

Philippians – Philemon Session Four



Saint Paul. Detail of the mosaic in Arian Baptistery. Ravenna, Italy Wikimedia Commons

Running the Race; Paul in Philippi; Citizens of Heaven; Assessing Philippians – Chapter Three; I can Do All Things Through Him Who Strengthens Me; Philippians 3:12 – 4:23

Running the Race (Philippians 3:12 – 16)

This passage starts with an important qualification of what Paul has just said in the previous verses: ***not that I have already obtained all this***. The direct object in the NIV translation – ***all this*** – does not appear in Greek. Paul does not explicitly state what he has not yet obtained. Nevertheless, there has been no shortage of attempts to “fill in the blank.” Is what Paul has not attained the resurrection from the dead he speaks about in v. 1? Or does it look ahead to the “prize” mentioned in v. 14? Or is it simply Christ, himself?

Most likely, what Paul is pursuing, but has not yet obtained, is the surpassing gain for which he has lost everything else, described in vv 8 – 11. (implied by the NIV’s ***all***). Above all, this involves knowing Christ and being found in him. Although it is Paul’s ambition to know Christ now, both in Jesus’ resurrection power and sufferings, a full knowledge of Christ must await Paul’s participation in the end-time resurrection from the dead (vv 10 – 11).

The second verb describing the “not yet” of Paul’s Christian experience is more controversial. The apostle assures his readers that he still has not been made perfect (*teteleiōmai*). The verb *teleiōō* occurs only here in Paul’s letters, but we

encounter its adjective form, “perfect” (*teleios*), in v. 15. Many interpreters think that Paul is co-opting the terminology of his opponents in order to correct some form of wrong-headed “perfectionism.” One common explanation is that Paul is concerned about people in Philippi with a gnostic-type misunderstanding. We know that some deviating Christian groups held that they had already arrived at a resurrection perfection in a spiritual sense.

Members of the Jewish community at Qumran regarded themselves as “perfect” due to their observance of Law (see Phil. 3:6b). As a result, Paul’s Jewish rivals may have used this language to make similar claims. The letter gives us no other indication, however, that there were people claiming “perfection” in Philippi. Furthermore, it is far from certain that Paul is talking about moral or spiritual perfection here.

The verb *teleiōō* has a number of possible meanings, including “attaining the goal in view.” In light of the race imagery that follows, this is probably what Paul had in mind. This verb, then, echoes the thought of the first one, making it more specific. The resurrection still lies in the future; therefore, Paul had not yet **reached the goal** of full union with Christ.

In contrast to what he has not yet attained, Paul strenuously pursues the end that lies ahead. ***I press on*** (v. 12b) translates a verb (*diōkō*) that in verse 6 describes his relentless pursuit of the destruction of the church, thus *persecuting* the church. Paul, however, can also use it in a positive sense. In Paul’s world, this word could describe an army in hot pursuit of its opponents or hunters who persevere in stalking their prey. But here (and more explicitly in Phil 3:14) the picture is more likely that of a runner who presses on with tenacity toward the finish line.

– Dean Flemming (*Philippians, A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*, New Beacon Bible Commentary, Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2009)

Paul in Philippi

Acts 16:13 – 40 tells the story of Paul and Silas in Philippi when they came across a slave-girl who was inhabited by a spirit. The girl’s owners hired her out as a fortune teller. Somewhat annoyed by the spirit, Paul ordered it out of the slave-girl. On seeing a major source of income just disappear, the girl’s owners drug Paul and Silas into the marketplace in front of a magistrate. Paul and Silas were stripped and beaten with rods and thrown into jail. About midnight that night an earthquake shook the foundations of the prison and opened all the doors. The Jailer, assuming his prisoners had escaped, was ready to kill himself when Paul stopped him. Paul baptized the jailer and his family. The magistrates apologized, released them, and asked them to leave the city.

The narrative of the encounter with the magistrates and its consequences (beating, imprisonment, apology) is confirmed by the letters. In writing to the Thessalonians Paul mentions that he and his companions had 'already suffered and been shamefully treated (*hybristhentes*) at Philippi' (1 Thess. 2:2). The verb *hybrizo* is perfectly apt to describe the punishment of a Roman citizen without even the semblance of a trial. There can be no serious doubt that Philippi was one of the places where Paul was imprisoned and beaten with rods (2 Cor. 11:23 – 5).

The disagreeable episode ends with the departure of Paul from Philippi. How long had he spent there? This is one question that Luke does not answer. The mention of 'many days' (16:18) is merely an ingredient in Luke's story-telling technique. There is something, however in Luke's account which suggests a more realistic solution.

What concerned those who dragged Paul before the magistrates was the loss of their livelihood, but what they had said in court was '*These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe*'. The discrepancy permits us to separate the occasion from the charge. It is possible to refrain from judgment on the exorcism, while at the same time according the charge serious historical probability.

Interpreting the charge as implying a missionary effort of considerable duration and success, is confirmed by Paul's correspondence with Philippi. The letters reveal a well-organized, generous community, with the energy to support Paul's missionary endeavours elsewhere (Phil. 4:15 – 16). In no other letter does Paul single out women 'who have labored side by side with me in the gospel' (Phil. 4:3). Nowhere else does he thank a church, whose very existence is 'holding forth of the word of life' (Phil 2:16), for its 'partnership in the gospel' (Phil 1:5). What these allusions imply about the relationship of the believers to the Apostle, and their lived embodiment of authentically Christian values, could not have been achieved in a brief visit.

We must assume, in consequence, that Paul spent at least the winter of 48 – 49 in Philippi where he made converts among pagans. It is entirely possible that his stay there was cut short by the sort of event reported by Luke's source. Even though there was no organized Jewish proselytization in the first century, sufficient Romans had been attracted to Judaism that Tiberius in AD 19 felt himself obliged to react against the phenomenon by expelling the majority of Jews from Rome. The example of the Eternal City would carry weight in a Roman colony.

– Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, OP, (*Paul: A Critical Life*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1996)

Citizens of Heaven

The anonymous *Epistle to Diogenetus* (A.D. second century) reflects on the kind of alternative citizenship that Paul describes in Phil. 1:27 and 3:20:

But while they live in both Greek and barbarian cities, as each one's lot was cast, and follow the local customs in dress and food and other aspects of life, at the same time they demonstrate the remarkable and admittedly unusual character of their own citizenship. They live in their own countries, but only as nonresidents; they participate in everything as citizens and endure everything as foreigners. Every foreign country is their fatherland, and every fatherland is foreign. They marry like everyone else, and have children, but they do not expose their offspring. They share their food but not their wives. They are in the flesh, but they do not live according to the flesh. They live on earth, but their citizenship is in heaven (Diogn. 5:4 – 9; Holmes 2007, 703)

– Dean Flemming (*Philippians, A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*, New Beacon Bible Commentary, Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2009)

Assessing Philippians – Chapter Three

Chapter three contains some of the most powerful theological lines in the Pauline corpus. As Paul reflects on his own experience with the purpose of inspiring his hearers to imitate his example in their own lives, he reveals the lesson he has learned from discipleship in the particular way in which he has been called to live it. The reversal of the value system that came perhaps gradually but still surely after his encounter with the Risen Christ changed his whole life, even though he remained a loyal member of Israel. Within that identity, his perspective changed radically so that everything previously considered something to be clung to now became loss. On the other side of that loss, however, was incomparable new gain, that of knowing Christ Jesus. Though Paul probably did not compose the hymn of chapter 2, and though it may have been originally composed for an entirely different purpose and with a different Christology in view, Paul's interpretation of it fit perfectly into the framework of his letter, and he was able then to speak of his own experience as a reflection of that of Christ.

The motif of heavenly citizenship expressed at 3:20 could be used as justification for noninvolvement in history and its challenges: If Christians do not really belong here, what is the point of trying to change anything? It must be remembered that Paul's eschatological worldview contributed to a certain detachment rather than involvement, whatever he and his followers actually believed about the return of Christ – and that is not at all clear. At the same time, he is very clear about community obligations and ideals, and does not tolerate abuses in that realm. This is very clear in the various problems about which he comments and gives orders in

1 Corinthians. Even here, the disunity in the church is a source of great dismay to him. Within the limited extent that Christians could change their world toward the values of God, they were expected to do so.

– Carolyn Osiek, (*Philippians Philemon*, Abingdon New Testament Commentaries, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2000)

I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

How is this possible? Philippians 4:13 uncovers the secret of Paul’s lifestyle of contentment. ***I am able to do all thing***, Paul affirms, ***in the one who enables me***. Here is where the roads part most sharply between Stoic self-sufficiency and Christian contentment. The source of Paul’s contentment is not inner strength but divine empowerment.

We need to make two further observations about this familiar text. First, it is important not to take Paul’s testimony out of its context. This verse is not a blanket assurance that Christians can do *anything*. ***Everything*** (*panta*, which picks up ***in everything and in all things***, v 12) refers in the first place to Paul’s God-given contentment in poverty or plenty. But since this is a life attitude for Paul (see 1:21), ***all things*** probably applies to more than the immediate issue of material want or wealth. It embraces whatever situations he might face, whether temptations, slander, imprisonment, even potential death.

Second, the common translation ***I can do everything through him***, is possible, but it is probably not the best way to read the Greek preposition *en*. Paul, it seems, makes the point that the power to be content in all circumstances lies in his relationship with Christ (3:10), not in his own power. It is only as he is in union with Christ that this divine empowerment is available to him. Later scribes made this explicit by adding the word “Christ” to the text (see KJV). The present tense Paul uses indicates that Christ continually supplies all the ***strength*** that we need.

– Dean Flemming (*Philippians, A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*)

Philippians Philemon, Abingdon New Testament Commentaries, by Carolyn Osiek, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2000

Philippians, A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition, New Beacon Bible Commentary, By Dean Flemming, Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2009

Paul: A Critical Life, by Jerome Murphy-O’Connor, OP
Oxford University Press, New York, 1996

Session Five: Philemon *The Request*