

# The Upward Calling in Philippians 3

with Allen Hilton

Open -- “Honey, Saul quit his job...”

## Preliminary Review: A Life Lived for Others

During our first three weeks together, we found that Paul lived and taught a life of self-emptying love that he epitomizes in his exhortation to “consider others as better/more important than yourselves (Philippians 2.3).”

To provide the Philippians a visual aid for that habit, Paul presents himself and his co-workers as poster boys, and then produces Jesus as the center and source of it all.

## ***Paul’s Habit of Self-Emptying and Other-Concern (Philippians 1.12-26)***

- In prison, employing the guards as a mission team (1.12-14).
- In prison, glad even that ill-motivated preachers are spreading the Gospel (1.15-18a).
- In prison, asking whether to keep living or take his life, Paul chooses life because “to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you (1.24).”

## ***Jesus’ Example of Self-Emptying and Other-Concern (Philippians 2.6-11)***

- Paul imbeds the famous “Christ Hymn” within his attempt to teach the Philippians how true community works. In the hymn, Christ Jesus was in the very form of God, with all of its status and prerogatives, but “emptied” and “humbled” himself until he was spread eagle on a Roman cross. This way of preferring the other/humanity becomes Paul’s primary case for their Philippian self-emptying and other-concern.

## ***Two More Examples (2.19-30)***

- Of Timothy, Paul writes, “*I have no one like him who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare. <sup>21</sup>All of them are seeking their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ (2.20-21).*”
- Of Epaphroditus, Paul writes,
  - “*[He is] my brother and co-worker and fellow-soldier, your messenger and minister to my need;*

- <sup>26</sup>for he has been longing for\* all of you, and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill.
- <sup>27</sup>He was indeed so ill that he nearly died...<sup>9</sup>Welcome him then in the Lord with all joy, and honor such people, <sup>30</sup>because he came close to death for the work of Christ,\* risking his life to make up for those services that you could not give me (2.25-30).

As we turn the corner to chapter three, then, we are ready to ask what gives Paul the wherewithal to give himself out so freely to others? And what makes that habit and life joyful?

## Part One – A Shift in Tone

### **One Letter or Two?**

As we make our way from Paul’s commendation of Epaphroditus at the end of chapter 2 into Paul’s sharp words at the outset of chapter 3, we might sense the temperature rising.

One of the most striking features of this letter [i.e., Philippians] comes after these general exhortations. For the friendly and joyful tone that characterizes the letter’s first two chapters shifts almost without warning at the beginning of chapter three. Indeed, if one didn’t know that there were two more chapters left in the book, it would appear that the letter was drawing to a close at the end of chapter two. ([Bart Ehrman, “Are there two letters to the Philippians?”](#))

Here, UNC New Testament professor, Bart Ehrman, puts simply an observation that has led many scholars to conclude that Paul’s Letter to the Philippians is a composite letter, made of two smaller bits that have been grafted together – either by the Philippians themselves or by later hands as the material was copied and spread beyond the city limits of Philippi.

Those who see two letters here base their belief on the radical change of tone in Philippians 3.1-3. After commending the Philippians unreservedly in his opening prayer (1.3-11) and calling them beautifully to a new, other-preferring way of being community (see review above) – all undertaken with perhaps the friendliest tone Paul strikes in any of his letters – the author shifts abruptly to a rather harsh tone of warning:

*To write the same things to you is not troublesome to me, and for you it is a safeguard. Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of those who mutilate the flesh! For it is we who are the circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and boast in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh. (3.1-3)*

This “transformation of textual timbre” as one scholar appraises the alteration alliteratively (see what I did there?) must be accounted for by good exegesis, whether one hypothesize a two-letter (or for some three-letter) composite or treats it as one.

This is not the space for an extended presentation of the debate. For that, I refer you to the work of others, including the brief summary of the question by Mark Allan Powell

So, do the four chapters we now know as “Paul’s Letter to the Philippians”, singular, actually carry two smaller letters that have been combined? Full disclosure: I was formed through my graduate professors and others who taught me, in a way of reading texts that some would call minimalism. We were schooled in making sense of what we saw in front of us, with the burden of proof for theories of composition placed squarely on the shoulders of the people who saw something other than the obvious. We learned to see elaborate reconstructions as brilliant fictions, unless textual evidence could be produced to back them. For us, the fact that no manuscripts of Paul’s Letter to the Philippians indicate any seam or transportation of the content. The last words of what we know as chapter two flow textually straight through to the first verses of chapter three, without a single ancient copy that lacks 3.2 and following or sets them up differently than the rest.

Because of all this, in my own work for this class, I will not eliminate the possibility of a two-letter composite. But I will assume the burden of exegesis – the task of making sense of the text as it is. With that in mind, here’s my case for the continuity of chapter three with the rest of the letter.

### ***One Conflict or Two***

In our first two sessions together, we’ve noticed Paul’s passionate concern for the Philippians, who have experienced “suffering” at the hands of “opponents” who threaten to intimidate them. To this point, we have named that as THE presenting issue among the Christians in Philippi. Now, however, the Paul seems to turn toward a second conflict, not between the community and the outside world, but between the members of the community themselves.

These first verses announce an early Christian issue we know most vividly from Paul’s Letter to the Galatians and Acts 15. As Paul sees it, competing teachers have begun wooing that central Asian Christian community away from Paul’s gospel of grace to the belief that Gentiles must enter God’s covenant with Abraham through circumcision and the fulfillment of Moses’ Law. In fact, Paul devotes three fourths of that letter to opposing and disparaging that outside voice with the vigor of a parent whose drug-addicted child has begun to use again. All of this is happening, despite the apparent resolution of the circumcision question in a Jerusalem gathering captured in Acts 15.

In Philippians, Paul’s concern gets many fewer column inches than in Galatians, but its beginning, at least has similar fire. “Beware the dogs! Beware the evil workers!” is his rhetoric to portray what seem like Galatians-style suitors. Then, rather than build an extended scriptural case for grace (as he does in Galatians), he produces a three-paragraph biographical sketch detailing his own transformative experience of that grace. (See below.)

Could this conflict be raging internally among the Philippian faithful? It’s possible. Immediately after this chapter-long challenge to the circumcisionist position, in 4.2-3, Paul exhorts Euodia

and Syntyche, two of his co-workers in Philippi and therefore leaders in the congregation, with the now-familiar refrain, “be of the same mind in the Lord.” Then he even calls the community – Paul’s “loyal companion” – to “help these women” be reconciled to one another. Paul does not name the cause of the conflict, but it is conceivable, given its position directly after Paul’s case for grace, that the nature of the gospel is their issue. That might also bring back into play the “bickering and complaining” Paul chided in 2.14-15.

Are the Philippians arguing about the nature of the good news? It’s possible. In any case, Paul makes his primary argument for his good news of God’s grace through testimony, by the telling of his own story.

### **Part Two: Paul’s Career Change**

Most of what we know about Paul comes from his letters and the narrative of his career in the Book of Acts. Paul’s part comes mostly from...

- Galatians 1—2, where he recounts his conversion and early life as a believer in order to defend the authenticity of his gospel and argue against detractors.
- 1 Corinthians 15, where he tells his low position on the pecking order of people Jesus appeared to after his resurrection.
- Reports like the one in 1 Corinthians 1—4, 1 Thessalonians 2, and Galatians 4, of Paul’s original and ongoing relationship with the group to whom he is writing.
- The occasional mention of his travel plans interspersed across his letters.

Philippians 3 is one of the more extended versions of Paul’s life-story telling.

#### ***“Type A” High Achiever***

Paul never did anything halfway. Throughout his life, if he saw a competition, he wanted to win it. If he saw a ladder, he climbed to the top rung and wanted to go higher. He cultivated the discipline to excel and then did.

#### **A+ Student**

*If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: <sup>5</sup>circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; <sup>6</sup>as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless (Philippians 3.4-6).*

*You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. <sup>14</sup>I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors (Galatians 1.13-14).*

#### **Passionate Persecutor**

When [the High Priests of Jerusalem] heard these things, they became enraged and ground their teeth at Stephen. <sup>55</sup>But filled with the Holy Spirit, Stephen gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. <sup>56</sup>'Look,' he said, 'I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!' <sup>57</sup>But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. <sup>58</sup>Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. <sup>59</sup>While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' <sup>60</sup>Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' When he had said this, he died.\* And Saul approved of their killing him.

That day a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria. <sup>2</sup>Devout men buried Stephen and made loud lamentation over him. <sup>3</sup>But Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison... (Acts 7.54—8.3)

... as to zeal, a persecutor of the church. (Philippians 3.6)

### ***Paul's Experience of Grace***

On a road from Jerusalem to Damascus, Paul suddenly realized that he had been climbing the wrong ladder. Jesus appeared to him and changed him and gave him a completely different climb.

### Paul's Summary of Experiencing Jesus

*Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. <sup>8</sup>More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord (Philippians 3.7-8).*

*Last of all, as to someone untimely born, Christ appeared also to me (1 Corinthians 15.8).*

*But...God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased <sup>16</sup>to reveal his Son to me... (Galatians 1.15-16)*

### Paul's Unnamed "Experience of Jesus"

According to the Book of Acts, Saul/Paul stood by while the Jewish council and mob stoned Stephen outside the city (Acts 7.58). While Saul watched, Stephen...

- Commended his spirit to Christ.
- Forgave the people who were killing him.

What Paul did not know at the time, but probably learned later, Stephen was both imitating and channeling Jesus. From the cross, Luke's Jesus...

- Commended his spirit to God.
- Forgave the people who were killing him.

While Paul did not recognize it immediately, Jesus “appeared” to Paul before he even knew it.

### The Big Story in Acts

*Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest <sup>2</sup>and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. <sup>3</sup>Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. <sup>4</sup>He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?’ <sup>5</sup>He asked, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ The reply came, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. <sup>6</sup>But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.’ <sup>7</sup>The men who were travelling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. <sup>8</sup>Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. <sup>9</sup>For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.*

*<sup>10</sup> Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, ‘Ananias.’ He answered, ‘Here I am, Lord.’ <sup>11</sup>The Lord said to him, ‘Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying, <sup>12</sup>and he has seen in a vision\* a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.’ <sup>13</sup>But Ananias answered, ‘Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; <sup>14</sup>and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name.’ <sup>15</sup>But the Lord said to him, ‘Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; <sup>16</sup>I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.’ <sup>17</sup>So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul\* and said, ‘Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.’ <sup>18</sup>And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, <sup>19</sup>and after taking some food, he regained his strength (Acts 9.1-19).*

### Soaking it All in: Arabia

*But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased <sup>16</sup>to reveal his Son to me,\* so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with any human being, <sup>17</sup>nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me, but I went away at once into Arabia, and afterwards I returned to Damascus (Galatians 1.15-17).*

### **Part Two: Life Lived in Grace**

We know of cults and other religious distortions that win passionate allegiance but destroy

souls. Given that experience, it is important for us to look at Paul's conversion closely to make sure that the person was not obliterated by the experience and made into a religious robot.

What Paul shares about himself in Philippians and in his other letters reveals both change and continuity – a new Paul with the old personality.

### ***A New Paul***

When Paul's life was turned upside down, so were his values. Suddenly, the things that formerly meant everything (e.g., achievement in keeping the Law of Moses, whatever possessions he had, distinction as a Pharisee), no longer counted for anything. His transformation is remarkable!

*For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ<sup>9</sup> and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ,\* the righteousness from God based on faith.<sup>10</sup> I want to know Christ\* and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death,<sup>11</sup> if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.*

*12 Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own (3.8-12).*

### ***But Still Paul***

#### Climbing a Different Ladder

Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own;\* but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead,<sup>14</sup> I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly\* call of God in Christ Jesus (3.13-14).

#### Passionate for the New Truth

*Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of those who mutilate the flesh!\*<sup>3</sup> For it is we who are the circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God\* and boast in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh—<sup>4</sup> even though I, too, have reason for confidence in the flesh (3.2-3).*

#### The HUGE Difference: Receiving the Gift

*For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ<sup>9</sup> and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ,\* the righteousness from God based on faith (3.8-9)."*

Paul's life changed utterly when he realized that he no longer had to win God's affection – that God needed nothing from him. Suddenly he became full enough to empty himself. Amazing Grace!

### **Part Three: Learning from Paul**

#### ***Seek and ye shall find!***

When I imagine Paul the Pharisee, I imagine someone who thought he was climbing the right ladder, but found when he got to the top that it didn't lead to the truth he sought. After that experience, he put his ladder on another wall.

#### ***God honors our native gifts.***

Paul's personality stays the same. His job changes. Saul's drive is still there in Paul. It is just aimed in a different direction.

#### ***One size does not fit all.***

Experiences of God vary as widely as the people who have them. Paul understates his own experience – “I want to know Christ” in Philippians, “Christ appeared to me” in 1 Corinthians 15, “God revealed God's son to me” in Galatians. This understatement guards against conversion envy, which we might feel in the face of the pyrotechnic conversion the Book of Acts describes.

#### ***Seek Christ where he may be found.***

In a way, Paul “saw Christ” in the death of Stephen. In the last week, where have you seen Christ in the life of someone around you?

### **Close – The Joy of the New Job**

In chapters 1–2 Paul offers the Philippians (and us!) the key to community. He gives himself out for others and for the gospel. In chapter 3, Paul tells us what made that possible: Christ offered a righteousness that wasn't earned, but rather was by faith. Paul accepted that gift in faith. No longer did he have to strive to gain God's approval. Now God gave it to him before any work. Christ had given himself out for Paul. That gift paradoxically freed him to give himself out for others.

Clearly, from the number of times “joy” pops up in this letter, Paul enjoyed his new job!

## How Many Letters to Philippi?

By Mark Allan Powell

Supplement to *Introducing the New Testament*, 2nd edition.

Polycarp, a second-century bishop, mentions letters of Paul to the Philippians. Did Paul write more than one letter to this church?

Some scholars believe that the letter to the Philippians in our Bibles is actually a composite of two or three letters that Paul wrote at different times.

- 3:1a; 4:8–9, 21–23 sound like possible conclusions to letters
- 3:1b–4:3 has a different tone than the rest of the letter (warnings against enemies in a letter that is otherwise happy and confident)
- 4:10–20 expresses thanksgiving for a gift, which typically came at the beginning of a letter rather than at the end
- 2:25–30 speaks of Epaphroditus returning to Philippi after a protracted illness, but 4:18 refers to him as if he has just arrived

A “two-letter theory” suggests that Paul wrote one letter (3:1b–4:20) when Epaphroditus first arrived and another letter (1:1–3:1a; 4:21–23) after Epaphroditus recovered from sickness.

A “three-letter theory” suggests that Paul wrote an early thank-you note (4:10–20), a follow-up letter that was hopeful and confident (1:1–3:1a; 4:4–7, 21–23), and a third letter to address problems in the church (3:1b– Supplement to *Introducing the New Testament*, 2nd ed. © 2018 by Mark Allan Powell. All rights reserved. 4:3; 4:8–9).

In either case, a later editor is supposed to have woven the different letters together to form the one that we now have in our Bibles. There is no solid evidence to support these proposals, but many scholars think that Philippians makes better sense when its contents are reorganized into two or three different compositions. Others find such theories an unnecessary imposition; they assume that Paul dictated the letter over a period of time in a way that allows shifts in his thought and mood.