

Philippians 3

Introduction: As has been the case throughout this letter, Paul's primary concern is the advancement of the gospel (1:12-14) and the "progress and joy in the faith" (1:25) of the Philippian church.

Keep in mind the following ...

- A. He is writing from a prison in Caesarea (1:13; Acts 23:23)
- B. He is writing to a church he deeply loves (1:7) for various reasons
- C. He is writing with the intent for it to be read aloud in the entire assembly
 - 1. First Appeal — A call to humble unity (2:1-4)
 - 2. Second Appeal — Warning not to fall prey to specific false teachings Paul had spoken of in the past (3:1)
 - 3. Both appeals are reflections of the Philippian's context (better understood by Paul through Epaphroditus (2:25-30)
 - 4. Both appeals are immersed in Paul's charge to the church to "rejoice" (1:18; 2:18, 28-29; 3:1)
- D. He is writing with an awareness of other church's successes and failures, which sheds light on his strict warning
 - 1. False teachings existed in other congregations

I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel;⁷ which is really not another; only there are some who are disturbing you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. Galatians 1:6-7 NASB

- 2. Loss of eschatological hope was increasing among some churches due to present sufferings and the lack of Christ returning in their own time (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18)

NOTE: Paul's concern is for the Philippian church (call to stand firm) and the advancement of the Gospel (1:23-27)

I. The Church is Instructed to Recall Prior Warnings Given Against False Teachings
(3:1-4a)

A. Paul will preface these warnings with a call to find joy “in the Lord,” amidst future trials (1a)

1. Not a break in Paul’s letter (as some suggest)
2. But a transitional statement
3. “Finally” or “As for the rest of the matters that need to be addressed”
4. Previously admonished the church to adopt an attitude of joy in the midst of difficulty (2:18, 29)
5. Now, again, Paul hopes they will maintain joy even when facing future challenges (keep in mind goal: progress of Philippians)
6. Foundation of their joy is Christ not the inconsistencies or challenges of their circumstances

B. Reason for Paul’s warning (1b)

1. Repeating old information
2. But wants it to be a safeguard, “suited to confirm,” negative-“to trip up” (Psalm 119:11)
3. Protect foundation from cracks and weaknesses as in other churches (Gal. 1:6-7) (i.e. keep in mind the attractive nature of Judaism in this context)

(ILL) — Reason for teaching Bible stories to young children, memorize Scripture, GT’s vision

4. Wants to maintain a strong witness so Gospel will spread

C. The False vs. True Circumcision (3:2-4a)

1. The characteristics of their opponents

Beware the curs (aggressive dog)! Beware the criminals! Beware the cutters!

- a. Called “dogs” — intrude where not wanted
- b. Insinuated themselves into Paul’s churches

But it was because of the false brethren secretly brought in, who had sneaked in to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, in order to bring us into bondage. ⁵ But we did not yield in subjection to them for even an hour, so that the truth of the gospel would remain with you. Galatians 2:4-5 NASB

- c. “Men who do evil” — unlike missionaries of the gospel, these people labor in an evil cause (Phil. 1:17)

For such men are false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. 2 Corinthians 11:13 NASB

- d. “Mutilators of the flesh” — confidence lies in physical operation on the flesh rather than gracious work of Christ (3:18)
2. The “True Circumcision”
 - a. Use of “we” includes circumcised Jew (5) and uncircumcised Gentiles - diversity
 - b. Common ground not their physical circumcision but commitment to the Gospel
 - c. As Gospel-people, they are the true people of God
 3. How does Paul’s claim stand against Old Testament truth?
 - a. God’s primary concern is the human heart not physical features

But the Lord said to Samuel, “Do not look at his appearance or at the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.” 1 Samuel 16:7 NASB

- b. Physical circumcision was a visible mark (sign) identifying those who were members of Israel, God’s chosen people

READ: Genesis 17:9-14

- c. Israel had such confidence in possessing the physical mark (sign) that they felt their election was secure even if hearts strayed
- d. Physical rite was designed to be a symbol of a deeper commitment (baptism)
- e. Circumcision of the heart is the qualification for entrance into God’s people — physical circumcision is irrelevant

For indeed circumcision is of value if you practice the Law; but if you are a transgressor of the Law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision. ²⁶ So if the uncircumcised man keeps the requirements of the Law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? ²⁷ And he who is physically uncircumcised, if he keeps the Law, will he not judge you who though having the letter of the Law and circumcision are a transgressor of the Law? ²⁸ For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. ²⁹ But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God. Romans 2:25-29 NASB

For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, but faith working through love. Galatians 5:6 NASB

And in Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ. Colossians 2:11 NASB

4. The characteristics of the “true circumcision” — the people of God
 - a. They “worship by the Spirit”
 - i. God included uncircumcised Gentile believers into Jewish faith community by placing Spirit among them

While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were listening to the message. ⁴⁵ All the circumcised believers who came with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also. ⁴⁶ For they were hearing them speaking with tongues and exalting God. Then Peter answered, ⁴⁷ “Surely no one can refuse the water for these to be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we did, can he?”⁴⁸ And he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to stay on for a few days. Acts 10:44-48, NASB

Therefore if God gave to them the same gift as He gave to us also after believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God’s way?” ¹⁸ When they heard this, they quieted down and glorified God, saying, “Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life.” Acts 11:17-18, NASB

After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, “Brethren, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and believe. ⁸ And God, who knows the heart, testified to them giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us; ⁹ and He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith. Acts 15:7-9, NASB

But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers. John 4:23, NASB

- ii. Presence of the Spirit among Gentiles is proof they are in — nothing else is needed
- b. They “glory in Christ” (boast) not in social privilege (Because I’m Jew, I’m exempt)
- c. Their confidence is NOT in the flesh

... Christians have placed their confidence in Christ, the feet of the Judaizers rest on a fallen human foundation (flesh) that will inevitably collapse (Frank Thielman).

My flesh and my heart may fail, But God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. Psalm 73:26 NASB

II. The Church is Instructed to Embrace Paul's Life as an Example of Where our Confidence Should Lie (3:4b-14)

NOTE: Our own experiences can provide helpful insights (i.e. been there done that; I tried righteousness through the Torah observance but it failed)

A. There is no future to the past — Paul's former advantages (4b-6)

1. Advantages by birth (status)
 - a. Impeccable credentials by family
 - b. Member of God's family
 - c. Circumcised on the 8th day
 - d. Racial identity with Israel
 - e. Membership in tribe that gave Israel its first king
 - f. Hebrew of Hebrews — spoke language of people
2. Advantages by achievement
 - a. Observed the law in the manner of a Pharisee

But perceiving that one group were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, Paul began crying out in the Council, "Brethren, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees; I am on trial for the hope and resurrection of the dead!" Acts 23:6, NASB

- b. Zeal to the Torah led to persecuting the church (see Acts 7)
- c. Righteousness in the law, considered blameless

NOTE: Hoping heritage and achievements would help him stand acquitted before God one day

NOTE: Paul excelled at Torah observance (the best), yet he indicates there is NO future here because it has nothing to do with knowing Christ

B. The future lies with the present — knowing Christ (3:7-11)

1. Paul's "gains" of status and achievement
2. Qualified him above others to have confidence in the flesh
3. Yet, "because of Christ," he considered former ways "loss" (7)
4. Considered "all things" (more than v. 5-6) loss (8a)
 - a. Anything people thinks has value now: position, comfort, status, honor, material goods, advantages

(ILL) Are these not the things we pursue? Sports? Professional Careers?

- b. Nothing at all/ total loss compared to knowing Christ

This material is copyrighted. Its use in the local church or in any other setting as a teaching tool or ministry presentation requires written permission from the author.

5. Ultimate goal: “Knowing Christ Jesus my Lord” (8b)
 - a. More than head knowledge
 - b. Personal, relational, intimacy (Hebrew “yada”)
 - c. Deep devotion and longing for Christ because of his love and grace

I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me. Galatians 2:20 NASB

To know Christ means to acknowledge God’s great act of deliverance in Christ and be submitted to Christ’s Lordship (Frank Thielman)

NOTE: Cerebral Christianity is NOT enough

6. Repeats theme: suffered loss all things
7. These “advantages” that you try to impose on Gentile converts are “filth”
8. Goal of renewed mindset
 - a. “Gain Christ” (8c)
 - i. Christ is the true gain
 - ii. Gaining Christ requires loss of all former things
 - iii. Rich in Christ alone, not Christ plus ...

(ILL) — Rich Young Ruler

- b. Or “be found in Him” (9a)
 - i. When is he expecting this?
 - ii. Now and then — already/not yet

For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus. Philippians 1:6 NASB

Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is. 1 John 3:2 NASB

9. Result of renewed mindset

- a. Be done with “my own righteousness” (works-based, earned, contrary to gospel)
- b. From the law
- c. The “from God righteousness”
- d. Is available “through faith in Christ”

2 Corinthians 5:21

READ: Romans 3:21-30

(ILL) — Standing vs. State

10. Final purpose/benefit of “knowing Christ Jesus my Lord” (3:10-11)

- a. To know (experience) the power of his resurrection
 - i. His resurrection guarantees ours — future

But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep. ²¹ For since by a man came death, by a man also came the resurrection of the dead. ²² For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive. ²³ But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, after that those who are Christ’s at His coming, 1 Corinthians 15:20-23 NASB

- ii. His resurrection allows us (Paul and Philipppians) to rejoice and endure present suffering for Christ (Hebrews 12:1-3)

For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. Philipppians 1:21 NASB

For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. 2 Corinthians 4:11 NASB

Christ’s resurrection had given him a unique perspective on present suffering — Gordon Fee

- b. And the fellowship (participation) of His sufferings
 - i. Context: Attraction of avoiding suffering (Christ and Jewish customs)
 - ii. Way forward lies with road less traveled — suffering for Christ
 - iii. Suffering brings true intimacy with Christ
 - iv. Our suffering manifests significance of Christ’s suffering to the world

For to you it has been granted for Christ’s sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake, ³⁰ experiencing the same conflict which you saw in me, and now hear to be in me. Philipppians 1:29-30 NASB

The power of his resurrection, which both enables us to live as those marked by the cross and guarantees our final glory
— Gordon Fee

C. The Future Lies With the Future — Attaining Christ (3:12-14)

1. He has not yet obtained the full eschatological realization (see v. 10-11) of knowing Christ — only at the resurrection of the dead
2. Nor has he “already become perfect” or brought to completion this goal
3. Future belongs to those who persevere
4. Pursuing with all might because Christ so passionately pursued him first

In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. 1 John 4:10, NASB

5. How should one pursue this goal? (13-14)
 - a. Without distraction — “forgetting what is behind” (runner leading) distracted by Judaizers
 - b. Straining ahead — Christ fully known
 - c. Focus on prize — remember the reason for our running

“There is no other prize; hence nothing else counts for much except ‘knowing Christ ...’” Gordon Fee

III. The Church is Challenged to Live Out These Instructions (3:15-21)

NOTE: Paul concluded personal story with a passionate declaration the pursuit of the prize — knowing Christ fully and completely

— Turns now to application — “Therefore”

A. Begins with a call to the “mature” — “teleios” (3:15)

1. “Teleios” (3:12) = not yet “completed” in the sense of an eschatological hope
2. Already “teleios” (3:15) = mature along with the Philippians in terms of how they wait in the present for the final glory

See Philippians 1:27

NOTE: How we live NOW matters

- We are Kingdom/Gospel people
- We are called to shine like bright lights in a dark, perverse, and crooked world
- How we live now impacts our witness in the present and ultimately impacts eternity

This material is copyrighted. Its use in the local church or in any other setting as a teaching tool or ministry presentation requires written permission from the author.

3. A call to follow Paul's and Christ's example (3:15)
 - a. So as not to lose focus of their crucified and risen Lord in their sufferings
 - b. Be conformed unto His death so they may joyfully reach the prize of His eternal presence

B. Appeal and Indictment (3:17-19)

1. Follow my example
2. Take note of others who follow this same pattern
3. Because there are many whose walk does not conform to this Kingdom pattern instead their "mind is set on earthly things" (3:19)

C. Reason for the Appeal (3:20-21)

1. Our citizenship (focus) is in heaven — future glory
2. Versus those whose end is destruction (living only for the present)
3. Commonwealth already exists in heaven and now we wait for a Savior who points to the "not yet aspect" of the Kingdom
 - a. Our present citizenship is ALREADY in heaven where we wait for Savior
 - b. At His coming, Christ will transform bodies of present humiliation by conforming them into His likeness of his present body of glory
 - c. He will do this in keeping with the power emphasizing the absolute sovereignty

CONCLUSION

1. Despite appearances and circumstances, God is still in control
2. Our salvation is not just a moment and not just for today, it is forever
3. At his coming, we will inherit the final glory that belongs to Christ alone
4. So how we live now does matter — we must passionately and eagerly press on toward the goal since final prize is the consummation of what God has already accomplished through his death and resurrection

When we stand before God on the final day, all external advantages and disadvantages will dissolve, and our true selves, the part of us that chooses good or ill, obedience or disobedience, will remain. Then we will see ourselves as we really are, and this moment of revelation will contain surprises — C.S. Lewis