

p 67 WEEK 9: PRESSING FORWARD IN PURSUIT OF CHRIST

Philippians 3:12–21

The Place of the Passage

Paul warned the Philippians about false teachers in 3:2. Their distortion of the gospel led him to use his own life as illustrative of a wrong (vv. 4–6) and a right (vv. 7–9) understanding of the gospel. The true gospel looks to Christ alone for righteousness, but then pursues further intimacy and identification with him (vv. 10–11). Now clarifying that the Christian life is imperfect and in process, Paul appeals to the Philippians to follow his example and not that of false teachers (vv. 18–19).

The Big Picture

The Christian life is neither one of perfection nor of passivity, but a progressive pursuit of Christ and his likeness as we await his return and the consummation of all things.

p 68 Reflection and Discussion

Read through Philippians 3:12–21, which will be the focus of this week’s study. Following this, review the questions below concerning this section of the book of Philippians and write your responses. (For further background, see the *ESV Study Bible*, page 2286 or visit www.esvbible.org.)

Last week’s passage ended on a high, exultant note (vv. 1–11) while this week’s begins in a more tempered tone. How might verses 12–14 be a clarification of verses 1–11? Looking through the rest of the passage (vv. 15–21), do you see any other reason why Paul writes about his imperfect pursuit of Christ in verses 12–13?

Verse 12 provides three motivating factors in Paul’s pursuit of Christ. Why does Paul “press on,” according to this verse?

Paul writes that his aim in pressing on is “to make it my own” (v. 12). What does he mean by this phrase? How does it relate to the next phrase, “because Christ Jesus has made me his own”?

p 69 What language does Paul use in verses 12–14 to describe his approach to the Christian life? What imagery is he conveying? What does it say about the nature of Christian growth?

What “lies behind” that Paul resolves to “forget” (v. 13)? (Hint: don’t limit your consideration to negative things of the past.)

Paul attests that he is constantly “straining forward to what *lies ahead*,” “toward the *goal*,” which is “the *prize* of the *upward call*” (vv. 13–14). What is he referring to here? Is this a theme found elsewhere in Philippians 3?

When Paul speaks to “those ... who are *mature*” in verse 15, he uses the same Greek word as in verse 12: “Not that I ... am already *perfect*.” He is *not* perfect, but then he addresses those who *are* perfect. How do we reconcile these two things? Is Paul speaking with “tongue-in-cheek” in verse 15? Explain.

p 70 In verses 15–16 Paul addresses those who “think otherwise”—i.e., other than his view of the Christian life in verses 12–14. What does he say to them? What doctrinal and pastoral assumptions stand behind Paul’s approach?

Remarkably, after fully acknowledging his imperfection (vv. 12–13), Paul calls the Philippians to “join in imitating me” (v. 17). This is a call not infrequently issued by Paul (Phil. 4:9; 1 Cor. 11:1; 2 Thess. 3:8–9; 1 Tim. 4:12, 15–16), so why do many of us find it remarkable? Why are we often leery of watching and imitating imperfect Christians, let alone serving as models ourselves?

Paul warns of false teachers in 3:2 and 3:18–19. Do you think that these two passages refer to the same group? Why or why not? (For help, see the notes on pp. 2285–2286 of the *ESV Study Bible*.)

Paul uses five powerfully descriptive phrases for the false teachers in verses 18–19. What are they? In what ways might these phrases be contrasts of previous themes in Philippians?

p 71 Paul ends this section by writing of our heavenly “citizenship” (vv. 2–21). We are already *now* citizens of heaven, and yet we “*await* a Savior” and the transformation of our bodies. How should we think of our heavenly citizenship as a *now-and-not-yet* reality?

Read through the following three sections on *Gospel Glimpses*, *Whole-Bible Connections*, and *Theological Soundings*. Then take time to consider the *Personal Implications* these sections may have for you.

Gospel Glimpses

JESUS HAS MADE ME HIS OWN. Quite similar to Philippians 2:12–13 (“work out your own salvation ... *for* it is God who works in you”) Paul writes in 3:12–13, “I press on to make it my own, *because* Christ Jesus has made me his own.” Both passages stress the complementary truths of human responsibility and divine sovereignty. What is unique about 3:12–13, however, is the personal, even intimate, tone: “Jesus has made me his own.” Whether in initial grace or in ongoing sanctification, the reality is not simply that God works (or draws, or changes, or grows, or purifies—all good and important!), but that Jesus is making us his own. He is powerfully at work in us *because* he has taken us as his own. This should daily energize us, as it did Paul, to “press on to make it my own,” even “straining forward” to Christ and Christlikeness (Phil. 3:12–14).

FROM LOWLINESS TO GLORY. Paul ends this chapter by rejoicing that when Jesus returns he “will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body” (v. 21). The path from lowliness to glory is a well-trodden one by this point in Philippians. The supreme example is that of Christ in his incarnation and crucifixion, leading to his resurrection and exaltation (2:5–11). Similarly, Paul’s life being “poured out as a drink offering” (in execution) is something to “rejoice” in since it will demonstrate, at the “day of Christ,” that he “did not run in vain” (vv. 16–17). Epaphroditus, too, was “near to death” (v. 27) because of his service to Paul on the Philippians’ behalf. God rescued him from life-threatening sickness; thus, the church should “honor” him (v. 29). Paul, again [p 72](#) in chapter 3, recounts his great “loss” for the sake of Christ (vv. 4–8)—a passage that ends with his expectation and longing to “attain the resurrection from the dead” (v. 11). So, too, 3:21 treks that path between present lowliness (“our lowly body”) and future glory (“transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body”). All put together, it is clear that Paul is making an important point!

Whole-Bible Connections

ALL THINGS SUBJECTED TO JESUS. Paul speaks of “the power that enables” Christ “to subject all things to himself” (v. 21). He has already made the point that, because of who Christ is and because of his obedient death, he was raised and is now “highly exalted” (2:5–11). His power and authority are supreme and universal. In that sense, all things have *already* been subjected to him (1 Cor. 15:28; 1 Pet. 3:22). But experience as well as God’s Word tells us that much of the world still does not bow before or confess Christ. Hebrews explains this: the Father has put “everything in subjection to him” and “left nothing outside his control”; but “at present, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him” (Heb. 2:8). When the King returns a second time, his rule, authority, and power will be universally and unavoidably manifest (Phil. 2:1–11). The power that will one day abolish all earthly authority, enemies, even Satan, and death itself, is *the same power* that will “transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body.” He will do it “by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself” (v. 21).

Theological Soundings

INDWELLING SIN. When Paul acknowledges his spiritual imperfection in Philippians 3:12–14, he is assuming a theological category that is fundamental to the Christian life. The absence of perfection assumes the presence of sin. While sin’s dominion has been crushed by God’s

regenerating grace (Rom. 6:1–14), and his law has been written on the heart, creating new desires (Jer. 31:33), there is a principle of remaining indwelling sin—what Paul often calls “the flesh” (Rom. 13:14; Gal. 5:16–23; Col. 2:23). Sin has been dealt a death-blow in regeneration, but it dies a slow death. In many ways, it is still quite active. The passions of the flesh “wage war against your soul” (1 Pet. 2:11). This is a slow and lifelong war. Thus, hard work is assumed in Paul’s language of “pressing on” and “straining forward.” But progress is also assumed. The race is run in steps—often small (and at times backward!), but we pray and strive for “progress” (Phil. 1:25). Such growth isn’t gained through performance of the law (3:2) but in knowing and seeking Christ (3:1–14; see also 2 Cor. 3:18).

p 73 HEAVEN. Philippians 3:20 says that “our citizenship is in heaven.” What is heaven? At the consummation of all things there will be a completely reconstructed creation, a new heaven and a new earth (Rev. 21–22). However, heaven is not just a future reality and place. Nor is it simply the dwelling of those who die before Christ’s return. Heaven is also a present, invisible reality for the saints living on earth. Every Christian is already “blessed ... with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places” (Eph. 1:3). Raised up with Christ in regeneration, we are mysteriously but really “seated ... with him in the heavenly places” (Eph. 2:6). So when Paul writes “our citizenship is in heaven” (Phil. 3:20), he is not only encouraging us to think about where we *will go*, but also about where we *are now*. It is a concept as majestic as it is mysterious. We “see” this realm now only with the eyes of faith (2 Cor. 4:18). We must “set our minds” on it (Col. 3:2) and long for the day when “heaven” will not only become visible but will overtake and transform everything.

Personal Implications

Take time to reflect on the implications of Philippians 3:12–21 for your own life today. Consider what you have learned that might lead you to praise God, repent of sin, and trust in his gracious promises. Make notes below on the personal implications for your walk with the Lord of the (1) *Gospel Glimpses*, (2) *Whole-Bible Connections*, (3) *Theological Soundings*, and (4) this passage as a whole.

1. Gospel Glimpses

2. Whole-Bible Connections

p 74 3. Theological Soundings

4. Philippians 3:12–21

As You Finish This Unit ...

Take a moment now to ask for the Lord’s blessing and help as you continue in this study of Philippians. And take a moment also to look back through this unit of study, to reflect on a few

key things that the Lord may be teaching you—and perhaps to highlight and underline these things to review again in the future.