

## Philippians 3:1-14

### “The power of his resurrection”

0. One way to understand the focus of a letter is to make a list of the imperatives; what does Paul want the Philippians to do? Here are the central imperatives of Philippians:<sup>1</sup>
  - a. *Unity in the mindset of Christ*: “Make my joy complete; **be of the same mind, having the same love**, being in full accord and of one mind” (2:2-3) “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus...” (2:5). “Let those of us who are mature be of the same mind... only let us hold fast to what we have attained” (3:15-16). “Join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us.” (3:17) “Stand firm in the Lord in this way” (4:1). “Whatever is true, honorable, etc., think about these things” (4:8).
  - b. *Put others first*: “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility **regard others as better than yourselves**. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.” (2:3-4). “Let your gentleness be known to everyone” (4:5).
  - c. *Don’t complain or argue*: “**Do all things without murmuring and arguing**” (2:14). “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling” (2:12; i.e., don’t be like whiny Israel in the desert!).
  - d. *Rejoice*: “**Rejoice** in the Lord” (3:1; 4:4).

Paul motivates these instructions with Jesus’ example (2:5-11). Here Paul turns to the question of whether Gentile converts should be circumcised. How does this fit in with the main thrust of the letter as found in the imperatives above? Given the hints of Roman persecution, what appeal might circumcision have held for the Philippians?

1. How does Jesus’ example embody the imperatives listed above? Where does the (your) local church do a good job of this, and where does it fall down?
2. Read Jer 9:23-24, 31:33-34 for background, then answer the following: Paul places above all else “knowing Christ” (3:8, 10), which he places in contrast with pursuing righteousness by means of observance. In that same passage Paul places six things in parallel:
  - Knowing Christ (7)
  - Gaining Christ (8)
  - Being found in Christ (9)
  - Having righteousness from faith (9)
  - Knowing the power of his resurrection (10)
  - Knowing the fellowship<sup>2</sup> of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death (10)

Based on this passage, what would you do to try to know Jesus better? Do you know Jesus better now than you did twenty years ago? What have you found most effective in knowing Christ better?

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<sup>1</sup> There are a few others, such as “Live your life in a manner worth of the gospel of Christ” (1:27), but these are the main instructions.

<sup>2</sup> *Koinonia*, “sharing” (NRSV), “participation” (NIV).

3. What is the “power of his resurrection” (10) and how do we get it? (See also Eph 3:14-19.) When have you experienced this sweet, sweet power?<sup>3</sup>
4. Christianity 101: Christ died for our sins, taking away the barrier between us and God. What this says nothing about is why we should ever need to suffer. (After all, didn’t Jesus’ suffering accomplish everything?) What sort of suffering is Paul advocating (see Q. 0), and what does it accomplish (Q. 2)? If you aren’t suffering, are you doing something wrong?

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*Fun fact:* “Dogs” is a term traditionally used for Gentiles, making this one of several ways that Paul employs apostolic judo to turn the Judaizers into the thing they were more trying to avoid, Gentiles. Another way: “The Greek word for circumcision is *peritome* (= ‘to cut around’); *katatome*, used here [in v. 2] denotes ‘cutting to pieces,’ hence ‘mutilate.’”

Be still and know that I am God,  
 be still and know that I am God,  
 be still and know that I am God.

In thee, O Lord, I put my trust,  
 In thee, O Lord, I put my trust,  
 In thee, O Lord, I put my trust.

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<sup>3</sup> Note, we should always be trying to collect tips for accessing God’s power, since we are powerless. Remember James’ and Jesus’ instruction on power? Be single minded! Cf. Mt 6:24; Jn 15:18-19; Mt 7:24-27; James 1:22; 4:4-5; as well as Rom 8:6-8.

## Leader's Intro:

This passage appears at first to be pretty straightforward, and at a distance it is. Here, paralleling Christ's example in 2:4-11, Paul provides his own. At that level, it serves rhetorically to reinforce his basic message to pursue unity by having Christ's mindset.

Why does Paul suddenly turn to the issue of circumcision? Well, from 3:1 we know this is a theme he's broached with them before. Fee suggests additionally that this may be the issue over which Euodia and Synthyche were fighting. Another possibility is that, facing pressure from the pagan world around them to participate in the imperial cult, they were tempted to adopt circumcision, which would allow them the legal protections afforded Judaism. So it's possible either E or S was not so much embracing circumcision for its own sake but for protection from persecution. If true, this makes the "confidence in the flesh" v. faith in Jesus all the more poignant. Clearly the question of justification is getting entangled with the question of protection from Rome. Perhaps Paul would have been okay with circumcision if not for that. But if there is any question of righteousness, the last thing he can do is condone that, as it stands counter to the gospel.

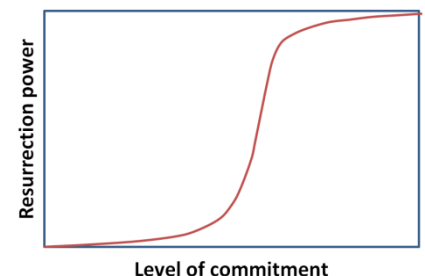
Paul's own Damascus Road story looms large in the background. Paul is right in saying he was a Hebrew's Hebrew, and it just made him an enemy of God. The only path forward was to trust Jesus. That's the message here, and it applied both to righteousness and Roman persecution.

The core message, though, which he is arguing for, is that they imitate him in trusting Christ, and being willing to suffer out of love for others. That will accomplish their righteousness and will bring the unity they need to withstand persecution.

One other exegetical pickle: "if somehow I may attain the resurrection of the dead": Fee points to the "somehow" as regarding the means of it happening, not whether it will happen. McCallum believes it is not referring to the final resurrection, which Paul clearly has no worries about, but about something in this life.

This passage should not be taken in isolation. If we make it about circumcision and legalism, we miss the point Paul is driving at, which is the same as he made in 2:1-4, that they need to defer to one another. That he uses such dramatic examples as his and Jesus' stories should not cause us to lose track of the fact that he is advocating the same mindset as he presents in 1 Cor 13. We suffer by putting others first, even in small ways, and this is how we "know Christ." This is striking language and should stand in stark contrast to a simplistic view of the atonement: We sin and deserve death; Jesus dies for our sins; we escape death and live in right relationship with God. That is the standard four-spiritual-laws view and correct as it is, it doesn't attempt to address what happens next, which is that we turn around and die for others. The crucifixion kept us from being dead in our sins, but only imitating Jesus in his sufferings will bring us to life. (See 2 Cor 4:7-12.)

Again, it is a mistake to see Paul's and Jesus' examples and assume we can't experience resurrection power unless we abandon all and pursue martyrdom; we know that's not the case because of the imperatives Paul uses in this letter, which include such apparently mundane things as don't complain or murmur or argue (2:14), and look to the interests of others (2:4). The one thing to maybe add to this picture, which we find from other sources (James and Jesus) is that the plot of resurrection power v. level of commitment is nonlinear:



If we want to unleash God's power, we can't make this a hobby, and at the core is not just a decision about how we spend our time and money but of where we put our confidence and trust.

Other things to bring out include:

- Paul's language is excellent at calling out our tendency to put confidence on observance as making us spiritually "safe", as opposed to building our relationship with God. The church has a rich history of trusting in sacramental observance or piety. Imagine now how hard it was for Paul to eat his first bite of pork, and ask yourself whether your observance or religious habits are more about making you feel like you are on the straight and narrow rather than building up others and your relationship with Jesus. Do you know Jesus better than you did twenty years ago? What has helped?
- This passage is bookended with calls to rejoice. It's worth asking what role rejoicing (and even worship) plays in this passage and its goals. I am not sure of the answer, aside from the observation from Phil 4 that trusting God starts with reframing through thanksgiving. Worship, if indeed that's what Paul has in mind

(remember he's talking to a body of believers, not just individuals), can do just that and reframe our thinking, and this letter is all about having the mind of Christ.

- Please note that “sharing” in v. 10 (NRSV) is *koinonia*—Paul wants to know the *fellowship* of Christ's sufferings; again, pointing to a body activity, not just an individual experience.

I think those are the high points. For **BACKGROUND** I would suggest beginning by reading the story of Paul's conversion from Acts, e.g. 22:3-21.

### **Extra questions and observations:**

1. Read Acts 22:3-21. How would Paul's experience, first as a Hebrew of Hebrews, then servant of Christ, have affected his view of what religious observance could offer?
2. We tend to think of “the flesh” as referring to base desires, and especially sexuality. What does it mean in this passage?