

Knowing Christ

Philippians 3:1-16

Introduction

In chapter 2 Paul exhorted the Philippians to live lives that considered others ahead of themselves. He then held up Jesus as the temple for a disciple's life followed by the example of Timothy and Epaphroditus. The opening of chapter three sounds like Paul is wrapping things up and then gets distracted and goes a different direction.

"Finally" should be understood as something like "the final matter to be discussed" or "for the rest of what needs to be said." The connection between this section and the previous sections can be seen in the repeated themes. Focus is still on Christ (3:3 "boast in Christ" - 1:21; 2:8), participation in Christ's suffering (3:10-11; 1:29-30 - 2:17), eschatology [end times (3:11-14, 20-21; 1:6)], exhortation to stand fast (4:1 - 1:27) and having the same mindset (4:2-2:2).

This is a warning against being influenced by Jewish Christians who preach circumcision as a required ritual to be considered the true people of God. This is a prominent issue in Paul's writings (Romans/Galatians).

This section can also be seen as a fourth example of someone who is living a life directed by the mind of Christ. In this case, Paul is the example. Here Paul used his personal testimony to address the teaching of the Judaizers and to call the Philippians to follow his example.

Appeal against Jewish Identity Markers: 3:1-4a

As stated in the introduction, "finally" should be understood as a transitional word that introduces the final matter to be discussed. The idea of joy or rejoicing is most often brought up in Philippians when discussing an adverse circumstance. Jesus is the basis and focus of rejoicing. One's relationship with Christ is the lenses through which disciples should see everything that occurs in his or her life. It is one's relationship with God that triumphs over adverse circumstances. It may be that the idea of rejoicing needs to be stated so often in this short section because it is a concept that is difficult to embrace.

What Paul said next was not something new, but something he had previously addressed with the Philippians, possibly when he first took the gospel to them. It needed to be restated because it was too easy for the false teachers Paul was about to expose to gain a foothold within the Christian community. Why Paul brings this up here is not clear. It is not known whether or not Judaizers were already in Philippi. Perhaps there were those in Philippi who believed appearing to be Jew in a Roman colony was safer than being seen as a Christian. Whatever the case, it is a clear warning and the discussion did give a platform for reminding the Philippians what is at the heart of the gospel

Three descriptions are given for the false teachers, introduced with the word translated “beware” or “look out for.” The first one is “dogs.” Dogs in the first century were detested scavengers. They were detested by Gentiles and seen as unclean by Jews. So despicable were dogs that this was a derogatory term used by Jews in reference to unclean Gentiles. This is a very scathing statement about the false teachers. Those who would promote circumcision as a means to make Gentiles clean are themselves unclean from everyone’s perspective.

The second description of the false teachers is “evil workers.” They attempted to persuade disciples to embrace Jewish identity markers in order to be counted among God’s true people. What they were teaching actually promoted wickedness in terms of taking the gospel’s focus off Jesus and putting it on some external ritual.

The third description is “mutilators of the flesh.” Here is a play on words. The Greek word for circumcision is *peritome* (to cut around). The word used here is *kata tome* (to cut in pieces). A form of this latter word is found in Leviticus 21:5 in the LXX (Septuagint: Old Greek OT). In that text the priests in the temple were forbidden to cut their flesh to gain God’s attention, as did pagan priests when trying to gain the attention of their gods (1 Kings 18:28).

Paul then contrasted these false teachers to the “we who are *the* circumcision.” Circumcision will be the first word Paul uses when giving his religious pedigree with *peritome* (v. 5). Paul was probably using the word “we” to draw the Philippians into relationship with him and his teaching. This is who the Philippians had been and need to continue to be. Those who were “*the* circumcision” are not a counterfeit version of

God's people. This may very likely refer to one who takes a proper position before God (Deut. 10:16; 30:6 - circumcised heart).

The word "worship" speaks of priestly temple service. It can be translated, "who minister in the Spirit." This is in stark contrast to those who "mutilate the flesh." As indicated earlier, priests were forbidden to do such things (Lev. 21:5). The true circumcised live by the power of the Spirit not by the power of the mutilating knife. Paul gives a similar statement in Galatians 3:2-3. "Did you receive the Spirit by doing the works of the law or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? Having started with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh?" Is your ministry (worship) empowered by the knife or empowered by the Spirit?

Some Jews boasted in their identity markers, not only against Gentiles but Jews as well who did not practice the identity markers as strictly. Circumcision was used by Jews as one of those things that created an exclusive club of God's people and those not circumcised were viewed as outsiders. Jews believe circumcision was a deterrent to sexual sin. Such things gave them confidence in their relationship with God and their ability to deal with sin. Such things are not the place where confidence about one's relationship with God or ability to deal with sin is found. The true identity marker of God's people is the presence of God's Spirit and boasting or confidence is found in Christ rather than any external ritual.

Paul's Personal Testimony: 3:4b-14

Paul's Past: 3:4b-6

Paul's own life stands as a testimony for the position he took in the previous verses and his own theology about Jesus and the gospel. Paul had been in the theological position that his opponents held. He came to know the futility of such a position.

There was no Jew who could claim a superior status over Paul in terms of being a good Jew. His heritage was as tightly connected to Israel's past as anyone's could ever be. The first things mentioned had to do with things Paul inherited by birth. The last two were things that came as a result of his religious zeal or his personal achievement.

Paul began by taking a swipe at his opponent's glory in circumcision (things of the flesh). As far as things of the flesh go, Paul had as much or more to boast in than anyone. Paul had been circumcised on the day given when God established the covenant of circumcision with Abraham (Gen. 17:12).

"Israel" was the name given Jacob after he wrestled with God. It is the designation of God's ancient people, a place into which Paul was born. Benjamin was Jacob's favorite son, and the tribe of Israel's first king and Paul's namesake (Saul). In the blessings, Moses spoke over Israel; the tribe of Benjamin was described as "The beloved of the Lord" (Deut. 33:12). Benjamin was the only tribe that stood with Israel when the other 10 tribes broke off abandoning worship in Jerusalem. "Hebrew of Hebrews" indicates Paul was a pure blood Jew. It may also refer to Paul having learned the Hebrew language, not something every Jew of his day knew.

Now to the merits Paul achieved apart from his birth privilege. Being a Pharisee meant that Paul's zeal for the traditions of Israel's ancestors went well beyond that of most other Jews. It points to Paul's strict keeping of Jewish tradition and ritual (circumcision, Sabbath keeping, food laws, etc). Paul was an ardent student and observer to Torah's rituals. Paul was not even an average Pharisee. Paul was so zealous for Israel's traditions that he persecuted Christians.

"As to righteousness under the law, blameless. This does not mean sinless. It speaks of observable conduct that showed how zealous Paul was for Jewish cultic ritual and tradition. The context of "blameless" here is the same as that of 2:15. Paul had the reputation among Jews as one who strictly observed Jewish ritual and tradition. All the things mentioned here, particularly the last three, are things that can easily lead to boasting in one's own performance. They were things that Jews took great pride in. These things distinguished Jews from the rest of the world.

Paul's Present: 3:7-11

This is one of the most profound and uncomfortable statements about Christian discipleship in the entire NT. On one level we take great joy and maybe too much pride in what is said. At another level we may be frightened by its implication for our lives. Paul contrasted his past with his present by means of a gain/loss metaphor. This may

best be seen as an accounting ledger. There were things Paul once put on the side of assets that he had put in the loss column. The things Paul once saw as liability or loss he had put in the asset column. The difference maker is Christ, found 10 times in this text either by proper name or pronoun. All that is said here is about relationship, not intellectual ascent to a theological proposition concerning the identity and nature of Jesus. Notice the way Paul talked about relationship with Jesus: “knowing” (experiential knowing), “my Lord,” “in him,” “sharing,” and “becoming like.”

Righteousness based on observing the rituals and traditions of Torah came to be regarded by Paul as “rubbish” (excrement or refuse thrown out for scavenger dogs to eat). This was a big slap in the face to Jews whose pride was found in their Jewish heritage and observance of Torah. The reason it was so vile to Paul was because it took focus off Christ. Not only that, it was based on achievement that brought about boasting in self rather than boasting in God. I believe, even if Paul could have had covenant relationship with God on his own merits he would have repudiated it. Paul was so overwhelmed with the faithfulness of God in the gift of Jesus that nothing else was of real value. There was no value to Paul in anything that did not come from God and was not found in Jesus.

What God did in Jesus was not simply for the purpose of forgiving sins. As important as that is, it is not the ultimate goal of what God has done. God’s purpose and plan for creation is relationship with his creation. Therefore, the surpassing value is “*knowing* Christ Jesus.” The Hebrew understanding of this is to know as wives and husbands know each other or children and parents know each other. Knowing involves intimacy that comes from personal experience. This relationship continues to be seen in the words “gain Christ” and “found in him.”

The Hebrew understanding of righteousness or justification is “the relational aspect of God and humanity in the context of a covenant” (Onesti and Brauch, “*Righteousness, Righteousness of God,*” Dictionary of Paul and His letters, pg. 828). They go on to say, “Usually the word suggests Yahweh’s saving acts as evidence of God’s faithfulness to the covenant.” Covenant relationship with God (righteousness) does not come through a person’s ability to perform religious ritual or through the practice of religious tradition. Covenant relationship is the work of God. The phrase

“faith in Jesus” (v. 9) is literally “through faith/faithfulness Christ.” The construction of the Greek leads many scholars to translate this “by way of Christ’s faithfulness.” Here is how the New English Translation reads in 3:9.

... and be found in him, not because I have my own righteousness derived from the law, but because I have the righteousness that comes by way of Christ’s faithfulness – a righteousness from God that is in fact based on Christ’s faithfulness.

Our covenant relationship with God was provided by the faithful act of God in sending Jesus to die for the creation and Jesus’ faithfulness to the will of the Father. How can there be any thought that any rubbish like religious ritual could provide such a magnificent gift?

What Paul said next can appear to many of us to be a frightening proposition. They are words we like to say but not necessarily what we like to do. I doubt I can even come close to adequately writing about verses 10-11. This is where Paul was taking his readers as he contrasted his past with his present. This is where 2:1-11 points disciples.

Rather than the garbage Paul previously pursued (Jewish ritual and tradition), his new pursuit was to experience the life of Jesus as much as possible. The observance of Jewish ritual and tradition can produce a life that others could look at and describe as blameless. It could not lead to truly know God and experience his likeness. It was only through the covenant keeping faithfulness of God (God’s righteousness) and the faithfulness of Jesus that humanity could come to experience Jesus’ suffering, death, and resurrection. Then and only then can God truly be known. To know Christ involves three aspects of Jesus’ life: his resurrection, suffering, and death. The outcome of such a life is to experience vindication for a life devoted to God by experiencing the resurrection when Jesus returns.

The resurrection of Jesus was not just a powerful act that disciples are supposed to believe happened. Neither is it something that only gives disciples hope of a future resurrection. The resurrection power of God unleashed the Spirit of God into the world empowering disciples in ways that can only come from the power of God. Paul experienced the power of the resurrection from the day he heard Jesus speak to him on the road to Damascus and continued to experience God’s resurrection power

throughout his ministry. He described himself as a clay jar (2 Cor. 4:7) and one who understood his weakness and the greater experience of being empowered by God (2 Cor. 12:6-10). See also Ephesians 1:17-21. Disciples experience the power of Jesus' resurrection in their daily walk with God.

The suffering spoken of here is not suffering in general. Jesus suffered because he lived in a world dominated by Satan and the power of Sin. Those in whom Satan had his hooks dogged Jesus through out his life until they finally found the opportunity to kill him. Jesus suffered throughout his life as he brought the light of the kingdom of God into a dark world. What gave Jesus the strength to do this was his unquestioned loyalty to the Father. If a disciple is going to experience the life of Jesus, he/she must be a light (Phil. 2:15) in a dark world. Faith communities experience the suffering Christ when they stand together (Phil. 1:27) looking out for the interests of others (Phil 2:3-4) while living within a crooked and perverse generation (Phil 2:15). Knowing the suffering of Christ is the same as living a life worthy of the gospel (Phil 1:27).

The road to experiencing the power of Jesus' resurrection and suffering is through the process of being conformed to his death. The Greek word translated "becoming like" includes the word *morphe* that was seen in 2:6-8. It is also important to note that the word *morphe* is in the passive tense, meaning this forming is the work of God. By the use of this word Paul was making a strong connection between what Christ chose to do and what disciples are called to become. Jesus took a form that led to his being fully human and fully slave. Jesus' choice led to a life devoted to God that resulted in his death. Disciples are continually being formed into the likeness of Jesus' death.

Death here does not mean all disciples who are being transformed will suffer a martyr's death. It speaks of the character of the suffering. This transformation into the likeness of Jesus' death occurs through the resurrection power of Jesus working in a disciple's life as they face suffering for the sake of the gospel. This suffering comes as a result of being devoted to the will of God and to the needs of others while living in a hostile world.

The resurrection spoken of in 3:11 is the resurrection at the end of time. It appears in our English translations as if there was doubt in Paul regarding the likelihood

of such an event. This certainly cannot be a correct interpretation of Paul's thought here. Resurrection only occurs for those who have died. Dying, in the sense it is talked about here (dying to self and giving self to the will of God), is the prerequisite of the resurrection when Jesus returns. The hint of doubt here has to do with Paul's concern as to whether or not the Philippians will stand firm together. Paul was reminding the Philippians that what they currently had was not the goal. There is a goal waiting that Paul discussed in the next verses. They had not yet obtained the end time resurrection. "The final two clauses put it all in perspective: to 'know' Christ in the present means to be 'conformed to his death,' so that all of Christian life is stamped with the divine imprint of the cross as we live out the gospel in the present age, while we await the hope of resurrection" (Fee, pg 337).

Pressing toward the Goal: 3:12-14

"Not that" is a Greek idiom that introduces the following qualifier to what Paul just said. The "this" or "goal" is to know Christ. Although there is an aspect of knowing Christ that occurs during this life, a disciple's relationship with Christ will also be incomplete in this life. There is an "already/not yet" dimension to knowing Christ. We can know Jesus on some level now, but we will not know him fully until he returns and we experience the resurrection at the end of time. Therefore, Paul continued to press toward the goal of knowing Christ. Paul pressed on living the life of dying to self so that he would even more fully know Christ when he participates in the resurrection. A motivation for pressing on was the fact that Christ had first pursued Paul on the road to Damascus and had made Paul his own possession. Christ wanted the former persecutor of the church and reached out to Paul first.

Being in the "already/not yet" place in history left Paul, rightly so, unsatisfied. He knew there was something more and even greater coming. Therefore, like a runner in a race he continued to run for the prize. The runner who receives the prize does not get distracted. He pays no attention to the past but keeps his eye on the tape at the end of the race.

Paul's relationship with God, as with all Christians, began with God. It was God who called Paul and who called the Philippians. The call for Paul began on the road to

Damascus but has a “heavenly” goal. All of this is only found in relationship with Jesus. It is “in Christ Jesus.” It is found in one whose life is characterized by the life of the cross and resurrection. Christ is the means and the goal of God’s calling. The prize at the end is to fully know Christ. This is something that is often missed. The goal is not forgiveness or “walking the streets of gold.” Such thoughts may show our self-centeredness and shortsightedness. The goal is knowing Christ, knowing what it is to do everything through the power of God, desiring only the will of the Father, considering others more important than self, experiencing the suffering that comes from such a life, and in the end, experiencing the resurrection from the dead just as Christ experienced resurrection.

Those who are mature understand and embrace the cross-defined life. Those who are immature have their mind set on the here and now. But there is hope because God can and will reveal it to those who are open to his guidance.

Conclusion

Judaizers may not have been an imminent threat to Philippi, but Paul warned the Philippians of their teaching and in doing so addressed his concern for the Philippians. To focus on things of this world whether religious ritual, conflict within a community of faith, or hostility from the outside world distracts disciples from the purpose and goal to which God has called them. The goal is not forgiveness, although forgiveness plays a major role. It is not religious ritual. It is not getting to go to heaven, as important as that is. The goal is having relationship (“knowing”) Christ Jesus. The relationship Paul longed for was one that experienced the life of Christ as fully as possible. It is a life that lives by the power of God rather than by one’s own power. It is a life that is totally devoted to the will of God even at one’s own personal risk. It is a life that seeks the good of others over self. This is a life that is defined by the cross. This relationship with Jesus is to some degree possible now. But what we experience in this life is partial. We will not fully know Christ until the day he returns and we experience the resurrection.

Paul’s purpose for discussing his past and present desire relates to the affairs of the Philippians. They were feeling the pressure of the hostile world around them. They

were experiencing conflict within the faith community. Paul reminded them of what God had given them and what God called them to, life with Christ defined by the cross. If they would open themselves up to the conforming power of resurrection and suffering for the gospel, they would be able to handle the hostile world and able to address the conflict within. They would come to understand that the goal of the Christian is to know Christ and they would not fully know Christ until he returns. Therefore, keep pursuing the goal of knowing Christ.

Points to Be Made

1. Practicing right religious ritual has its God-given place but it is not the “end all and be all” of the Christian life. Even such noble things are rubbish in comparison to what is most important, particularly if they become things in which Christians boast.
2. The goal of the Christian’s life is to know Christ. It is to pursue a life that is empowered by God and defined by the cross and resurrection.
3. We will not fully experience the Christ event until Jesus returns and we experience the resurrection.
4. Don’t let the world in anyway take our focus off the goal.