

## Philippians – Part 3

### Phil 2:19 - 3:21

- Paul now turns from exhortation to practical matters.
- Paul hopes “in the Lord” that Timothy will be able to visit them soon. This is mentioned here and reveals how Timothy, as a co-author of Philippians (1:1), is really an honorary title; the real author is Paul alone. The fact that he plans to send Timothy soon – not immediately – means he is not the bearer of the letter. And Paul looks forward to receiving news via Timothy on his return, and he is confident that it will be *good news*.
- In contrast to everyone who is pursuing their own agendas – verse 21 – Timothy is genuinely concerned with the welfare of the Philippians.
- Nevertheless, Paul considers it necessary to send Epaphroditus to Philippi as well, and he is the bearer of the letter. Indeed, Epaphroditus was seriously ill (verse 26) and perhaps people in the Philippian church had heard about this news and were anxious to hear that he had made a full recovery – verse 28. The Greek words that Paul uses suggests that Paul regards Epaphroditus’ service in a “priestly” way – as an *offering* to God. Epaphroditus’ distress – verse 26 illustrates the difficulties of communication and travel in those times.
- This is a very pastoral and practical moment in the letter. It's down to earth. It shows how Christians in their daily lives share the same attitude of Christ, as being concerned for others rather than themselves. It also reminds us of the practical support that Paul had on his journeys, including being in prison. This resulted in real collaboration and stronger bonds of friendship.
- **Chapter 3:1 onwards:**
- The very first word of this section is, “finally,” which seems a surprise as we’re only half way through the letter! He still has a great deal more to say. Some commentators argue that this marks the end of one letter and the beginning of another. Some suggest instead that 3:1-4:3 is an insertion from another letter. We should note, though, that the word translated as “finally” could also be translated as “and so” and, therefore, doesn't quite have the same connotations.
- We are to *rejoice in the Lord* – 3:1!
- The word “beware” (3:2) is strong and emphatic. Paul issues a warning against Jews of some kind using the strong language of “dogs,” which is a term of derision usually for Gentiles because dogs are scavengers (not pets!) and were naturally associated with uncleanness. Of course, these people in Paul's mind are not genuine followers of God – they are “evil.” The Greek word “mutilation” is a substitute for circumcision. Whereas circumcision was understood to be a sign of the covenant between God and Abraham, hence something of pride to a pious Jews, is here compared to mutilation – making gashes in the flesh – something that was done by pagan priests! In fact, this was forbidden in Leviticus 21:5. The irony is that these people cared desperately about keeping themselves pure and obeying the commands of the Torah. But Paul regards all such righteousness of the law – verse six – as worthless compared to the righteousness that comes in Christ Jesus. Paul warns that their hope is in the wrong thing. We have come across this kind of thing before in Galatians – Galatians 3:1 – 5. Notice that this is not an attack on Judaism as such, because he

probably had in mind a group of Christian Jews who disagreed about the terms by which one could belong to the people of God. They insisted that Gentile Christians had to formally become Jewish proselytes. Now it could possibly be that they were Gentile Christians who were overly enthusiastic! Regardless, this is *not* a justification for anti-Semitism.

- In verses three and four Paul talks about having no confidence in the flesh – in other words in the physical sign of circumcision.
- Those who belittle the earthly privileges of others are often those who don't themselves have such honors! But this is not true in Paul's case, as he goes on to outline in verse 6-7. Paul uses the word “the flesh” here, which means the *physical* body - in contrast with the spiritual body. “Flesh” in itself is not sinful, although it can easily fall prey to sin. It represents something that we would call “human” or “worldly,” and Paul says he has no confidence in such things, instead his confidence is “in Christ.”
- Paul therefore had inherited privileges and excelled in everything “Jewish.” He had been a Pharisee, a faithful and sincere adherent of the Mosaic Law.
- Paul seems to be an accountant in that he talks about “profit and loss”!
- What does Paul understand by “knowing Christ” or being “found in him”? It was probably a more Old Testament understanding of religion as “knowledge of God.” And that this knowledge of God was based on God's self revelation to people. To “know God” is to honor God and obey his will – not simply to have knowledge concerning “the facts” *about* God. Paul speaks about “Messiah Jesus as his Lord” -the these are very powerful words.
- The righteousness that he talks about in verse 9 is based on faith. There is a contrast between the righteousness that comes from the Law and one that comes from God. In this we can go back to Roman 7-8.
- We now come back to this disputed phrase of “faith in Christ” or the “faithfulness of Christ” (v9). In order to get a fuller picture other examples of the phrase need to be considered – Romans 3:22, 26; Galatians 2:16, 20; 3:22. One can understand this “righteousness” to be *from* God but *through* the faithfulness of Christ. And as we learned earlier in the hymn (2:5-11), this arises from Christ's self-emptying, obedience, and trust in the Father, and his subsequent vindication in the resurrection.
- Paul picks up on this idea of “knowing Christ” (v8) and adds “and the power of his resurrection.” Perhaps surprisingly, Paul mentions Christ's resurrection before his suffering and death – but see Romans 4:25. Belief in the resurrection of the body was a distinctive Jewish idea that was taken over into Christianity but was now understood to be depend on the resurrection of Christ.
- Again, Paul talks about sharing in Christ's suffering. In other words, Christians must become like Christ *in death* to also become like Christ *in life*. Our attaining the resurrection from the dead clearly lies in the future even though Christians *already* know the power of God's resurrection in their lives. In the midst of Paul suffering he knows about God's resurrection power, and that provides him with some assurance of his own future resurrection.
- Paul reminds them at the end in verse 11 that we have not yet arrived at our final destination. Christ's resurrection has already occurred, but their own resurrection lives in the future and is necessary for others to keep on going.
- **3:12-4:1**

- What Paul is saying might be misunderstood as complacency, and so he hastens to remind the Philippians that is not yet obtained what he's aiming for – namely (likely here) the resurrection of the dead. The word “goal” is linked to *telos*, meaning “to complete, to bring to perfection.” Some have suggested that Paul is attacking a group of Gnostic Christians who claim to be perfect already! There are also hints of an athletic imagery, as running towards the prize – or the finish line. (There are subtle differences in the NIV and NRSV in v13-14.)
- Versus 15 and 16 have been suggested to imply that Paul is writing to a divided community.
- In verse 16 it gets a little confusing because Paul seems to imply that he has already attained something! The suggestion is that it is *not* the final prize, but perhaps a *mature* faith rather than a *perfect* faith.
- In verse 17 Paul now calls on the Philippians to *imitate him*. This may sound extraordinarily conceited. However, this can be understood as a Rabbi wanting his followers to imitate him. It also needs to be seen in the light of Paul himself being rooted “in Christ.” Paul has often seen himself as a role model to be imitated – 1 Cor 4:16; 11:1; 1 Thess 1:6; 2 Thess 3:7, 9. Some of suggested this should be translated as the “imitators *with* me,” rather than be “imitators *of* me.” In which case Paul would be seeking the Philippians to join him in imitating Christ. This is a questionable interpretation of the Greek, although theologically plausible!
- In verse 18 and 19 we go back to those who practice mutilation, and Paul treats them with sarcasm and contempt! On the other hand, it could be extended to those who live lives of indulgence, and gluttony, and shameful sexual practices.
- Paul again talks about the “Lord Jesus the Messiah” in verse 20. There are some resonances here the hymn of 2:6–11.
- We are to “stand firm in the Lord.”