

## Research Article

# Theological Study of “The Meaning of Emptying Himself” in Philippians 2:7 and Implications as an Example for Christians in Daily Life

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**Abstract:** The phrase “Emptying Himself,” by the apostle Paul addressed to the Lord Jesus in Philippians 2:7 can be interpreted in various ways. The phrase can be interpreted that when Jesus was born into the world he was like a human being in general, not divine. It can also be interpreted that Jesus was actually a human being in general who was born with a special mission like the prophets who lived in the Old Testament. The text research on “emptying oneself” is currently one of the important verses in Christian theology regarding Christology, because it describes the action of Jesus Christ who was willing to ‘empty himself’ or what is known as kenosis. The research on the text of Philippians 2:7 will be carried out by analyzing the Greek word kenosis using the literal interpretation method, namely looking for the meaning of the original language of writing, namely Greek. To support the literal interpretation, the researcher will also conduct a contextual, grammatical and historical interpretation study. The research on this text produces meanings including: Jesus gave up His divine attributes without losing the essence of His divinity, in order to become a limited human being and take on the form of a servant. This action not only shows the love and humility of Jesus, who is an example for Christians in everyday life, but also the understanding of the essence of Christ's theology.

**Keywords:** Emptying Himself, Meaning, Philippians 2:7

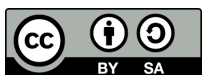
Received: March 17, 2025;

Revised: April 15, 2025;

Accepted: May 21, 2025;

Published : May 24, 2025;

Curr. Ver.: May 24, 2025



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## 1. Introduction

The research on the text of Philippians 2:7 is based on Paul's statement that in Christ there are good things that the church in Philippi can possess as written in verse 1: "there is encouragement, there is comfort from love, there is participation in the Spirit, there are affection and sympathy." However, to obtain those things, there are other things that must be fulfilled, namely in verses 2-4, "make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind, 2:3 do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. On the contrary, with humility, each person should consider others as more important than themselves; 2:4 and each person should not only look out for their own interests, but also for the interests of others. What Paul is conveying is not just ordinary advice or without reason. Paul's statement in verses 2-4 is the goal that Paul hopes to achieve because of the disputes occurring within the congregation, which then became the background for writing this letter. The problem that occurred among the congregation in Philippi is written in Philippians 4:2: "I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord." The words “advice” and “being of the same mind” were first conveyed by Paul in Philippians

2:1 and 2. The step that Paul took to resolve the issue, Paul taught about the person of Jesus through his letter.

The study of *kénōsis* in Philippians 2:7 aims to explain the meaning of *kénōsis* and how this teaching can provide an understanding of Christ's existence at His first coming. Paul raises the Greek word *kénōsis* or emptying Himself to lead to a correct understanding of the nature that exists in Jesus, namely human and divine nature, and also becomes an example in the lives of Christians today.

## 2. Proposed Method

Research on "The Meaning of Emptying Himself" Jesus according to Philippians 2:7 uses a descriptive analysis method, a study that seeks to describe by interpreting the consequences that are currently happening. The approach with this method will be applied in the inductive method with literature, namely the study of biblical texts and books related to this topic.

## 3. Results and Discussion

The Epistle to the Philippians was written by the Apostle Paul while he was in prison (Phil. 1:7; 1:13; 1:17). This letter is not only intended to strengthen the congregation, but also to encourage them to live in love, unity and humility. In Philippians 2:3-4, Paul advises, "Do not seek self-interest or vain praise. Instead, let each other with humility consider others more important than himself." This verse serves as an introduction to the discussion of *kenosis* in Philippians 2:5-11, which is known as one of the most profound Christological hymns in the New Testament.

"Philippians 2:7 is an important foundation for understanding the theology of Jesus Christ who took on human flesh and willingly left his divine glory. In this verse appears the Greek word *kenoó*, which means "to empty." [1] In this context, self-emptying is not meant as a loss of divinity, but as an emptying of certain attributes in order to carry out the mission of redemption in the world. The understanding of *kénōsis* has developed through the ages, resulting in various interpretations among theologians.

### A. The View of Early Church Theologians

Early church theologians viewed the concept of *kénōsis* as central to God's act of salvation. One of the main figures, Athanasius, explained in his work *De Incarnatione* that Christ's self-emptying act was the greatest manifestation of God's love. In his view, this self-emptying did not mean that Jesus ceased to be God, but that He, as the all-powerful God, willingly took on human weakness in order to make salvation possible. Athanasius wrote, "Only through the union of God and man can true salvation be accomplished." [2]

This understanding is also supported by Gregory of Nyssa, who emphasized that *kenosis* is evidence of God's wisdom and humility. Gregory describes how Jesus, despite his divine power, chose to withhold His power and live a human life. He states that, "Christ's self-emptying is the way for man to understand the glory of God in human limitations." [3] Thus, early church theologians viewed *kenosis* as a bridge between divinity and humanity.

This view was formally confirmed at the Council of Chalcedon (451 CE), which affirmed that "Jesus Christ has two natures, divine and human, united without any mixture or change." [4] The council refuted the view that self-emptying entailed the loss of the divine nature, emphasizing that Jesus remained fully God despite his human nature. This provided a strong theological basis for understanding *kenosis* as an act of God's love that did not destroy his divinity.

In addition, theologians such as Augustine also made great contributions in explaining *kenosis*. He highlighted that Jesus' self-emptying was a form of total obedience to the will of the Father. In his book *The City of God*, Augustine wrote, "In his humility, Christ did not seek glory for himself, but to restore the glory of humanity lost through sin." [5] This approach emphasizes that *kénōsis* speaks not only of God's humility, but also of the purpose of human redemption.

### B. Reformation View

During the Reformation, theologians such as Martin Luther provided a new perspective on kenosis. Luther viewed Jesus' self-emptying as an expression of God's solidarity with humanity. In his theology, Luther emphasized that Jesus experienced the fullness of human suffering, allowing God to truly understand human weakness. He wrote, "Through the suffering of Christ, God walks with us in the darkness, bringing the light of love and hope." [6] John Calvin, one of the leading theologians of the Reformation, had a similar view but focused more on the obedience aspect of Jesus. In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin explains that "kenosis is Jesus' conscious act of forbearance of his divine rights in order to fulfill the will of the Father. ... Christ's self-emptying is the proof of his perfect obedience, even to the point of death on the cross. Self-emptying does not mean loss of divinity, but complete submission to the will of God." [7]

The Reformation view also highlights how kenosis serves as a model for Christians. Luther expressed his belief that self-emptying is a call for all believers to live a life of humility and service. "As Christ gave up everything for us, so we must give ourselves up for the service of others." [7] This perspective shows that kenosis is not only relevant in theology, but also has significant ethical implications. In addition, Reformation theologians often linked kenosis to the doctrine of grace. They believed that through Jesus' self-emptying, humans could receive the undeserved gift of salvation. Calvin emphasized, "In kenosis we see the beauty of God's grace, which gives unconditionally, even when men do not deserve it." [7]

### C. Modern Theologians' Views

In modern theology, the concept of *kénōsis* has received a new, deeper and more contextual interpretation. Karl Barth, for example, sees self-emptying as a manifestation of God's absolute love. In *Church Dogmatics*, Barth explains that kenosis is the act in which God becomes incarnate as a human being without losing His divine essence. He states, "In self-emptying, God does not abandon His divinity, but shows His love in the most human way." [8]

Jürgen Moltmann, expanded the understanding of kenosis by linking it to the suffering of Christ on the cross. According to Moltmann, self-emptying speaks not only of humility, but also of God's solidarity with human suffering. He wrote, "The God who empties himself is the God who suffers with man, bringing hope through that suffering." [9] This view provides a new dimension in understanding how God works through suffering to bring redemption. In addition to Barth and Moltmann, Paul Tillich emphasized that kenosis is evidence of God's transformative nature. He believed that through self-emptying, God changes humanity's relationship with divinity. In *Systematic Theology*, Tillich wrote, "Self-emptying is God's way of entering human history in order to transform it from within." [10] Thus, modern theologians view kenosis not only as an act of love, but also as a means of spiritual transformation.

### D. Contemporary Views

Contemporary theologians such as N.T. Wright see kenosis as a call to a life of service and humility. In his book *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, Wright explains that Christ's self-emptying is an example for the congregation to follow. He writes, "Self-emptying is not only relevant in theology, but also fundamental to Christian ethics for building a loving community." [11] Wright emphasizes that living in kenosis means giving up personal rights in order to serve others and build unity in the congregation. Miroslav Volf, in *Exclusion and Embrace*, highlights how kenosis can create inclusive relationships in society. According to him, self-emptying is a call to open oneself to others, transcending social and cultural differences. This perspective emphasizes the importance of kenosis in building unity amidst diversity. Volf writes, "The self-emptying of Christ is not only a model for the relationship between God and man, but also a pattern for the relationship of man to his fellow men." [12]

In addition, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, a feminist theologian, in her book *In Memory of Her*, presents a critical view of kenosis. She emphasizes that the concept of self-emptying must be balanced with empowerment, especially for vulnerable and marginalized groups. She writes, "Self-emptying must not be used as a tool to support oppression, but as a call to uplift the oppressed." [13] This view provides a strong social dimension to the application of kenosis in community life. James Cone, in *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, also links kenosis to God's solidarity with human suffering, especially in the context of racial injustice. Cone argues that Christ's self-emptying on the cross is a form of God's identification with those who

experience injustice. He wrote, "The cross of Christ is a symbol of self-emptying that affirms that God stands on the side of the oppressed." [14]

### E. Philippians 2:7 Viewpoint

#### 1. Contextual Analysis

Close context of Philippians 2:7 includes Philippians 2:1-11, which is often referred to as the "Christ Hymn." This section begins with Paul's call to the Philippians to live in unity and humility. In Philippians 2:2-4 Paul writes exhortations for the church that are aimed at perfecting its joy. These exhortations include: be of one mind, having the same love, being of one mind, being of one mind, not seeking selfish ambition or vain conceit. Humility, considering others better than your own interests, looking not only to your own interests but also to the interests of others. The presence of these exhortations is likely to be a problem in the Philippians related to these things. Verse 5 then serves as an introduction to verses 6-11, Paul presents Christ as the perfect example of humility. Philippians 2:6-7 states that Christ, though he was in the form of God, retained not the rights of divinity, but emptied himself by taking the form of a servant.[8] In the grammatical structure of the Greek, the verb *ekenosen* (to empty) occupies a key position, indicating Christ's active act of giving up certain attributes for the sake of his mission.

The meaning of *kenóo* in this context is understood as a voluntary act of renouncing divine rights, not divine nature itself.[15] This is confirmed by the use of the phrase "taking the form of a servant," which indicates that self-emptying occurs through incarnation, not through loss of divine essence. The extended context of Philippians 2:7 includes major biblical themes related to incarnation and humility. One theme that parallels Philippians 2:7 is the prophecy of Isaiah 53, which describes the suffering Servant of the Lord. In Isaiah 53:3, the Servant is "despised and rejected by men," a picture that reflects Jesus' humility in His earthly life. In addition, the New Testament context provides additional insight into self-emptying. John 1:14 states, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." This verse shows that the incarnation of Christ was an act of love that brought God into human history. Other letters of Paul, such as 2 Corinthians 8:9, also underscore this theme: "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor."

Jesus' self-emptying also relates to Old Testament theology, where humility is seen as a primary characteristic of a servant of God. Psalm 113:5-6 states, "Who is like the Lord our God, who dwells on high, who humbles himself to behold what is in the heavens and what is on the earth?" This verse shows that God's humility is a characteristic of His approach to humanity.

#### 2. Historical Analysis

Historically, the city of Philippi was a Roman colony located in Macedonia. As a cultural and trade center, Philippi was inhabited by various ethnic groups, such as Romans, Greeks, and Jews. The Christian congregation in Philippi faced the challenge of remaining faithful to the Christian faith amidst a materialistic and pragmatic environment. Internal and external conflicts often arose, including disputes between congregations (Philippians 4:2-3). It is in this context that Paul emphasizes the importance of humility and sacrifice, by making Christ the primary example. Jesus' act of emptying himself not only has theological meaning, but is also relevant in the daily lives of Christians. As a servant, Jesus showed that serving others is more important than seeking personal honor. The apostle Paul describes that the 'form of a servant' taken by Jesus reflects unconditional obedience and love for God the Father (Philippians 2:8). In a modern culture that tends to prioritize personal interests, this teaching is very relevant to building a loving and serving community.

#### 3. Literal and Grammatical Analysis

Text Philippians 2:7

*⁷avlla. e`auto.n evke,nnsen morf.h.n dou,lou labw,n( evn o`moiv,mati avnqrw,pwn geno,menoj\ kai. sch,mati eu`regei,j w`j a,nqrwpoj* [16]

<sup>7</sup> But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: <sup>8</sup> And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.[1]

The word “emptied himself” comes from the Greek word ἐκένωσεν (*ekenōsen*) from the root word *kenōō*. The word *kenōō* means “to give up the prerogative of an empty status or position, to let go; literally he emptied himself, that is, he took up an unimportant position (Phil. 2:7). The meaning here is clear that the things that Jesus could do supernaturally because of His divine nature He let go and did not use as a prerogative even in desperate situations or in humiliation. According to the Gingrich Lexicon the word *kenōō* means “to empty (Phil. 2:7),” “i.e. he set aside the equality with or likeness of God (which is spoken of Christ), (Phil. 2:7).” Thayer’s understanding of ‘setting aside’ is very clear that Jesus at His first coming did not use His divine nature or divine nature.

*ekenōsen* in Philippians 2:7 is in the form of a third person singular active aorist indicative verb. This indicative verb states a fact or real action that has occurred (aorist), namely when Jesus first came to this earth. This action carried out by Jesus, according to the definition of kenosis from the Friberg Lexicon ‘namely he took an unimportant position’ is clarified by the next sentence, namely ‘taking the form of a servant, and being made in the likeness of men.

From the lexicon meaning of the word *kénōsis* it is explained that Jesus’ act of emptying himself means temporarily setting aside while on earth and not eliminating his divine nature. “He took on human nature voluntarily, it was his own act and was done with his own consent. ... He gave up the honor and glory of the upper world.”[17] “What Christ willingly gave up by becoming human was not his divine nature, but the glory that was his right and possessed by him in his pre-existence,” According to Barnes the word *κενόω* *kenōō* literally means to empty, “to make empty, to make vain or empty.” he states that Jesus’ action does not mean that he literally gave up his divine nature and perfection, because that is impossible. He cannot cease to be omnipotent, and omnipresent, and all-holy, and righteous, and good. But Jesus may have set aside, for a time, the symbols or manifestations of His glory, or that the outward expression of His glory in heaven may have been withdrawn.[8] “Jesus’ self-emptying did not result in His losing His attributes, but rather His choosing to limit Himself. Paul literally wants to set Jesus as an example of such self-abasement.”

The study of the text of Philippians 2:7 on the word ‘emptied himself, has the meaning that “Christ’s act of emptying himself is an example of humility that every believer should follow.” Paul encourages the congregation to emulate this attitude in their relationships with others. “Jesus’ self-emptying is not merely symbolic, but shows that service to others is the heart of the Christian vocation.” “Christ’s self-emptying love is a living proof of God’s selfless love.” “The humility offered by Jesus when he was emptying himself is an attitude of Christian hospitality, because it commands us to pay more attention to the interests of others than to our own interests.” Theologian Wright wrote, “Self-emptying is a call to place the needs of others above personal interests.” Barnes reveals that Jesus took a very lowly place and He humbled Himself to do actions that are only appropriate for those who are servants. As written in Luke 22:27 “I am among you as one who serves;” means that the nature of humility must be possessed by servants or servants.

#### F. Theological and Practical

Relevance Theologically, Philippians 2:7 confirms that Jesus in his human existence at his first coming did the act of ‘emptying Himself’ not meaning that he gave up his divine nature and attributes (2:6). But rather to put aside for the time being. Jesus is truly God and truly human. Practically, this teaching is relevant in the daily lives of Christians. In a modern culture that often prioritizes egoism. Philippians 2:7 reminds believers to have humility in serving others, creating an atmosphere of community as written by the Apostle Paul in Philippians 2:1-3.

#### 4. Conclusions

*Kénōsis*, or the self-emptying of Jesus, is a popular theology of Christ because it is part of the Christian faith. The doctrine of *kénōsis* teaches that God’s love in Jesus Christ was so great that He was willing to leave His glory to become a man. Through this act, Jesus demonstrated the perfect example of humility and sacrifice and His totality as a servant or service to humanity. This teaching has been the foundation of Christian theology for centuries, inspiring generations to live in humility, serve others, and embody God’s love in their daily lives.

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