What is harpagmos in Philippians 2:6?

Iver Larsen, translation consultant, revised October 2026

The meaning of the Greek word ἁρπαγμός (harpagmos) in not clear in this verse. The ending –mos basically indicates an event, so it is helpful to look at the corresponding verb ἁρπάζω (harpazō). This word is very common in the LXX and usually refers to plundering the property of the enemy, including taking captives.

The verb ἁρπάζω is fairly common in the NT (14 times). The plundering idea (seize and carry away) is found in Mat 12:29: *How can anyone enter a strong man's house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man? Then he can* ***plunder*** *his house.* (NIV)

A few times it refers to a kind of rapture, where a person is suddenly **snatched (up/away)**. Philip was snatched up in Acts 8:39, Paul was snatched up to Paradise/third heaven in 2 Cor 12:2,4, Christians are to be snatched up to meet the Lord in the air according to 1 Th 4:17, and a symbolic child is snatched up to God's throne in Rev 12:5.

A person can be **snatched from** the fire and thereby be saved as in Jud 1:23 (*save others by snatching them from the fire*). This is similar to Acts 23:10 where Paul is **snatched away from** an angry mob by soldiers and thereby saved.

In John 6:15 some Jews wanted to snatch Jesus away from his disciples and his ministry to make him king, but he escaped. (*They intended to come and make him king by force* - NIV).

If the subject/agent is a wild animal, it refers to attacking and tearing to pieces in order to eat the prey. The lion often does that in the LXX, and in John 10:12 it is a wolf (*so the wolf* ***snatches*** *the sheep* – GNB). In Matt 11:12 we have violent people attacking the Kingdom of God wanting to tear it to pieces and destroy it. In Matt 13:4 the birds came to **snatch up** the seeds that fell on the path and then eat them, although here we only have the word for eating up the seeds. The snatching before eating is implied. In the explanation of the parable in Mat 13:19 Jesus explains that these birds represent Satan and his demons who come and **snatch away** the word that is sown in peoples' hearts. In John 10:28-29 we hear that once a person has truly become a Christian, no one can **snatch** such a person away from the protective hand of the Father.

What is common in these various contexts is a quick and **forceful seizure and removal of somebody or something**. The purpose may be to save or to destroy. In many cases, but not always, the person has no right to snatch away this person or thing.

With this background, we can think of ἁρπαγμός as the event noun, **snatching up something** by force which one may not have any right to do. Now, event nouns in Greek are often extended to refer to the object for the action or its result. For instance, κτίσις (ktisis) may refer to the event of creation, but in the NT almost always refers to the thing or being

that is created. The same applies to ἐλπίς (elpis) which may refer to the event of confident expectation, but quite often it refers to the thing that one expects to receive. In the case of Phil 2:6, ἁρπαγμός likewise **does not refer to the event but to the thing that is snatched**.

The thing to be snatched in Phil 2:6 is **the position of being equal to God**. It is a position that Satan wanted to snatch for himself, but he did not succeed. That would have been robbery. However, for Jesus it was not a robbery or plunder. It was not something that he needed to snatch, since he already possessed it. Jesus, in fact, did the exact opposite. He already had that position, but he accepted to give it up in order to become a human being. **He did not try to hold on to it forcefully, to cling to it and not wanting to give it up.** In most cases, the one snatching something does not have the right to do so. But this is not how Jesus looked at this position. He had the right to keep it and cling to it, but he chose to let go and obey the will of the Father even if it meant humiliation and suffering.

BDAG suggests the following translation: "[He] did not consider equality with God a prize to be tenaciously grasped."

The meaning of the verses is expressed quite well in the Good News Bible (GNB), which retains the aspect of force that is always associated with the Greek word: "He always had the nature of God, but he did not think that by force he should try to remain equal with God. Instead of this, of his own free will he gave up all he had, and took the nature of a servant. He became like a human being…"

NLT96 (New Living Translation) has the same idea that Jesus did not cling to his rightful position. Clinging implies some kind of force: "Though he was God, he did not demand and cling to his rights as God." NLT04 is along the same line: "Though he was God, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. Instead, he gave up his divine privileges…"

Many are familiar with the NIV84 which is similar to RSV and NET: "Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped." The meaning of this translation is a bit difficult to grasp, but it gets even more obscure in the revised NIV (which is similar to God's Word and the HCSB): "Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage. Rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness."

The text can be translated in different ways. It is not that one is right and others are wrong, but some are better at expressing the intended meaning than others.

In our Danish translation we said: *He was equal to God, and had the right to hold on to that equality*.