typically accompanied an animal sacrifice. What might be the sacrifice be in this case? Is Paul referring to his imprisonment or anticipating martyrdom?

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=65eboCGdE4c>.

5. How does 2:27 affect your reading of 1:21, “to live is Christ, to die, gain”? Should you be ambivalence in the face of death (ours or others’)?
6. Why does Paul delay in sending Timothy?
7. In Paul’s news about travel plans he models a form of discipleship which is not common in the Western church. Two elements of this are worthy of note. First, for Paul, the measure of success is their sanctification (2:16). Second, Paul models long-term hierarchical discipleship, describing Timothy as his true son in the faith (2:22).

Have you yourself, or has another believer you know of, adopted a congregation in this way, or practiced this form of discipleship? If not, should we be taking ownership of our church’s health? Should we identify younger believers who can be discipled?

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Fun fact: The Pope recently approved a change to the wording of the Lord’s prayer, from “lead us not into temptation” to “do not let us fall into temptation.” While his translation does not at all match the original Greek, he feels it will not mislead Christians into believing God induces temptation. (The NRSV, which does match the Greek, reads, “do not bring us to the time of trial.”)

Leader's Intro:

Okay, we have finished 2:1-13, and now are doing the rest of the chapter. Philippians is a blend of two types of letters (remember in the ancient world they taught many different letter forms—one manual including 21), *friendship* and *moral exhortation*. The former is characterized by among other things (a) reciprocity; (b) affection; (c) an interest in the movements and affairs of the other; (d) reciprocity; (e) an absence of thanks (contrary to our culture, thanks would have been seen as a way to satisfy the reciprocity with only verbal acknowledgement); (f) an absence of client-patron language (so Paul begins the letter as a servant, not as an apostle. The latter is characterized by (a) warning away from a behavior; (b) recommending another; (c) use of paradigms, examples to follow. Philippians is rich in these various elements, and they are found in chapter 2, which begins with paradigm and exhortation and moves to an account of movements and affairs.

Before jumping into 14-18, it's worth getting a running start by reviewing some aspects of 2:1-11, especially Jesus' paradigm of humility, something not covered in previous studies. In 2:4-11 Paul present Jesus as a paradigm of humility. Merriam-Webster defines humility as freedom from pride or arrogance. C. S. Lewis famously said, "humility is not thinking less of yourself, it is thinking of yourself less." So when Paul implicitly defines humility as not doing anything from selfish ambition and looking to the interests of others (2:3-4), we don't find this hard to understand. Humility is often misunderstood by believers, and if you asked a modern Christian to describe humility s/he might not end up describing Jesus, who was offended, who didn't work with the power structures in his church, who didn't use polite conversation to ease discomfort (even Paul did this!), etc.

Moving into 2:14-18, we have a passage rich in OT allusions. I would answer to the question above on this topic, With these allusions, Paul ties this simple exhortation to both the Israelites who grumbled even as God was trying to take them to the promised land, and to the elect in the end times (Daniel). Yet here the church does not play the role of Israel; rather, the surrounding pagans do. So Paul, while encouraging them to be the Israel God always intended, is also encouraging simple evangelism. This is reinforced by the passage from Daniel Paul quotes, where those whose names are written in the book will "lead many to righteousness."

These points need to be brought out, and have the power to put what otherwise sounds like a snoozer of a command, "don't complain", into a larger perspective, helping indicate what is at stake.

Other topics of interest in this chapter:

- We also didn't cover what it means for Jesus to be given The Name by the Father. Fee covers this beautifully in his commentary (the smaller one esp.) and also in the 3rd of his Vineyard lectures, at minute 38.
- Paul describes himself as being poured out as a libation. Libations generally accompanied larger sacrifices. What is he referring to? And is this a reference to his martyrdom? The answer to the latter is no, likely not, since he says more than once he expects to be released from prison.
- Paul's reference to God sparing him sorrow by saving Epaphroditus should not be missed. The "live is Christ, die is gain" in chapter 1, has led some believers to conclude that at funerals we should show no sorrow, in order to better imitate Paul's ambivalence. But clearly this passage shows his understanding of the pain of loss, pain we should not be ashamed to show and experience.
- It should be noted that in Paul's perspective God's mission for the church is to make it the people who bear his name, with whom he dwells, the fulfillment of his plan for Israel. Much of what we read here we read through an individualist lens, but Paul is all about how to get us to be the *people* we are meant to be.
- This brings us to two potentially counter-Church-cultural (counter-CHURCH-cultural) messages. The first is that the measure of success is not just how much you or I complain, but the health of the church as a whole. That's

what Paul is after. The second is that he is modeling discipleship. Here we see that for Paul, the measure of success is their sanctification. We also see Timothy as his true son in the faith. These are things which are alien to us. How many of us can point to another believer, let alone congregation, and say, “those are growing because I tended the garden”?

So for a relatively humdrum passage [(a) don't complain; (b) here are our plans], there are some points not to be missed.