

The Teaching of Philippians Chapter Three

Ya know, I believe I can very safely say that, in my earlier years, every time I heard someone teach from Philippians chapter three (and I've done it myself), it was applied to Paul's individual maturity in Christ and then applied to our individual maturity in Christ; however, I believe we'll see that such wasn't at all what Paul had in mind when he dictated this great passage.

Please consider read the entire chapter before proceeding with the following remarks.

Verse 2: Beware of dogs; beware of evil workers; beware of the mutilation! Then in **verse 18b** he said of these people that **they are enemies of the cross of Christ.**

Since the original term for "mutilation" is derived from the Greek term meaning "to cut," and since Paul went on in the next verse to speak of "the circumcision," to what group of people do you think Paul was referring? Right: The Jews. In fact it seems that Paul may have had Psalm 22:16 in mind, a verse that prophesied of how the Christ was treated: "DOGS have surrounded me. A band of EVIL-DOERS has encompassed Me" (NASB). As is well-known, the term "dogs" was usually applied by Jews to non-Jews, but here Paul applied this term to the Jews! So he was warning these brethren about Jews who rejected Jesus as the Christ, especially those known as Judaizers (i.e. that who were out to destroy Christianity).

By the way, in a play on words, **verse 19** appears to be an obvious allusion to the prophecy of Hosea concerning the end of national Israel for her rejection of Yahweh her husband; while Paul wrote of how these Israelite enemies of the cross as being boasters in the shameful, God in Hosea spoke of how He'd turn these boastful ones into a people of shame (4:7) by destroying them (7:13), which would of course, as Paul put it, be "their end" (v. 19) which was "at hand" when Paul wrote this letter nearly 2000 years ago now (4:5).

Verses 3-4a: For we are the circumcision who worship God in the Spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh, though I also might have confidence in the flesh.

Note how Paul was contrasting "the Spirit" with "the flesh" as well as contrasting genuine Jews with false Jews. Do ya think there was a connection? Certainly.

As he also wrote of in Romans chapter two, the true Jew (&/or true Israel) in the sight of God were those who accepted Jesus and His *spiritual* kingship and *spiritual* salvation. (Also consider Rev. 2:9 & 3:9 relative to this.)

Verses 4b-9: If anyone else thinks he may have confidence in the flesh, I more so: circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless. But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. But indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for Whom I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness which is by law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith.

Since Paul spoke about numerous matters associated with the law of Moses, and since he then followed that with the idea of being "found in the Messiah," surely we can see that he was using "the flesh" versus "the Spirit" as a contrast of the old covenant with the new covenant as in Romans 8:1-17 (please read those great verses of inspiration). So...

Since Paul associated the righteousness found in the law with his own righteousness (vv. 6 & 9); and, since he followed that up with a reference to the righteousness of God that's found in Christ (vv. 8-9), it would be fair to say that Paul was contrasting—and therefore emphasizing—that true, godly, and acceptable righteousness could only be found in the *finished* work of Christ. Hence...

The context of Philippians 3 concerns the same general idea as can be found in Second Corinthians 3 and the righteousness found only within the confines of the NC (2 Cor. 3:9).

Verses 10-11: That I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.

Since Paul said that he counted all those OC (old covenant) things as rubbish (v. 8) so that...

- ~ he may win Christ (v. 8, KJV), and so that...
- ~ he may be found in Christ, thereby having his attempt at righteousness hidden by God's righteousness (v. 9, cf. Isa. 64:6), and so that...
- ~ he may truly know Christ, and so that...
- ~ he may know (*gnonai*, "come to know/experience") the power of His resurrection (v. 10), and finally so that...
- ~ he may attain to the resurrection from the dead (v. 11)...

don't ya think that all of these are just different ways of referring to the same thing which occurred or would occur simultaneously? Certainly. Now...

Since Paul used the present tense when he said that he was "being" conformed to Christ's death (i.e., he didn't use the perfect tense, "having been," as if referring to his baptism), then surely he was here referring to the "dying" he was experiencing in reference to the transition from the old fleshly covenant to the new spiritual covenant as he wrote of in Second Corinthians chapters 3—5. If you don't think so (or even if you do), then let's read on. (By the way, the clause "that I may know Him" is marital language [cf. Rev. 21:2 & 9, etc.])

Verse 12: Not that I have already attained or am already perfected; but I press on that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me.

Since Paul spoke of attaining to the resurrection of the dead (v. 11) ... which he associated with his desire to experience the cloak of Christ's righteousness (vv. 9-10) and everything else listed under our previous #1 above..., and since he said here (v. 12) that he had not yet attained to perfection, then it seems obvious that the perfection of which Paul wrote was meant to describe the inclusion and completion of everything in that list above (cf. 1 Cor. 13:8-10).

Wouldn't you say that the purpose for which Jesus laid hold of Paul was to provide for his (and every other believer's) absolute righteousness/resurrection/perfection? Certainly. So this passage seems to clearly suggest that Paul believed in a transition period, the period in which he lived and in which he was exceedingly and directly involved. If you don't think so (or even if you do), then let's read on.

Verses 13-14: Brethren, I do not count myself to have laid hold of it yet (NASB), but one thing I do: forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Since Paul said that he hadn't yet attained to the resurrection from the dead (v. 11) as well as therefore to righteousness (vv. 8-10) and perfection (v. 12), and since he went on to say that he had not yet (by the AD 50s as well as many years after his conversion) come into possession of that righteousness (cp. vv. 9, 12, & 13), then he was saying that the fulfillment of righteousness wouldn't come until the resurrection. Now that's something hard for most folks to swallow. Now...

If that's an accurate interpretation of Paul's words here, then we have only two choices: [a] if the resurrection spoken of here refers to a still future, end-of-time, biological resurrection, then we today actually don't have Christ's righteousness imputed to us yet; or [b] Paul was referring to a spiritual resurrection of spiritually dead people into the life and righteousness of Christ when He finished His work at the AD 70 fulfillment of all things related to the OC (cf. Luke 21:22). But let's move on in our reasoning here:

Since the context concerns Judaizers who were pressing the ideology that the OC wasn't going to be (completely) outmoded (thus the binding of circumcision on Gentiles, etc., cf. vv. 2-4a), and since Paul's contention was that it would become outmoded (Col. 2:16-17, Heb. 10:1, et.al.), then, when he spoke of "forgetting those things which are behind," he was actually speaking of things associated with the old law (vv. 4b-6) instead of something to do merely with his personal maturity; and therefore when he spoke of "reaching forward to those things which are ahead," he was speaking of the perfected blessings involved in the NC (e.g. winning Christ, being found in Him and thus in His righteousness, knowing Him and the power of His resurrection, etc.).

After all that Paul had already talked about in the manner in which he had, wouldn't you say that "the prize" of verse 14 is yet another term describing all the blessings that he had previously talked about? Certainly.

Verse 16: To the degree that we have already attained, let us walk....

Isn't this an interesting statement? If Paul was speaking about a future, end-of-time, individual, and biological resurrection, wouldn't this statement imply that *parts* of their physical bodies had already died and been brought back to life? Sure it would, but we know that'd be ridiculous. So wouldn't this statement make more sense if it were interpreted to mean that those first generation Christians were in the midst of a transition period, transforming from one (OC/fleshly/Mosaic) body to another (NC/spiritual/Messianic) body? Definitely!

By the teaching of some in those AD 50s that the resurrection had already occurred (2 Tim. 2:17-18) while Jerusalem and the temple were still standing, we can see how that the Judaizers were merely trying to support their desire and belief that the OC would indeed continue to exist, either alongside the NC or intermingled with it. So when Paul told them in verses 15 & 16b to keep this mind about them, he was therefore telling them that the resurrection had not yet occurred and that they were thus to continue working out/toward their salvation (2:12). Incidentally...

In the beginning of this letter, Paul told these brethren that he was confident that God, who had begun a good work in them, would finish working it out until the day of the Lord (1:6), which, he wrote at the end of the letter was "at hand" (4:5). So here's the question: When Paul exhorted these brethren to not listen to the Judaizers but to keep on striving toward the goal, wasn't he here in chapter three developing the very thought he began with in this letter? Certainly.

Verses 20-21: For our citizenship is in Heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself.

Firstly, notice that Paul spoke of a *plurality* (multitude) of people ("we"/"our") and their *singular* (corporate) body. (We'll come back to this.)

Secondly, think of Second Corinthians 3 again: speaking of the old covenant (that which of course essentially defined the body of Moses as opposed to the body of Christ), Paul wrote that it had *some* glory (vv. 9 & 11), but the ministry of righteousness (aka the new covenant and its body, the body of Christ) would have *much more* glory (vv. 9 & 11); and remember, Philippians 3 is about righteousness. Now observe how Second Corinthians 3 (penned just a few years before Philippians 3) ends: "We, ... beholding ... the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from [one stage of glory] to [another] stage of glory." See...

In Philippians 3 Paul was contrasting their body (their pre-new-covenant-mode-of-existence body) that Christ considered one of minor glory with the body of glory He had in mind for them—one of much more glory! In fact, from my in-depth research on Paul's statement in Philippians 3:21, I'm convinced he was saying that Christ was transforming their body of humiliation into the body of *His* brand glory, the body *He* wanted for them, a body of righteousness not based on their own attempts of merit, but based on His accomplished perfection. So...

Is there any reason why we can't understand Paul here as referring to Christ coming to receive His bride—the church—body—to Himself (cf. John 14:2-3), resurrecting her—and thus the individual members comprising that body—by imputing to them His righteousness, thereby reconciling/restoring them to the presence/fellowship of God? I surely don't believe so.

One other additional point concerning "the hope of righteousness" for which those first generation Christians "eagerly" waited (Gal. 5:5) is this: "the righteousness of God" (Rom. 1:17) was never in the plans to come to fruition until Jesus returned for (i.e. to finish) salvation (Heb. 9:28, cf. Rom. 13:11; 1 The. 5:9; 2 Tim. 2:10; Heb. 1:14; 1 Pet. 1:5, 9, & 2 Pet. 3:15). Speaking of 2 Peter 3...

In verse 13 Peter said, "We, according to His promise, look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells." If the new heavens and earth have not yet arrived, then (as Paul taught in Php. 3), we don't yet have righteousness. And where (as Peter mentioned) did God promise this? In Isaiah 65:17 & 66:22, the only two places such a promise of God can be found; and in those chapters folks agree that God was prophesying about the New Covenant times, not Heaven after our deaths.

Corresponding well with this is Rev. 21:24 & 22:3 in which those who exist within the walls of the New Heavens & Earth, the New Jerusalem & Tabernacle of God which came down out of Heaven to the earth, are "saved" and don't experience the "curse" of unrighteousness any longer, thus no more death or tears in that regard. ☺