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NT 637/737--Philippians  
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### *Exegesis Research Paper*

#### I. **Text/Passage:** Philippians 2:1-11

<sup>1</sup> Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, <sup>2</sup> then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. <sup>3</sup> Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, <sup>4</sup> not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

<sup>5</sup> In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

<sup>6</sup> Who, being in very nature God,  
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;

<sup>7</sup> rather, he made himself nothing  
by taking the very nature of a servant,  
being made in human likeness.

<sup>8</sup> And being found in appearance as a man,  
he humbled himself  
by becoming obedient to death—  
even death on a cross!

<sup>9</sup> Therefore God exalted him to the highest place  
and gave him the name that is above every name,

<sup>10</sup> that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,  
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

<sup>11</sup> and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father.

#### II. **Observations: (Leave ALL of these questions in your final paper. If you do not believe that the question applies to this passage, enter “Not Applicable.” Delete this information within the parentheses.)**

A. Who is mentioned in this passage? Are they referred to by name, by relationship, or in some other way? Is there any description given for each one? If so, what words are used to describe them?

Not applicable

- B. If there are multiple participants, is there any dialogue between the participants? Can one of the speakers be identified as the main speaker in the passage? If so, who is the main speaker?

Not applicable

- C. Were you able to tell when and where the events and/or discussions in this passage occurred? If so, when, and where did these things occur? What places, if any, are mentioned in the passage?

While there is scholarly consensus regarding the timing of the writing of Paul's letter to the Ephesians, there is still considerable debate regarding its provenance.

It is generally accepted that Paul wrote his letter to the Ephesians sometime between C.E 59-61.<sup>1</sup> Philippians and also the book of Acts gives us a sense of the circumstances. Silva conjectures that during Paul's third missionary journey (Acts 20:1-2), Paul's opponents managed to have the authorities arrest him. Hearing of his imprisonment and affliction, and also in need of his spiritual help and guidance, the church in Philippi sends Epaphroditus to assist Paul.<sup>2</sup> It is within these circumstances in which Paul writes his letter. It is a letter that simultaneously communicates great joy for the church's continual participation in Paul's ministry while at the same time correcting and encouraging them in their lapses. It also attempts to cushion the church's possible disappointment of Paul not sending Timothy, and to joyfully receive back Epaphroditus.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin, *Philippians*, Revised., vol. 43, Word Biblical Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), xlix-l.

<sup>2</sup> Moisés Silva, *Philippians*, 2nd ed., Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 4.

<sup>3</sup> Silva, *Philippians*, 4.

Disagreement exists regarding the geographic origin of Paul's letter. The traditional position places the letter's provenance in a prison in Rome.<sup>4</sup> More recent scholarship, however, favors a prison in Ephesus. One of the main objections to the traditional view is the great distance between Rome and Philippi, which many view as insurmountable for the timeframes needed to travel.<sup>5</sup>

- D. What is happening, or what is being described in the passage? What is being presented or argued for (or against)? What does the writer want the readers/hearers to know, believe, feel, and/or do as a result of what he is saying?

Two major themes seem to dominate this passage - unity and humility.

In Paul's call for unity, he appeals to the believer's union with Christ as the basis and foundation for unity with one another. He asks the church to acknowledge the comfort, sharing, tenderness, and compassion they have already experienced since becoming one, and exhorts them toward even greater oneness (Philippians 2: 1-2).

Paul then instructs the church to embrace humility, as he sees a humble attitude as the central means in which the church will become more united (Philippians 2:3-4).<sup>6</sup> Humility for Paul is evidenced by considering the interests of others over one's own self. He follows this with a Christological hymn that exemplifies the humility he hopes for the church to emulate. For Silva, "what better way to reinforce [humility] than by reminding the Philippians of the attitude and conduct of him to whom they are united in faith."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Silva, *Philippians*, 3.

<sup>5</sup> Silva, *Philippians*, 5.

<sup>6</sup> Silva, *Philippians*, 92.

<sup>7</sup> Silva, *Philippians*, 92.

- E. What things are being discussed? Are there any commands, promises, warnings, words of encouragement, instructions, etc.? If so, what are they?

Paul begins with a call for unity (Philippians 2:1-2). He appeals to the unity the church has in Jesus Christ (who they already are foundationally and theologically) and the fruit of unity the church has already experienced and enjoyed.

He continues with instructions for humility (Philippians 1:2-4), commanding them to not act in their own self interest, but to value one another above one's self.

Paul then instructs them to "have the mindset as Christ Jesus" (Philippians 2:5). Christ's humility and servanthood is to be the church's model of humility. Christ's exaltation (Philippians 2:9-11), while unique in its scope to Christ, signals to Paul's audience what is valued and honored by God.

- F. Are there any other document or resources quoted, cited, or referred to? If so, which ones and why?

It is generally agreed that Philippians 2:6-11 represents an early Christian hymn or poem inserted and adapted by Paul for his letter.<sup>8</sup> The lyrical and poetic quality is unmistakable. Evidence for non-Pauline origin includes its use of rare idioms.<sup>9</sup> It has been proposed that the hymn may have been used for liturgical or creedal purposes.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Hawthorne, *Philippians*, 99.

<sup>9</sup> Hawthorne, *Philippians*, lxxiv.

<sup>10</sup> Hawthorne, *Philippians*, lxxiv.

G. Are there any Scriptures quoted, cited, or referred to? Are they from the New Testament or Old Testament? If so, which ones and why?

Not applicable

H. Is there anything else that was unfamiliar to you or that you needed to look up, such as a particular name, the definition of one of the words used, etc.?

The Christ hymn contains several phrases that are unusual and idiomatic. One in particular is verse 10b: ἐπουρανίων καὶ ἐπιγείων καὶ καταχθονίων. Hawthorne translates the phrase as: “of heavenly beings, and of earthly beings, and of beings under the earth.”<sup>11</sup>

Hawthorne points to the belief among ancient people that the universe was composed of three parts - heaven (or above the earth), earth, and below the earth.<sup>12</sup> What Paul is expressing through the Christ Hymn is the universality of Christ’s exaltation and lordship.<sup>13</sup>

I. Is there anything that is repeated, that is emphasized, or that stood out to you as being unusual?

I found the phrase, “being in very nature God” or “being in the form of God” (verse 6a), enigmatic. My understanding is Jesus *is* God so why does the Christ Hymn express Christ’s nature in this way? Hawthorne acknowledges that the precise meaning of the phrase is elusive, but maintains that μορφή (form) when applied to an object always signifies “form which truly and fully expresses the being which underlies it.”<sup>14</sup> He suggests that when applied to Christ and God, it is referring to the reality of God’s being.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Hawthorne, *Philippians*, 127.

<sup>12</sup> Hawthorne, *Philippians*, 128.

<sup>13</sup> Silva, *Philippians*, 116.

<sup>14</sup> Hawthorne, *Philippians*, 114.

<sup>15</sup> Hawthorne, *Philippians*, 114.

### III. Interpretation:

- A. Social Context: (What is the social context of the people in the passage? What did they believe about God, themselves, and each other? How did they interact with each of these mentioned? What did they think about and how did they interact with their families, villages/cities, neighbors, etc.?)

Paul's letter is written to the church in Philippi. Three important aspects help us understand the social dynamics in the church. First, the church was likely majority gentile as this was the predominant demographic of the city.<sup>16</sup> The expectation then is that most were former pagans who grew up in a metropolitan Hellenistic culture. Thielman adds that worship of the emperor was an important element in the religious life of the city.<sup>17</sup>

Second, the church may have been socio-economically diverse. The most compelling evidence for this comes primarily from the book of Acts. The early converts included Lydia (Acts 16:15) - a presumably wealthy merchant who owned a villa where the group met, the jailer (Acts 16:16-18) - whose household may have belonged to the artisan class, and also a slave girl (Acts 16:28).<sup>18</sup>

Third, the church may have included many women. As Fee puts it, "the fact that three of the people whose names are known to us are women is probably not accidental."<sup>19</sup> Fee sees there is

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<sup>16</sup> Gordon Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 16.

<sup>17</sup> Frank Thielman, *Philippians*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 16.

<sup>18</sup> Thielman, *Philippians*, 18.

<sup>19</sup> Fee, *Philippians*, 16.

good evidence that women in Greek Macedonia had a much more significant role in public life compared to other parts of the Greco-Roman world.

What these social factors suggest is that the church in Philippi was not, as Thielman puts it, a “homogenous social unit.”<sup>20</sup> The believers came from different spheres of life and from a highly stratified society. As these disparate groups came together, unity likely became a significant need and issue.<sup>21</sup>

#### B. Literary Context:

1. Where does this passage occur in the book? The beginning, middle, the end?

Philippians 2:1-11 is found in the 2nd quarter of the letter.

2. What has come before it? What comes after it? Insert an outline of the book, and/or a brief summary of what is mentioned before this passage and what is mentioned after it.

What comes before, Philippians 1:27-30, is an exhortation to the church to be unified. For Paul, the evidence of living a “life worthy of the gospel” is a church that is one in Spirit and one in faith (Philippians 1:27). The repetition of “one” highlights Paul’s desire for unity in the community. What follows is Paul’s expectation that the church will face suffering on behalf of Christ (Philippians 1:28). He emphasizes it is the “same” suffering he is currently experiencing, as if the shared suffering is evidence of their shared unity in the gospel.

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<sup>20</sup> Thielman, *Philippians*, 18.

<sup>21</sup> Thielman, *Philippians*, 18.

What comes after, Philippians 2:12-18, is an exhortation for the church to be sanctified. It begins with the encouragement to work out their salvation, meaning that the fruit of salvation would be made evident in their lives. What follows is Paul's encouragement to the community to not "grumble" and "argue." Paul's expectation is that the relational unity lived out by the community will be evidence of Paul's fruitful ministry among their lives, even as they face personal suffering.

3. Also, how does what we find in this passage relate to what has come before and what comes after?

A number of major aspects found in Philippians 2:1-11 are linked to other sections. The first aspect is humility and servanthood. Paul begins his letter introducing himself and Timothy as "slaves" of Christ Jesus (Philippians 2:1). Silva sees this as intentional given the prominent role humility and servanthood play in the letter, particularly in Philippians 2:1-11.<sup>22</sup>

A second aspect that connects Philippians 2:1-11 to other sections is the focus on unity. In Philippians 1:27 Paul exhorts the community to be of one Spirit and one faith. In Philippians 4:2, Paul pleads with Euodia and Syntyche to "be of the same mind in the Lord," a specific example in which the humility and unity Paul had been speaking to throughout the letter must manifest.<sup>23</sup>

4. How does this passage fit into the overall presentation or argument of the author? What would be lost if it were removed?

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<sup>22</sup> Silva, *Philippians*, 39-40.

<sup>23</sup> Hawthorne, *Philippians*, 240.

Philippians 2:1-11 serves as the center and climax of the letter. First, it pulls together the major themes of unity and humility in the letter. Hawthorne calls it the “kerygmatic center,” as it expresses the main heart of the epistle.<sup>24</sup> Second, the Christ Hymn is structurally and linguistically a standout in the letter. The lyrical language speaks just as loudly as the content itself - the humble self-giving example of Christ’s servanthood. Without this section, the letter would lose its theological foundation and proclamatory force.

- C. Genre: (What type of literature is this, such as a psalm, a proverb, a law text, a narrative, etc.? Does it contain other forms of literature, such as a narrative, a dialogue, a prayer, poetry, a parable, etc.?)

Paul’s writing is best categorized as a letter.<sup>25</sup> More specifically, based on its structure and content, Fee sees the epistle as a “letter of friendship.” Thielman would also agree with this characterization, remarking that the document is a “real letter” between Paul and close acquaintances.<sup>26</sup>

- D. Language: (Is there a special meaning to the original Greek, Hebrew or Aramaic? Compare various translations at this point. Is there a particular word which may have a special meaning?)

Bible translations differ in the translation of δούλος in 2:7. NIV and ESV translates δούλος as “servant” while NLT translates as “slave.”

“Slave” (δούλος) is a significant word in Paul’s letters. Fee observes that Paul’s first century readers, who had day to day familiarity with slavery, would have immediately associated his

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<sup>24</sup> Hawthorne, *Philippians*, 90.

<sup>25</sup> Thielman, *Philippians*, 22.

<sup>26</sup> Thielman, *Philippians*, 22.

usage of δοῦλος with those who were considered property and subservient to a master.<sup>27</sup>

The low status and subservient role of the slave takes on significant theological meaning for Paul in the New Testament. The term describes his relationship to Christ and to others. He is, as Fee puts it, “Christ’s slave, bound to him as slave to master, but whose ‘slavery’ is expressed in loving service on behalf of Christ for the Philippians.”<sup>28</sup> In 2:7, Paul uses δοῦλος to describe Christ’s incarnational ministry. This humble term becomes a powerful motif in the letter that describes the servanthood of Jesus which Paul hopes his church will emulate.<sup>29</sup>

- E. Text Criticism: (Is there a debate in the manuscript tradition about this passage? Footnotes in study Bibles and most academic commentaries will pick this up. Does the text variant alter the meaning or interpretation of the passage? If so, how?)

Not applicable.

- F. History of Redemption: (How does this passage relate to the rest of the Bible? Is it part of the story of Israel prior to the coming of Christ? Does it occur during Christ’s time in the world between his birth and death? Does it occur after the resurrection of Christ and giving of the Holy Spirit? Is it a result of the fall, or part of the fulfillment of the Christ-event?)

Paul is writing in the post-resurrection era, after the giving of the Holy Spirit to the church. A prominent question at this time is how the Gentiles are to be included into the family of God, namely whether or not they are to practice Jewish identity markers such as circumcision and food observances.<sup>30</sup>

- G. Commentaries:

1. What are some of the main issues discussed by the commentators concerning this passage? (answered with question 2)
2. What verse or verses, if any, do they seem to focus on more than others?

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<sup>27</sup> Fee, *Philippians*, 61-64.

<sup>28</sup> Fee, *Philippians*, 61-64.

<sup>29</sup> Fee, *Philippians*, 61-64.

<sup>30</sup> Silva, *Philippians*, 8.

Among commentators, two major issues tend to dominate. The first deals with the question - is the Christ Hymn best interpreted “ethically” or “kerygmatically”? The traditional “ethical” understanding sees Paul presenting Christ primarily as an ethical example. Christ is the supreme model of humility, self sacrifice, and obedience the Philippians are to follow and emulate.<sup>31</sup> This reading stems from an older understanding of 2:5 which interprets the verse “Have this attitude among yourselves which also in Christ Jesus.” The more recent “kerygmatic” interpretation sees Paul presenting the Christ Hymn primarily to retell the story of Jesus’ incarnation, death, and exaltation as a reminder of who they are, namely that their status is “in Christ” and now they can live accordingly.<sup>32</sup> Proponents of the “kerygmatic” interpretation generally read 2:5 as “Have this attitude among yourselves which you also have in Christ Jesus.” This reading emphasizes, as Thielman puts it, that “the Philippians should have the attitude among themselves that is required of those who are ‘in Christ.’”<sup>33</sup> Most proponents of this view do not challenge that the Christ Hymn advocates Christ as an example, but contend that this is not the main purpose of its inclusion.

A second major issue is the interpretation and theological understanding of κενόω in 2:7. Hawthorne favors the reading that Christ “emptied himself” or “poured himself out.” He maintains that the phrase does not imply that Christ discarded his divine substance or essence. Instead, as Hawthorne puts it, “it is a poetic, hymnlike way of saying that Christ poured out himself, putting himself totally at the disposal of people.”<sup>34</sup> Thielman, however, favors the

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<sup>31</sup> Thielman, *Philippians*, 112.

<sup>32</sup> Thielman, *Philippians*, 112.

<sup>33</sup> Thielman, *Philippians*, 113.

<sup>34</sup> Hawthorne, *Philippians*, 117.

reading “made himself nothing.” The four occurrences of κενόω in the New Testament, according to Thielman, are not understood as a literal pouring out, but refer to a figurative nullification. For Thielman, “Christ did not literally empty himself of any divine attribute; instead, he metaphorically emptied himself by revealing the form of God in the form of a slave.”<sup>35</sup> In his opinion, the NIV reading “made himself nothing” more fairly captures this understanding of κενόω.

3. How do they see what is said here impacting what happens elsewhere in the Old Testament and/or the New Testament?

Philippians 2:5-11 impacts our reading of the New Testament because it gives us a glimpse into how the early church understood Christ’s pre-existence and divinity. Commentators generally understand 2:6, “who, being in very nature God,” as an affirmation that Christ was both equal to God and existed prior to the incarnation.<sup>36</sup> For Fee, the phrase speaks to how Christ and God “both point to the same reality.”<sup>37</sup>

Philippians 2:7 also gives us a sense into how the early church understood the nature of Christ’s divinity in his incarnation. Some commentators have argued that Christ’s “emptying” means that in his humanity, he divested himself of some portion of his divinity.<sup>38</sup> It is proposed Christ let go in his incarnation the attributes of omniscience, omnipresence, and omnipotence. Other commentators such as Fee, however, have pushed back on this reading. For Fee, Christ is both

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<sup>35</sup> Thielman, *Philippians*, 117.

<sup>36</sup> Thielman, *Philippians*, 127.

<sup>37</sup> Fee, *Philippians*, 205.

<sup>38</sup> Hawthorne, *Philippians*, 121.

fully divine and human in his incarnation. To pour himself out for the sake of others was God displaying what true divinity is all about.<sup>39</sup>

#### IV. Application(s):

- A. Summary: Summarize in one concise statement or sentence what the passage is teaching. What is the main point of this passage? What is the main message to the original audience in their context?

Church, in the face of opposition, be unified as the community in Christ. In humility may you come together, with Christ as your supreme example.

- B. Impact on/Importance to Believers, Unbelievers, and Me: (What is the importance/significance of these events to people today? What applications might we make to our own lives, such as what we believe, how we treat others, what we do, etc.? In other words, how should knowing what is in this passage then change us now?)

1. Believers: (What does this passage teach a new Christian, a mature believer, etc. about who God is, what He has done, what He is going to do, etc.? Is there a promise to be relied upon, a truth to be known and trusted, a command to be obeyed, etc.?)

Paul's message to the Philippians in Philippians 2:1-11 has much to teach to Christians of all maturity levels.

For new Christians, Paul's emphasis on the value of church community speaks loudly to our tendencies toward individuality. These encouragements are particularly strong in 2:1-2. Paul first speaks to the benefits of community - the encouragement, comfort, sharing, and compassion enjoyed in the body. He follows it with an exhortation for us to be in one spirit and one mind. All of this is couched in the theological understanding that we are united in Christ.

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<sup>39</sup> Fee, *Philippians*, 214.

For mature believers, especially those who serve in the church as pastors, worship leaders, or deacons, the message of Christ's humility is relevant and sobering. The Christ Hymn points to Jesus as our example of true servanthood. It serves as a reminder to the servant leaders of the church the humble attitude and behavior that God desires. Practically, leaders are not to use their positions for their own advantage, rather their ministry must take the form of a slave for the sake of others.

2. Unbelievers: (What does this passage teach someone who has not yet trusted Christ?)

For unbelievers who may be accustomed with wrong ideas about Jesus and Christians presented in popular culture, Philippians 2:1-11 presents a powerful image of the biblical Jesus. This fresh picture of Jesus, which presents Christ as a humble servant and not as a tyrant, jingoistic patriot, or religious grifter, can serve as an attractive counter-cultural example of genuine Christianity. The Christ Hymn, which speaks to Christ's incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension can also serve as a framework for gospel presentation.

3. Me: (What does this passage teach me about God, His ways, and His actions in the past, present, and future? How does this instruct and/or challenge me?)

In the face of opposition, Paul exhorts the church to become more united. But he sees that unity can only come about if there is humility. As Silva puts it, "and what better way to reinforce this thought than by reminding the Philippians of the attitude and conduct of him to whom they are united in faith?"<sup>40</sup> As I consider what this means for me, I am challenged to consider what ways I need to change so that my church community can become more unified. Will unity be achieved through lecturing the members of my church into believing the same things as me? Or will it be through humble attitude and service? Paul sees the "mindset of Christ" as the way forward for our fragmented churches.

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<sup>40</sup> Silva, *Philippians*, 92.

C. Preaching/Teaching:

1. What essential elements would you want to include when preaching/teaching this text in your faith community/ministry context?

Two major preaching/teaching points would be relevant for my faith community.

The first is Paul's understanding that the basis of church unity is unity in Christ. This is expressed most clearly in Philippians 2:1-2, where Paul points to unity with Christ as the theological basis for the church to be like minded. Paul's call for the church to be unified does not rest upon an abstract philosophical ideal, rather it is based on the believer's concrete oneness with Christ.<sup>41</sup>

The second element ripe for teaching is humility and servanthood as the primary orientations in which Christians should relate to one another and to the world. Especially in this current moment when the church is so fractured by politics and theological differences, Paul sees the humility and servanthood of Christ as the appropriate antidote. Thielman writes that the humility to listen respectfully during a debate yet still remain united in spirit afterward "is the kind of humility [that] should characterize every Christian."<sup>42</sup>

2. Are there any parts of it that might require special explanation to help your ideal/target audience understand?

The word "slave" (Philippians 2:7) is a loaded term because of its associations with antebellum slavery in the United States. An explanation on the differences and similarities between slavery in Ancient Rome and the United States and also education on Paul's usage of the word would be prudent for two reasons. First, it avoids the potential confusion that Paul supports or advocates

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<sup>41</sup> Silva, *Philippians*, 96.

<sup>42</sup> Silva, *Philippians*, 132.

for slavery. Second, it gives us a fuller understanding of why Paul describes himself as a “slave” of Christ. In Philippians, “slave” becomes a powerful motif in the letter that describes the servanthood of Jesus which Paul hopes his church will emulate.

3. Are there any parts of it that might be especially challenging or disturbing to some in your ideal/target audience?

Paul upholds Jesus as the greatest example of humility, as evidenced by his obedience to the cross (Philippians 2:8). The word “obedience,” however, can have negative connotations in our current time and culture. It would be helpful to explain what Paul’ means by “obey” in the context of this passage. For Silva, Christ’s obedience is about his refusal to sin, his obedience stands in contrast to Adam’s disobedience.<sup>43</sup> Paul’s call for obedience is not to be used as an endorsement of authoritarianism as this is outside of its original meaning.

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<sup>43</sup> Silva, *Philippians*, 106.