

The Faith Journey of Paul: An Exegetical Analysis of Philippians 3:1-14

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Abstract²

This journal article examines the faith journey of Paul, specifically as it is delineated in Philippians 3:1-14. Verses 1-6 reveal that in the past, before he put his faith in Christ, Paul trusted in his human attainments. According to verses 7-11, after Paul encountered the risen Lord on the road to Damascus, the apostle made growing in the knowledge of Christ the central focus of his existence in the here-and-now. Finally, in verses 12-14, it is disclosed that Paul set his sights on increasing in Christlikeness. Based on the sports analogy of athletes running in a race, Paul explained that following Christ requires unrelenting dedication and perseverance on the part of believers. This involves doing the following: (a) putting our past—with all its shortcomings and attainments, whether real or imagined—behind us; (b) living wholeheartedly for Christ in the present; and (c) using all our effort to press on toward the future goal of being made complete in spiritual union with Christ in heaven.

1. Introduction

A common practice is to divide the fundamental issues of human existence into three domains of inquiry: (a) where we come from (i.e. the origin of our

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existence); (b) why we are here (i.e. the purpose of our existence); and (c) where we are going (i.e. the ultimate destiny of our existence). This triad of issues deals, respectively, with the past, present, and future aspects of every individual's life. Admittedly, there is some fluidity and overlap between these three facets of existence. Be that as it may, philosophers and theologians have found this approach helpful to demarcate the odyssey of life and to fathom its short-term and long-term significance (cf. Chan 2007:307-311; Echeverria 2007:243-244; Emmons 2005:734-736; Metz 2007; Zinke 2004:63-64).

The preceding breakdown can be seen in the faith journey of Paul, especially as it is delineated in Philippians 3:1-14. An exegetical analysis of the passage indicates that in the past, before he put his faith in Christ, Paul trusted in his human attainments (vv. 1-6). Then, after encountering the risen Lord on the road to Damascus (cf. Acts 9:3-5; 22:6-11; 26:12-18), Paul wanted growing in the knowledge of Christ to be the central focus of his existence in the here-and-now (Phil. 3:7-11). Moreover, with the future looming over the horizon, the apostle set his sights on increasing in Christlikeness (vv. 12-14; cf. Fee 1995:304, 338; Fowl 2005:159; O'Brien 1991:345-346). While Paul never forgot the lessons learned from his past (including his mistakes), he did not let these stymie his present efforts to know Christ more deeply and one day arrive at his future home in heaven. Indeed, Paul's discussion of the past, present, and future aspects of his life represent an affirmation of the lordship and centrality of Christ in every area of human existence.

2. Paul's past: trusting in human attainments (Phil. 3:1-6)

The fullest account of Paul's life and ministry is recorded in the Book of Acts. He is first mentioned in connection with the stoning of Stephen. At that time (about A.D. 35),³ Paul was an unconverted Jew known as Saul of Tarsus. A group of zealots brought Stephen before the Sanhedrin on charges that he had spoken against the temple and the law. His defense took the form of a historical survey in which he argued that God can be worshiped apart from the temple and that the Jews had a history of stubbornly disobeying God. Stephen so enraged the Jewish leaders that they dragged him out of Jerusalem and

³ The dates used in this essay for Paul's life are based on the timeline appearing in the *Zondervan TNIV Study Bible* (2006:1854-1855).

began to stone him. During this grisly episode, the witnesses removed their cloaks (or outer garments) and laid them at the feet of Saul, who agreed completely with Stephen's execution (7:1-8:1; cf. Betz 1992:187; Bock 2007:310-316; Bruce 1980:238-239; 1986:710-711; 1988:129-161; Ladd 1997:404-405; Longenecker 1981:349-352; Mauck 2001:75-84; Morris 1990:20-21; Pelikan 2005:100-109; Reese 1976:348-350; Purdy 1962:684; Tannehill 1994:85-101; Walaskay 1998:74-79; Wall 2002:125-132).

After persecuting the believers in Jerusalem, Saul decided to go after those Christians who had fled the city, to bring them back to face trial before the Sanhedrin and possible execution (Acts 9:1-2; 22:4-5; 26:9-11). On the road near Damascus, about noon one day (22:6), a light "brighter than the sun" (26:13)⁴ blazed around Saul and his companions, who all fell to the ground. Saul heard the voice of Jesus asking, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" (9:4), and received instructions to go into Damascus and find the house of Ananias on the street called Straight. Saul was blinded, and for three days did not eat or drink anything (vv. 8-9; cf. Betz 1992:187-188; Bock 2007:353-359; Bruce 1988:180-185; 1993:682; Longenecker 1976:629; 1981:367-372; Mauck 2001:87-89; Morris 1990:56; Pelikan 2005:120-124; Tannehill 1994:113-116; Walaskay 1998:91-94; Wall 2002:146-151).

In Damascus, Ananias received his own vision from the Lord. Ananias was commanded to go to Saul, restore his sight, and tell him of his new mission—not to persecute Christians, but to join them, and spread the gospel even further, to the Gentiles (vv. 15-16). Though Ananias was fearful of Saul because of what he had heard of Saul's persecutions (vv. 13-14), Ananias did what the Lord commanded, and a new Christian was baptized, filled with the Holy Spirit, and ready to share the good news with both Jews and Gentiles (vv. 18-20). According to 13:9, eventually Saul began using his alternate name, Paul, since the latter is Roman and Hellenistic in origin (cf. Bock 2007:359-362; Bruce 1988:185-189; Longenecker 1981:372-374; Mauck 2001:89-90; O'Brien 1991:375; Reese 1976:357-362; Pelikan 2005:124-127; Tannehill 1994:116-119; Walaskay 1998:95-98; Wall 2002:151-152).

⁴ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from *Today's New International Version* (hereafter abbreviated, TNIV).

After getting saved, Paul worked with the Christians in Damascus (9:22), the desert regions of Arabia (Gal. 1:17), and Jerusalem. Opposition from the Jewish leaders drove him to Tarsus (Acts 9:26-30). Paul worked with Barnabas to reach Gentiles through the church at Antioch of Syria (11:19-26). On the first missionary tour (about A.D. 46–48), Paul visited the island of Cyprus and the cities of Antioch of Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe (Acts 13-14). On his second missionary tour (about A.D. 49–52), Paul carried the gospel further west to the province of Macedonia and the cities of Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, and Corinth (Acts 16-18). On his third missionary tour (about A.D. 53-57), he worked with churches at Ephesus, Troas, and Miletus (Acts 19-20; cf. Betz 1992:188-189; Bruce 1986:713-716; Bruce 1993:683-686; Polhill 1999:159-164; Purdy 1962:685-686).

Although Paul had zealously persecuted the earliest followers of Christ, the Lord still called this passionate Pharisee from Tarsus to be an important messenger of the gospel to the Gentiles (cf. Acts 8:3; 22:4-5; 26:9-11; 1 Tim. 1:12-14). Paul accomplished his God-appointed mission by both personally establishing churches throughout Greece and Asia Minor and writing divinely inspired letters to Christians throughout the Mediterranean world—including those living in Philippi. Throughout the Philippian epistle, Paul's deep affection for the believers who had supported him with their prayers and financial aid is evident. Though these Macedonian believers were being persecuted for their faith in Christ, they had neither abandoned Paul's teachings nor discarded his friendship. Such steadfast devotion to the Lord Jesus and His ambassador compelled Paul to pour out his heart to them.

During the course of Paul's tumultuous career as a travelling evangelist, he was held in custody at least four times: temporarily at Philippi (about A.D. 50); once in Caesarea (about A.D. 57-59); and twice in Rome (first in about A.D. 60-62 and second in late A.D. 66 or early A.D. 67). It is most likely that Paul wrote the letter to the Philippians during the first imprisonment in Rome while he was under house arrest (cf. Acts 28:14-31). During this period of detainment, the apostle had the freedom to entertain guests, preach the gospel, and write. His second imprisonment in Rome's Mamertine prison was far more restrictive. In fact, this second imprisonment apparently ended with his execution (cf. 2 Tim. 4:6-8, 16-18; cf. Hawthorne 1983:xxxiii-vi; Hendriksen

1962:21-31; Hooker 2000:473-475; Kent 1978:95-99; Lightfoot 1981:1-5, 49-60; Martin 1982:7-9; Müller 1984:13-14; Thielman 1995:16-18).

It was after the Philippian believers had sent Paul a generous gift while he was under house arrest in Rome that the apostle wrote a letter to thank them for their kindness and to report on his current situation. At the same time, Paul took the opportunity to urge them to remain strong and united in their faith in Christ, though many external and internal elements may have been discouraging them. The apostle began Philippians 3:1 with the exhortation to his readers to “rejoice in the Lord”. Joy is a major theme that is stressed throughout Paul’s letter (cf. 1:4, 18, 25; 2:2, 17-18; 3:1; 4:1, 10). In this instance, the apostle encouraged his fellow Christians to rejoice because they belonged to the Lord Jesus (Capes, Reeves, and Richards 2007:207, 210; Collins 2008:40; Fee 1995:291; 2007:408-409; Hawthorne 1983:124; Hendriksen 1962:147-148; Hooker 2000:524; Kent 1978:138; Lightfoot 1981:61-62, 125; Martin 1982:123; Müller 1984:104-105; O’Brien 1991:348-349; Thielman 1995:166-167).

Such an experience would aid in protecting Paul’s readers from the heretical legalism of his doctrinal enemies. He referred to them as “dogs” (v. 2), “evildoers”, and “mutilators of the flesh”. Concededly, these words are harsh, yet they convey the seriousness with which the apostle viewed the imminent threat to his spiritual children in Philippi. (Similar concerns are expressed in the Galatians 5:2-12.) “Judaizers” is the term used to refer to the enemies of the gospel that Paul proclaimed. These were legalistic Jews who contended that all believers, regardless of their ethnicity, had to observe the ceremonial practices of the Old Testament in order to gain and maintain salvation. The Judaizers especially insisted that converted Gentiles had to be circumcised before they could be received into the Church (Acts 15:1-2). Moreover, the Judaizers rejected Paul’s claim to be an apostle, arguing that he had watered down the gospel by ignoring the requirements and customs of the Mosaic law (21:20-21; cf. Aageson 1992:1089; Barnett 1993:649-650; Betz 1992:193-194; Beasley-Bockmuehl 1998:183-184; Murray 1993:654-655; Filson 1962:1005; Hall 1992, 1:1030; Harrison 1982, 2:1150; Marshall 2004:349-350; Rapa 2001:166-167, 254; Schreiner 1993:137-138).

Against this historical backdrop we can understand why Paul called the Judaizers “dogs” (Phil. 3:2). This was the term that orthodox Jews would call Gentiles, for they considered both Gentiles and dogs to be unclean, vicious scavengers (cf. 1 Sam. 17:43; 24:14; Prov. 26:11; Isa. 56:10-11; Matt. 7:6; 15:22-27; Mark 7:26-28; Bateman 1998:55; Bock 1994:330; O’Brien 1991:354-355; Ryken, Wilhoit, and Longman 1998:214). In a way, the apostle reversed the use of this derogatory term by applying it to devotees of the Torah who insisted that Gentiles subject themselves to Jewish cleansing rites before they could become true Christians (cf. Isa. 56:10-11; Rev. 22:15; Holladay 1969:79; Marshall 2004:350; Silva 2005:147). Paul may have used this word also because these people harassed him at times during his missionary journeys (cf. 2 Cor. 11:13-15; Gal. 5:12; Fee 1995:294-295). Perhaps this is what prompted the apostle to refer to his antagonists as “evildoers” (Phil. 3:2). After all, the upshot of their troublesome actions and heretical teachings was injurious to the spiritual well-being of Jesus’ followers (cf. Bockmuehl 1998:187; Collins 2008:64; Doughty 1996; Hawthorne 1983:125; Kent 1978:138; Lightfoot 1981:144; Martin 1982:125; Müller 1984:105-106; O’Brien 1991:355-356).

Moreover, Paul called the legalists “mutilators of the flesh”, in which the Greek word translated “mutilators” (literally, “to cut down or off”) is an ironic play on the term rendered “circumcision” (literally, “to cut around”; v. 3). This brings to mind the disfiguring injuries pagans inflicted on themselves as they participated in frenzied rituals (cf. 1 Kings 18:28; Fee 1995:296; Thielman 2005:317-318). The apostle’s sarcasm was appropriate, for the religious frauds demanded that all Christians be physically circumcised as a prerequisite for becoming holy and acceptable to God. The apostle did not attack circumcision itself, but rather the significance that the Judaizers placed upon it. On the one hand, Paul affirmed the propriety of the Jews to be circumcised. In fact, on at least one occasion he circumcised a believer when he thought it was appropriate (cf. Acts 16:3). On the other hand, the apostle objected to anyone teaching that righteousness comes through obeying a Jewish ceremony such as circumcision (cf. Bateman 1998:55-56; Martin 1982:126; Hendriksen 1962:151-152; Hooker 2000:524; Udoh 2000:223).

Originally, God instituted the rite of circumcision as a sign of the covenant between Him and Abraham’s descendants (cf. Gen. 17:9-14, 23-27; 21:4;

34:13-17; Exod. 4:24-26; 12:44-48; Josh. 5:2-8; Luke 1:59; Hall 1992:1:125-1026; Grudem 1994:975; Lewis and Armerding 1979:1:701-702; Morris 1990:83). Circumcision was intended to mark their entry into the community of faith in Lord. In ancient Israel, circumcision was done on the eighth day after the son's birth, usually by the father. Several non-Jewish groups also practiced the rite. Later, rabbis performed the ceremony for the Jews (Hyatt 1962:629; Schreiner 1993:138; Woodbridge 2000:411-412). Over time, some Jews began to see circumcision, not as a *sign of* a relationship with God, but rather as the *means to* a relationship with Him. This excessive valuation of circumcision carried over into the early church (cf. Acts 15:1, 5; Gal. 2:11-13; 5:2-3). Paul's view was that while Jews were free to decide whether to circumcise themselves and their sons, no one should try to force Gentile Christians to be circumcised (Longenecker 1976:638-639, 659-660).

Paul transformed the meaning of circumcision from an external mutilation of the flesh, which could be done only to men, to the internal work of God's Spirit that marks every believer's union with the Father based on the Son's redemptive work (cf. Lev. 26:41; Deut. 10:16; 30:6; Jer. 4:4; Ezek. 36:26; 44:7; Col. 2:11, 13; Erickson 1998:1046; Harrison 1996:99; Ryken, Wilhoit, and Longman 1998:149; Udoh 2000:221, 223). Paul declared that it is Jesus' disciples—namely, everyone worshiping and serving God by the power of His Spirit (cf. John 4:23-24; Ridderbos 1975:286, 337, 481; Silva 2005:148)—who are the true “circumcision” (Phil. 3:3) and the real people of God (cf. Gal. 3:6-4:7). This included both believing Jews and Gentiles (cf. Fowl 2005:147-148; O'Brien 1991:359). Instead of bragging about what they have attained, they exulted in what the Lord Jesus had accomplished on their behalf through His atoning sacrifice at Calvary, resurrection from the dead, and ascension into heaven. Expressed differently, believers did not put any trust in their pious observance of religious rituals; instead, they rejoiced in the fact they had eternal life in spiritual union with the Redeemer (cf. Jer. 9:23-24; 1 Cor. 1:31; 2 Cor. 10:17).

Undoubtedly, there were legalists who challenged Paul's authority to teach as he did about circumcision. These same persons would also have contested his disparagement of the efficacy of human efforts to merit God's approval. Against the backdrop of these detractors, Paul delineated his stellar credentials. In this way, the apostle signaled that he had plenty of reasons to

put confidence in his personal pedigree and professional achievements, especially based on the Judaizers' standard of righteousness. As a matter of fact, no one was a more zealous defender of the Jewish laws and customs than Paul had been. Moreover, whatever credentials the Judaizers claimed they had, the apostle contended that he was far more qualified than any of them to speak as a Jew on matters of observing the Torah (Phil. 3:4; cf. Bockmuehl 1998:195; Fee 2007:408; Hawthorne 1983:131-132; Hendriksen 1962:155-156; Hooker 2000:526; Kent 1978:139; Martin 1982:127; O'Brien 1991:367-368; Thielman 1995:169-170).

The apostle began by noting that he was circumcised on the eighth day after his birth (v. 5). The implication is that Paul's parents were devout Jews, who faithfully followed the Mosaic laws (cf. Gen. 17:12; 21:4; Lev. 12:3) and trained their son in his religious duties from the time he was an infant. How many of the apostle's detractors could say the same? Next, Paul stressed his birthright as a Jew. Not only was he a member of God's chosen people by birth (cf. Rom. 9:3-4; 11:1), but also he was from the tribe of Benjamin. Jacob was the son of Isaac and the grandson of Abraham, and together these three men were the patriarchs of the nation of Israel. Jacob had twelve sons, two by his beloved wife, Rachel. The older was Joseph, and the younger was Benjamin (cf. Gen. 35:18, 24; 46:19; 1 Chr. 1:28; 2:1; Matt. 1:2; Luke 3:33). One of the twelve tribes of Israel was descended from Benjamin. Israel's first king was Saul, a Benjamite (cf. 1 Sam. 9:1-2; 10:20-21; Acts 13:21). When Israel divided into the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah, the tribe of Benjamin remained loyal to the tribe of Judah (cf. 1 Kings 12:20-24). Furthermore, Jerusalem and the temple in the holy city were located within the district of Benjamin (cf. Josh. 18:15-16; Fowl 2005:150; Hendriksen 1962:156-158; Hooker 2000:526; Kent 1978:139-140; Müller 1984:109-110).

Paul's list of credentials included being "a Hebrew of Hebrews" (Phil. 3:5). This meant, in part, that he was the Hebrew son of Hebrew parents (rather than merely a proselyte to the faith). In more contemporary parlance, one might say that Paul was a true or pure-blooded Hebrew—if one could ever be found. He was part of an elite group who had been taught Hebrew (or Aramaic), the ethnic language of the Jewish people, and schooled in the Jewish traditions (cf. Acts 22:2-3; Gal. 1:14). To his birth and training as a Jew, Paul added three

personal achievements. Foremost, he was a Pharisee. Within the Jewish community, no group of people were more highly esteemed as strict observers of the Torah, the law of Moses. In fact, Gamaliel, one of the most highly respected rabbis in the Pharisee party of the day, was Paul's mentor (cf. Acts 22:3; 23:6; 26:5; Bruce 1980:236; Hawthorne 1983:133-134; Lightfoot 1981:147; Martin 1982:127-128; Reese 1976:347-348; Ridderbos 1975:36).

Moreover, the former Pharisee demonstrated his fervor for the law by zealously persecuting Christians, whom he once believed were God's enemies (cf. 1 Cor. 15:9). The zealot not only denounced the followers of Jesus, but also actively hunted them down in order to imprison and execute them (Phil. 3:6). As a matter of fact, before Paul's conversion, he would settle for nothing less than the total destruction of the Church (cf. Acts 8:3; Gal. 1:13). In a way, Paul was even more blind to the truth of the gospel than were the Judaizers. Finally, he said he was "faultless" (Phil. 3:6) according to the righteousness stipulated in the law. Put another way, if the law could produce righteousness in a person, then Paul would qualify, for by any human measure he was blameless in his observance of the Jewish commands and rituals (cf. Bockmuehl 1998:201-202; Bruce 1980:237; Eastman 1999:193; Fee 1995:309-310; Guthrie 1981:690; Martin 1982:129; Müller 1984:111; O'Brien 1991:380; Silva 2005:151-152; Thielman 2005:318).

3. Paul's present: growing in the knowledge of Christ (Phil. 3:7-11)

By any human standard of measurement, Paul's credentials were impeccable. Despite this, he rejected as inconsequential everything he had accomplished as an upstanding Jew before his dramatic encounter with Jesus the Messiah on the road to Damascus. In light of the Savior's work in the apostle's life, Paul considered his birth as a Benjamite Jew, his high standing in the party of the Pharisees, and even his scrupulous adherence to the Mosaic law to be ineffectual in securing his redemption. All that had been a profit to Paul (and which the Judaizers prized), he counted as a loss due to his devotion to Christ (Phil. 3:7). Expressed differently, what the apostle once regarded as sterling personal assets he now regarded as grave liabilities (cf. Marshall 2004:350; Ridderbos 1975:138, 140-141; O'Brien 1991:386-387; Silva 2005:157; Wenham 1995:162). In truth, after turning to Christ in faith, Paul's "previous

balance sheet suddenly looked alarming” (Bockmuehl 1998:205; cf. Collins 2008:49-50). As a matter of fact, everything about which the apostle once boasted as a Jew he now considered as “garbage” (v. 8). The underlying Greek term was used in the vernacular of the day for fecal matter—that is, detestable excrement or worthless dung meant to be discarded in a sewer (cf. Isa. 64:6; Bock 1994:328; Collins 2008:64-65; Lightfoot 1981:149; Ryken, Wilhoit, and Longman 1998:222).

Amazingly, Paul did regret this “loss” (Phil. 3:8), for what he had gained in having an intimate, experiential knowledge of Christ Jesus as his Lord, was worth infinitely more (cf. v. 10). The apostle was now ready to press his point home. As righteous as he might have appeared in his relentless zeal to obey the Torah, he now realized that true righteousness can come only “through faith in Christ” (Phil. 3:9). The latter refers to trusting in the Messiah for salvation (cf. Fee 1995:324-326; Macky 1998:169; Ridderbos 1975:239; Silva 2005:161; Wenham 1995:356). A less likely option is to translate the original as “through the faith [or faithfulness] of Christ”, which emphasizes the steadfast obedience of the Savior (cf. 2:6-11; Bockmuehl 1998:210-211; Hooker 2000:528; Martin 1982:132-133; Matlock 2007:174, 183; O’Brien 1991:398-399; Thielman 1995:171). The Judaizers had demanded that believers be ritually purified through circumcision. Paul’s argument was that he was circumcised and did far more in his efforts to be justified under the Mosaic law—and yet none of that was of any value to God. The upshot is that no one can attain righteousness. Only God can offer it, and it is received when people believe in the Lord Jesus. The implication is that the merit arising from Christ’s atoning sacrifice is the ground of salvation. Moreover, faith is the means by which believers are joined to Christ and His merit (cf. Eastman 1999:192; Ladd 1997:488-490; Morris 1990:83-83; Ridderbos 1975:170, 251; Schreiner 2008:355-356). These truths were at the heart of Paul’s teaching, and he wanted his Philippian friends to permanently establish them as the doctrinal cornerstone of their church.

In the New Testament, the Greek word translated “righteousness” comes from a root term that means “straightness” and refers to that which is in accordance with established moral norms. In a legal sense, righteousness means to be vindicated or treated as just. From a biblical perspective, God’s character is the definition and source of righteousness. As a result, the righteousness of

human beings is defined in terms of God's holiness. Because the Lord solely provides righteousness, it cannot be produced or obtained by human efforts. God makes His righteousness available to all people without distinction. Just as there is no discrimination with Him in universally condemning all people as sinners, so God does not show partiality by offering righteousness to one particular ethnic group. The Lord freely gives it to all people—regardless of their race or gender—when they trust in the Messiah (cf. Achtemeier 1962:92-97; Brown and Seebass 1986:362-365; Erickson 1998:968-970; Grudem 1994:722-732; Kelly 1988:194-195; Ladd 1997:478, 480-482; Morris 1990:33-34; Onesti and Brauch 1993:830-832; Schrenk 1999b:2:202-208; Spicq 1994:334-336; Webster and Gerstner 1986:726-727).

In the New Testament, the Greek word translated “justified” signified, in Paul's day, a court setting, with a judge declaring an individual “not guilty”. The idea of justification comes from a judge pronouncing someone to be righteous or innocent of a crime. The word had a technical forensic application of a one-time rendering of a positive judicial verdict. Paul used the term to refer to God's declaration that the believing sinner is righteous because of the atoning work of the Messiah on the cross. Without question, then, faith in the Lord Jesus was the sole basis for repentant sinners to be justified in God's sight (cf. Rom. 1:17; 3:21-26; 9:30-32; Gal. 2:16; 3:22; Blackman 1962:1027-1029; Brown and Seebass 1986:362-365; Erickson 1998:968-970; Faulkner, Murray, and Bromiley 1982:1168-1170; Grudem 1994:722-732; Ladd 1997:478, 480-482; McGrath 1993:518-521; Morris 1990:69-71; Schreiner 2008:351-353; Schrenk 1999a:2:215-218; Spicq 1994:1:337-344; Webster and Gerstner 1986:3:727; Wenham 1995:54-55).

In Philippians 3:10, Paul reiterated that his lifelong aim was to “know” Christ (cf. v. 8). When the apostle spoke of knowing the Savior, he was not just referring to the gathering of theological facts about Jesus. More importantly, Paul had in mind experientially knowing the Messiah; in other words, the apostle desired to “know” (v. 10) Jesus in an ever deepening personal union. Furthermore, Paul wanted to have an ongoing relationship through his encounter with the Redeemer, especially as He worked in the apostle's life. This spiritual bond was characterized by “mutual faithfulness” (Bockmuehl 1998:205), in which God redeemed the elect (cf. Isa. 43:1) and they lovingly obeyed Him (cf. Hos. 4:1-2; 6:6; Eph. 1:17-19; Col. 1:10; O'Brien 1991:388).

The Greek word that Paul chose for “know” expresses the idea of understanding and perceiving an object in an intelligent manner. The word implies personal acquaintance, experience, and familiarity. In brief, the apostle did not just want to know about Christ. Paul also wanted to experience the Savior in the fullest way possible on a day-to-day basis (cf. Jer 31:34; Hos 6:3; 8:2; John 10:27; 17:3; 2 Cor 4:6; 1 John 5:20; Bock 1994:321; Fee 1995:318, 329; Fowl 2005:153; Capes, Reeves, and Richards 2007:213; Echeverria 2007:246-247; Longenecker 1976:4:662-663; Marshall 2004:351; Smith 2002:180-181; Ridderbos 1975:243-248; Wenham 1995:232; Zinke 2004:72-73).

Significantly, the apostle wanted to know more about both Jesus’ sufferings and His resurrection power. While many believers want more of His power, few would seem to crave “participation in his sufferings” (Phil. 3:10). Paul, however, regarded suffering for Christ as a sought-after privilege (cf. Rom. 8:17; 2 Cor. 12:10). These, then, were the two realms in which the apostle wanted to grow in his knowledge of the Savior. The first included a personal awareness of the power that raised Jesus from the dead. To be specific, Paul wanted to experience that power working in his life in order to bring about Jesus’ righteousness in the apostle (cf. Rom. 6:1-14; Eph. 1:18-23; 2 Cor. 12:1-10). Second, Paul wanted to have fellowship with Christ in His sufferings. The idea is that through Paul’s own sharing in the adversity and anguish that came with being a committed believer, he would understand more fully the anguish Jesus endured on the cross. More generally, the “stinging reality of Christian suffering” is the means by which the Father “transforms” His spiritual children “into the image of his Son” (Silva 2005:165; cf. Col. 1:24; 1 Thess. 1:6; Heb. 10:34; Jas. 1:2; 1 Pet. 4:12-16; Erickson 1998:203, 967, 987; Fowl 2005:158; Lightfoot 1981:151; Martin 1982:134-135; O’Brien 1991:404-405; Perriman 1991:77; Schreiner 2008:311-312, 314, 332; Wenham 1995:154, 364).

In all this, Paul wanted to conform to Jesus’ death—to the extent that the trajectory of the apostle’s life was “deliberately patterned after the main thrust of the Christ story in 2:6-11” (Fee 2007:412; cf. Bockmuehl 1998:216-217). The latter consisted of Paul divesting himself of personal gains and regarding them as complete losses (3:7-8; cf. Capes, Reeves, and Richards 2007:213; O’Brien 1991:410). Being conformed to the Savior also involved crucifying

the “sinful nature with its passions and desires” (Gal. 5:24; cf. Hawthorne 1983:144-145; Hendriksen 1962:168-169; Hooker 2000:529; Müller 1984:116-117; Perriman 1991:73). Paul’s ultimate goal was not to languish moribund in a state of lifelessness; rather, it was to be raised from the dead along with other believers on the day appointed by God (3:11). At the Messiah’s second advent, Paul would completely know Jesus as supreme Ruler and Redeemer. On the one hand, the apostle was uncertain about the outcome of his current situation as a prisoner in Rome and how boldly he would witness for Christ in the face of impending execution (cf. Otto 1995:324, 330-333). On the other hand, he had no doubt that he (and all believers) would be raised from death to life at the end of the age (cf. Dan. 12:2; John 5:29; Acts 24:15; Rom. 8:30-31; 1 Cor. 15:20-23; 1 Thess. 4:13-17; 2 Tim. 1:12). In short, Paul’s confession of faith in the Messiah made it clear that salvation totally and without question depended on the atoning work of the Lord Jesus (cf. Eastman 1999:192; Guthrie 1981:386-387, 628; Smith 2002:181; Ridderbos 1975:487-488, 551, 538).

4. Paul’s future: increasing in Christlikeness (Phil. 3:12-14)

Paul had just described the kind of knowledge of Christ he desired. The apostle also wanted to correct any misconceptions the Philippians might have had concerning what he had just said. He noted that he had not yet acquired a perfect knowledge of the Savior, nor was he in a state of spiritual flawlessness (cf. Guthrie 1981:671, 914; Lightfoot 1981:151-152; Macky 1998:278; Martin 1982:136-137; Ridderbos 1975:250-251, 271). Instead, Paul was pursuing the redemption that Jesus had attained for him—the redemption that the apostle would fully possess when God one day raises believers from the dead. On the one hand, the Messiah had already redeemed Paul; but, on the other hand, he needed to “press on” (Phil. 3:12) to achieve the goal Christ had set for him. For the apostle, the notion of “salvation ... embraces more than conversion and even initial incorporation into a community”. It should be “understood as both accomplished fact and ongoing process” (Barram 2006:62; cf. Bockmuehl 1998:217-218; Eastman 1999:195-196; Polhill 1999:175; Silva 2005:166-167, 174-175).

Paul used the metaphor of a race to illustrate what it means to follow Christ. Both the Greeks and the Romans were avid fans of sporting contests. Sometimes the Roman games were violent and cruel, but often combatants merely engaged in feats of strength, endurance, and speed. Running was one of the more popular sports. When runners won their races, they might win prizes of wealth. Of far more value to most of them, however, was the recognition and honor they received. After each contest, a herald proclaimed the victor and his hometown, and a judge presented him with a palm branch. At the conclusion of the games, each victor received a wreath made of olive or laurel leaves. According to Greek tradition, an oracle from the god Delphi had established this custom (cf. Collins 2008:57-58; Fee 1995:348-349; Hawthorne 1983:154; Hendriksen 1962:170-171; Hooker 2000:532-533; Kent 1978:142; Lightfoot 1981:152-153).

Paul repeated his statement that he had not yet attained the spiritual faultlessness that comes only with the final resurrection. Moreover, he emphasized to his “brothers and sisters” (v. 13) in Christ that human credentials were powerless in meriting God’s favor. Assuredly, if the apostle did not claim to be spiritually complete, then the Christians in Philippi (as well as the Judaizers) could not make such a boast (cf. Bockmuehl 1998:222; Holladay 1969:84; Marshall 2004:352; Martin 1982:138; Müller 1984:123; O’Brien 1991:426-427; Thielman 1995:194-195). The latter notwithstanding, there still remained two things Paul and all other believers could do as they strove with single-minded determination for the lofty goal held out before them.

First, believers could put their past behind them. For Paul this included his former life as a Jewish zealot and all his successes up to that point. In all likelihood, the apostle was thinking about his former life, since he had earlier described his attainments as a pious Jew. Despite his outward success and dedication to the Mosaic law, he had failed to acquire God’s favor or personal righteousness. Paul was not talking about obliterating the memories of his former life. Instead, he did not want to recall his former achievements with the intention of noting how they had contributed to his spiritual progress. Nor did the apostle want to dwell on his past sins (which may have included the execution of Christians), for God no longer held these sins against him (cf. Hawthorne 1983:153; Hendriksen 1962:172-173; Kent 1978:142-143).

Second, Paul and his fellow Christians in Philippi could strive for the future prize that awaited them, namely, the “culmination or consummation of salvation” (Eastman 1999:193; cf. O’Brien 1991:433; Silva 2005:177). The apostle used specific Greek words to draw a picture in the minds of his readers of an athlete who is participating in a running contest. Just as sprinters exert all of their efforts to push forward and reach the finish line, so Paul used every effort to drive himself forward in becoming more conformed to Christ’s glorious image (cf. Rom. 8:29; 2 Thess. 2:14; 1 John 3:2; Bock 1994:324-325, 328; Perriman 1991:71; Schreiner 2008:308-309). The great difference between races in a sporting event and the race Christians are running in is that a sporting event has only one winner. In the case of the Christian life, all who finish the race win (cf. 1 Cor. 9:24-27; 1 Tim. 6:12; Heb. 12:1).

Paul’s utmost effort to win the prize was not to run faster or longer than all other Christians, but to reach a common “eschatological goal” (Thielman 2005:312). Expressed differently, the apostle was not trying to excel above all other believers, but to win a prize that Jesus will award to all who run for Him (Phil. 3:14; cf. Polhill 1999:175). Paul did not say exactly what the prize would be, but he did indicate that he would receive it in heaven in the presence of his Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ (cf. Bockmuehl 1998:225; Fee 1995:341; Fee 2007:413). Moreover, God was the one who called Paul to press on toward this objective (cf. Rom 8:30; Gal 1:15), which especially included becoming more Christlike. Furthermore, it was God who enabled the apostle to run the race (Phil. 1:6; 2:12-13; cf. Barram 2006:122; Bock 1994:320). Thus, Paul fully participated in the race of the Christian life for the glory and honor of God (cf. Echeverria 2007:249-250; Schreiner 2008:312, 377).

5. Conclusion

This journal article has examined the faith journey of Paul, specifically as it is delineated in Philippians 3:1-14. Verses 1-6 reveal that in the past, before he put his faith in Christ, Paul trusted in his human attainments. According to verses 7-11, after Paul encountered the risen Lord on the road to Damascus, the apostle made growing in the knowledge of Christ the central focus of his existence in the here-and-now. Finally, in verses 12-14, it is disclosed that Paul set his sights on increasing in Christlikeness. Based on the sports analogy

of athletes running in a race, Paul explained that following Christ requires unrelenting dedication and perseverance on the part of believers. This involves doing the following: (a) putting our past—with all its shortcomings and attainments, whether real or imagined—behind us; (b) living wholeheartedly for Christ in the present; and (c) using all our effort to press on toward the future goal of being made complete in spiritual union with Christ in heaven.

Sometimes we, as believers, can remain stuck in the past. Unless we learn to leave the failings and accolades of our past behind, we risk overlooking the eternal rewards God has for us in the future. If anyone had a past to dwell on, it was Paul. As a former persecutor of Christians, Paul had dragged believers off to jail and stood by approvingly as Stephen, the first recorded Christian martyr, was stoned to death. Paul once tried to destroy the church he later helped to build. It took an encounter with the risen Lord Jesus to turn Paul's life around. Thankfully, Paul had learned not to dwell on the sins of his past. Instead, he said "I press on," keeping his eyes on heaven and the future. Likewise, God has called us to run for Him. He wants us to strive for the prize that awaits us in the Lord Jesus and to put forth every ounce of effort to attain the goal God has set before us. The Savior will reward us with a prize of far greater worth than anything we could possibly receive on earth.

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