

# PHILIPPIANS

## Knowing Christ (3:10 – 4:1)

### *Commentary: Week Six*

#### North American Commentary<sup>1</sup>

[3:10](#) Paul turned his thoughts to knowing Christ. Some understand the words “know Christ” (which are an infinitive in Greek) to express the purpose of gaining Christ and being found in him. In this sense, the purpose of being found in him would be to come to know him. That seems somewhat awkward for Paul but is a possibility. A better approach is to understand the infinitive as consecutive, further defining “to be found in him” (v. [9](#)). This, then, gives the content of Paul’s deep desire, i.e., to come to know Christ in a life-shaping way.

In this verse two ideas complement each other: the power of Christ’s resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings. They provide a theological foundation for Paul’s thought, as well as a model for Christian growth. Christians must be like their Lord. Here another chiasm occurs. The first elements are the power of his resurrection (v. [10](#)) and attaining the resurrection from the dead (v. [11](#)). The second elements are fellowship of sharing in sufferings (v. [10](#)) and becoming like him in his death (v. [10](#)). The literary arrangement indicates that Paul’s deepest ambition was resurrection power. While the chiasm expresses these four statements in two, the logical order preserved Paul’s theology.

[3:11](#) The definition of resurrection power depends on Christ’s experience since the only available model is Christ. The power displayed through Christ’s resurrection is also available through Christ. It is divine power and all of God’s attributes appear in Christ. Resurrection power has two phases. First, at conversion believers experience the power of a spiritual resurrection. They are given new life. A new spiritual energy characterizes the new life in Christ. Yet this powerful life only begins at conversion. Successively and progressively the moral life must be changed, the physical body ultimately transformed, and believers brought to the eternal resting place of resurrection, heaven itself. The transformation does not happen at once. It culminates in the attaining of the resurrection from the dead. The resurrection occurs at the time of the Lord’s return to earth. ([1 Thess 4:13–18](#)). That will finalize the application of resurrection power to the Christian.

Paul longed for the complete resurrection in his own life. Any contemplation of existence without the completed process made him uncomfortable because no one can conceive of himself without a body. Resurrection power achieves the entire process. Paul’s longing to know Christ, therefore, was a longing to be like Christ in his glorified state.

Knowing Christ also meant identifying with his death. This involved participating in suffering and being conformed to his death. Paul spoke of sharing in Christ’s sufferings in various ways, but here he paralleled [Rom 6:1–11](#). In Romans the suffering was the death of Christ into which Paul had been baptized. He thus participated in what Christ did for him when he died. Paul did not expect to contribute to Christ’s sufferings, i.e., by taking on himself some redemptive suffering as Jesus did, neither did he mean that he would suffer and die as Jesus did. The theological substructure of this passage is the Christian’s identification with Christ.

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1. Richard R. Melick, *New American Commentary – Volume 32: Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1991), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 134-144.

Paul also spoke of his identification with Christ's death. Being united with Christ in his death was a spiritual reality, but being conformed to his death was the daily process of living. Again [Rom 6:11](#) provides the theological parallel. The task of the Christian is, in part, to realize that the nature of salvation is a death. By constantly choosing that death to sin and self, a conformity to Jesus' death occurs. Jesus completely died to self and became a sacrifice for others. It was the greatest demonstration of commitment to the will of God, and it was that death which brought his resurrection life. Paul realized that conformity to Jesus' death made him a candidate for resurrection power. This helps explain the spiritual discipline mentioned in [3:12–16](#).

In longing to know Christ, therefore, Paul sought a complete relationship with him. Situations may differ, but each Christian has the hope that resurrection power results from death and that conformity to Jesus' death brings life. In fact, the more obedient one is to Christ, thus conformed to his death, the more resurrection power becomes available. Further, Paul longed for the completion of his Christian hope. Someday he would enjoy complete transformation of character, newness of body, and a perfect environment. He would live in heaven with his Lord.

TRUE ZEAL ([3:12–16](#)). Paul's attention turned to true zeal in living the Christian life. He continued his argument against his Jewish opponents through his personal experience. What should occupy the thoughts and focus the energy of genuine Christians?

The passage falls into two distinct parts. First, in [3:12–14](#), Paul expressed his desire to achieve what God had in store for him. Then, in [3:15–16](#) he issued a call to follow his pattern of living. The Greek of this section is particularly difficult, but the thrust is abundantly clear. Paul was in the process of achieving. In case he was misunderstood in [3:4–11](#), he clarified that he had not yet arrived. One of the key words of the passage is “pursue” (“press on,” NIV; *diōkō*, [3:12](#), [14](#)). It stresses an active commitment to the call of Christ.

Some commentators suggest that in this section Paul addressed his opponents. They say that he consciously countered a perfectionistic group, sometimes called “divine men,” who claimed their own completeness. Others suggest that Paul produced this section because the Jewish opponents of [3:2](#) taught that perfection could be achieved by keeping the law. Still others see Paul continuing the logic of [3:4–11](#), issuing a warning because of a tendency to misunderstand his teaching. His introduction of [3:15](#) with the words “all of us who are mature,” (lit., “perfect”), however, suggests that there may have been some irony in his tone. The context does not require an opponent, and it is unlikely that he envisioned one. A group within the church may have misunderstood his teaching on justification and taken it to their own “logical” conclusions, which were theologically unacceptable.

*Paul's Desire to Fulfill His Call* ([3:12–14](#)). [3:12–13a](#) Twice, in similar terms, Paul expressed his imperfection. The first expression presents this in three ways (v. [12](#)), and the second expression summarizes the three ways into one (v. [13](#)). The three are: “Not that I have already obtained,” “have already been made perfect,” and “I press on.” The basic question is, What did Paul lack and, therefore, seek? Three times the word root for “received” occurs ([3:12](#); *lambanō*; *katalambanō*, twice). The word is ambiguous, and no object occurs with it.

The precise definition may refer to mental or experiential attainment. Used of the mind, it means *to understand* (or *understand fully* with *katalambanō*). This would mean that Paul did not yet understand the significance of Christ or that he did not know him completely. If the use were experiential, “to grasp something,” Paul stated that he did not yet have in hand what he desired. The understood object of the verbs would determine which definition applies.

What did Paul hope to attain? In these verses two phrases suggest an answer: “have already been made perfect” and “Christ Jesus took hold of me.” “Have already been made perfect” (*teteleiōmai*) occurs only here in the Pauline corpus. It contrasts with the verb “obtained.” Through his past experiences (“obtained,” aorist tense), Paul had not yet achieved completion (*katalambanō*, perfect tense). The question is whether Paul referred to a perfect knowledge or experience. Was his call to a complete knowledge of Christ or to a complete identification with him in character?

THE CONTEXT HAS A BEARING ON THE PROBLEM ([3:9–11](#)). Those who understand Paul’s desire in the mental sense, to know Christ completely, point out that the primary verb in these verses is “that I may know him” (see [3:10](#)). That knowledge, then, involved knowing Christ’s power and suffering. Because that knowledge was related closely to experience, clearly he wanted to know in his experience the full implications of his union with Christ. However, the text seems to argue against that understanding.

Those who understand Paul’s desire in the experiential sense point out that the object of the verb “obtained” is “the resurrection from the dead” of [3:11](#). It seems best, therefore, to understand Paul as saying he had not completed the experiential process begun in his salvation. He looked forward to the resurrection from the dead and, secondarily, to the process of conformity to death which would bring it forth.

“The resurrection” fits this context and answers the problems raised in the text. First, it easily explains why Paul had not attained. He looked to the end of time when the resurrection would occur. Second, it is helpful to remember that a first-century heresy stated that the resurrection was already past. Paul countered it in [2 Tim 2:18](#) (cf. [1 Cor 15:12ff.](#); [2 Thess 2:2](#)). Something similar may have concerned Paul here when he pointedly affirmed the necessity of continued growth. Third, this fits well with Paul’s prayer in [1:9–11](#). He hoped to be pure and blameless at the day of Christ. Fourth, the idea of “the power of the resurrection” (v. [10](#)) must be taken with the death that precedes it. Thus the thought of conformity to the will of God (“becoming like him in his death,” v. [10](#)) continued to be a goal because resurrection power is available in death. The best explanation of this desire is that Paul looked ahead to the completion of his salvation.

[3:13b–14](#) The content of Paul’s goal is given. Repeating the word “press on” of v. [12](#), Paul employed athletic imagery to make his point. Since the Greek athletic games captured the imagination of all of the peninsula, Macedonia included, it spoke vividly to the readers. The manner of attainment is explained by two participles. First, “forgetting what is behind” comprehensively expresses Paul’s future orientation. What was done was done! Both the nostalgia of the former life and the “good ole days” of his Christian life would paralyze him in terms of what God wanted in the future. Every day was a new adventure. Second, he was “straining toward what is ahead.” This word continues the athletic metaphor. It is particularly graphic, bringing to mind the straining muscles, clear focus, and complete dedication of the runner in his race to the prize. Both mental and physical discipline were necessary.

The goal is the heavenward call of Jesus Christ. The text is ambiguous here. The “goal” (“mark,” KJV; *skopos*) is the “goal marker” in English. It was the focus of the eye when a runner ran the race. For Paul, it was probably the model provided in Christ who demonstrated both obedience unto death and the resurrection. The prize is explained as the heavenward call (*anō*). The NIV translates it, “for which God has called me heavenward,” correctly seeing that the word *anō* refers to heaven as opposed to earth. The translation seems to make the call at the beginning of the race, however, rather than the end. That corresponds to Paul’s life if the call is understood as at the time of conversion, but there is no hint of that here. It seems best to take it as the call associated with the resurrection. At that day there will be a call to heaven. Further, in [3:21](#), Paul mentioned the resurrection and the transformation that will occur then. He lived for the day when the heavenward call would come, like a victory in a race. Rather than slack off, as some were prone to do, the thought of it motivated him to further purity and service. He would get to

know every dimension of Christ (reign and suffering), through every means. The joy of the process kept him going, but he realized that the ultimate joy was the completion of God's work in his life.

*Paul's Encouragement to Other Believers (3:15–16).* Paul came to his point at the end of this section. His experience correctly set a pattern for all believers. If they would understand it and join with him, they would avoid the influence of the false teachers. Three movements occur in this command to the church: a call to unity, a warning of misconduct, and an exhortation to continue.

**3:15a** First, Paul called the Philippians to unity. The words “take such a view of things” use the verb “be minded” which characterized [2:1–11](#). It occurs again later in this verse. The word includes both thoughts and values. The church was to value these truths as Paul did. Several problems occur in this verse. First, who did Paul mean by the word “mature”? He called the believers “mature” (“perfect,” *teleios*), but in light of the relative infrequency of the word as a description of persons, questions arise. Two primary possibilities exist regarding it. Conceivably, Paul addressed a group of people who shared his outlook and were perfect in their understanding of their imperfection or in their desires to be perfected. This meaning requires different uses of two words built on the same root, which is awkward. On the other hand, Paul could have been speaking in irony, addressing a group of people who assumed they were perfect. If so, he was calling them to admit their imperfect knowledge about such matters and accept his evaluation. The choice between the meanings is difficult, but the latter is likely the correct reading.

**3:15b** Second, Paul warned about misconduct. The interpretation depends in part on knowing who Paul addressed. It could have been a correction to the false teachers or instructions to mature Christians. Some scholars take the position that Paul meant that those who differed with him had a right to their own positions because ultimately the way they thought did not matter. That hardly seems consistent with Paul's attitude. Others argue that Paul really meant it would do little good to try to convince the false teachers of their error. God would reveal it to them. Another possibility is that Paul turned his thoughts to the general problem of disunity in the congregation, which he addressed in [4:2ff](#). Paul did address the mature and realized that God would work in them. Further, his words were corrective, i.e., that God would correct their wrong attitudes in the course of time. Their misunderstanding involved their perfectionistic ideas, which had reached a deep level of personal commitment, evidenced by Paul's use of the term “think differently” (*phroneō*).

**3:16** Third, Paul gave an exhortation. The believers were to remain steadfast. What they achieved to this point was to guide them into the future as the standard by which they would walk collectively. Here Paul used another relatively rare term, which the NIV translates “let us live up to” (*stoicheō*). Generally it means an *orderly walk* or a *disciplined walk*. It has overtones of a collective discipline, of all walking in the same row or by the same measure. Two emphases appear in this sentence. First, they were to remain true to what they had. Second, they were to remain true with a collective discipline that was to characterize the entire church. This meant that they would not follow the infatuating teachings of Paul's opponents, and it also meant that they would seek to implement in their own lives what they already knew to do. That included knowing Christ and looking forward to the resurrection.

The last sentence summarizes this section by presenting a challenge to continue in the faith. Obviously some believers had tendencies toward deviating from what they had learned from Paul. In rebuking the false teachers, Paul presented his own testimony and urged the group at large to have the same attitude. While the exhortation related primarily to [3:12–16](#), it ended Paul's first line of apology against his opponents. It also placed faith in the church members' attitudes and ability to continue in the things they had learned.

## (2) The False Teachers' Character Exposed [3:17-21](#)

Paul continued to warn the church about the false teachers. The format remains the same as vv. [1-16](#): the literary pattern is comparison and contrast. Now, however, the text moves to plural rather than singular subjects so that the entire church is included (vv. [20-21](#)). Some interpreters see a change of opponents to the libertines; others see a consistent reference to enthusiastic Jewish teachers, as at vv. [1-16](#). They were probably the same opponents. If they were a new group, Paul handled them in a veiled manner, with no introduction and no conclusion to their teaching. Paul also implicitly described them as non-Christian. They were enemies of the cross (v. [18](#)), their citizenship was on earth rather than heaven (v. [20](#)), and they did not have the same destiny as Paul and the church (v. [21](#)). Structurally, after an introductory statement setting the direction for these verses (v. [17](#)), Paul described the opponents (vv. [18-19](#)) and then contrasted them with true believers (vv. [20-21](#)).

ENCOURAGEMENT TO IMITATE PAUL ([3:17](#)). [3:17](#) Earlier Paul urged the church to imitate Christ ([2:5-11](#)); here he urged the Philippians to imitate him. The theme occurs in other places in Paul's writing ([1 Cor 4:16](#); [11:1](#); [2 Thess 3:7-9](#)), but it seems awkward to the present-day Christian. There is no egotism here, as two factors in the text make apparent. First, he realized that they would follow other Christian models as well. The words "join with others in following my example" naturally meant that they would follow Paul, but later in the verse he urged them to follow others with the same goal. Second, vv. [1-16](#) reveal that imitation is the literary style Paul used. He recalled his own experience to persuade them to follow him. To state that they should follow him was no more prideful than the pattern he employed in this chapter. It rather grew out of it.

In addition, Paul urged them to imitate others who were like-minded. The word for "take note of" (*skopeō*) occurs elsewhere in this passage. It meant the Philippians were to have the lives of others in their sights or to make living like these their aim. In Paul's absence they were to find other models who were true to his commitments. The principles Paul taught worked in the lives of their friends, who could be followed in Paul's absence.

CHARACTERISTICS OF PAUL'S OPPONENTS ([3:18-19](#)). [3:18](#) Paul delivered his final blow against the false teachers. Emotion characterizes the text, and Paul confessed his tears as he wrote. It is the only recorded instance that the apostle Paul cried. Why was there such emotional involvement with these deceptive teachers? Paul described them and then explained their characteristics. He was sad, first of all, because he had to make repeated warnings about them. They apparently followed him about, seeking to entice people away from the truth. Doubtless, repeated efforts to counter that brought on fatigue. Second, he called them enemies of the cross. The statement must mean more than that they refused to accept the cross as God's way of reconciliation. It means that they actively opposed the message of the cross and hindered those who would take advantage of its work. Paul cherished the cross. For him, the fact that the false teachers did not revealed who they were. The strong emotion parallels the emotion of [Rom 9:1-3](#), where Paul prayed that he could be anathema for his kinsmen. Apparently these teachers were his own people who should have accepted the Messiah, but they chose instead to hinder the truth wherever they could. This was organized, active opposition to the gospel.

[3:19](#) Paul exposed these teachers by revealing their character. Four statements explain their theology and practice, although little is known about them. The first characteristic looks to their eternal condition: Their end was destruction. Destruction does not necessarily mean *loss of existence* since its opposite is salvation ([1:28](#)). The direction they were going was enough to warn the church. The second and third characteristics point to the way they had lived before that time. These two belong together because they are linked in the Greek text by one relative pronoun. Those who identify the opponents as libertines point out that Paul decried excessive food and sexual pleasures. Since this is a Jewish context, the statement must refer to dietary laws and circumcision of which they were so proud. They had become so



preoccupied with kosher foods that they spent more time contemplating them than thinking about God. Similarly, they were preoccupied with their circumcision, boasting of it wherever they went. Although Paul generally did not speak of circumcision as a shame, here the term applied because of the focus on the genitals, which should have been a private matter. When made public, it was distasteful. Clearly, these matters engendered pride in the teachers, and Paul criticized them severely. Finally, they minded earthly things. Since they were earthly in orientation, their religious shortsightedness came because they could not see beyond time into eternity.

CHARACTERISTICS OF TRUE BELIEVERS (3:20–21). [3:20–21](#) Paul ended this comparison by presenting a Christian perspective. He specifically contrasted the earthly with the heavenly. Paul stated that “our citizenship is in heaven.” The metaphor had rich meaning to the Philippians. Immediately their thoughts would have turned to an analogy with their earthly citizenship. They were proud of their Roman citizenship, but the analogy would have conveyed more. Philippi was an outpost colony, and, interestingly, Paul was at the home base in Rome. Regularly they awaited news from the capital to know how to conduct their business. When Paul said that they belonged to a citizenship, he spoke directly to them. Though they belonged to a city, the political entity spanned several geographical areas. Similarly, the church was an outpost of an entity which had its own capital, heaven. Although “citizenship” may call to mind a place, Paul used it of a people. They awaited the Savior from that citizenship. He would come with power sufficient to subdue everything and with ability to transform their bodies to be like his. They would naturally associate subduing power with a Roman emperor, but transforming power was unique to Christ. Once again, Paul spoke of the resurrection as the climax of his Christian experience. By implication, the false teachers would not share in the resurrection of the just because their expectations were earthly rather than heavenly.

One final point occurs in v. [21](#). Paul focused on the physical body which would be transformed so that it became like Christ’s body. Two factors are significant. First, the body is destined for eternity. It should be treated accordingly, and people should not make earthly existence *in the body* their ultimate concern. The tragedy of the false teachers was, in part, that they did just that. They focused on some aspect of the body that would not last beyond this life. Second, Paul’s hope involved a physical transformation. His theology included the fact that redemption culminated in a change of the body itself. The spirit was already in a resurrection with Christ; the body awaited that change. This statement reiterates the hope expressed in v. [10](#). The power of the resurrection would be complete when Jesus exerted his power toward the bodies of believers. Paul characterized the body now as one of humiliation (*tapeinōseōs*). In so doing, he addressed the limitations Christians have on earth. The body is not suited to heaven unless a transformation takes place. In that sense, it symbolizes a Christian’s state of humiliation. Someday, however, it will be a body of glory, fully suited to the needs of heaven and displaying the glory of Christ himself. This was a significant hope, fully pastoral in motivation. It should have caused the believers to press on until that great day.

## Miscellaneous Exhortations 4:1–9

Paul's mind turned to various matters in the church. Throughout the epistle there are hints of disunity among the congregation, and Paul countered that disunity with strong doctrinal (2:1–11) and practical (2:12–18) instruction. This chapter presents the only tangible evidence as to what the problem might have been, and the evidence is scarce. Several exhortations occur in these verses: to steadfastness (4:1), to unity (4:2–3), to joy and peace (4:4–7), and to the proper outlook (4:8–9).

Some interpreters question where this section begins. Since 4:1 is obviously transitional, a case may be made for including it in the previous section. Grammatically it is natural for a “so then” (*hōste*) clause to look forward. There is a parallel in 2:12, which, looking forward in the text, applies the truths of Jesus' self-emptying to the church. Here, Paul applied the truths of chpt. 3 to the practical church life. For that reason, 4:1 is included in the exhortations of the final chapter.

### (1) Exhortation to Steadfastness 4:1

**4:1** Immediately Paul changed his tone in this verse. The previous passage contains the emotion of argumentation; now he spoke with the warmth of a dear friend. Two sections occur in this verse: the address to the readers and the exhortation.

**THE ADDRESS TO THE READERS.** In the address Paul made three statements about the church. First, the members were “brothers.” The term occurs frequently in Philippians and helps express the oneness they had with each other and with Paul. Second, he said, “whom I love and long for.” The first term, built on a form of *agapē*, stresses the strong tie that bound them together in love. The second word, “long for,” occurs only here in the New Testament. It speaks of Paul's desire to fellowship together. Just because they were Christian brothers did not guarantee that Paul would feel this way about them. Their relationship grew out of the fellowship in the gospel. Third, Paul called them his “joy and crown.” These terms turned the readers' thoughts to the end of time. Joy is a common theme in the epistle. This use is unique, however, because the church *was* Paul's joy. He did not mean that they replaced the joy of the Lord, but rather that life was better because he knew them. They brought him joy even while he was awaiting trial. Further, their response to the gospel would bring him joy on judgment day. The imagery of the crown speaks of the reward God gives. The Philippian believers were Paul's crown. The fact that they believed guaranteed Paul's rewards. Clearly, a strong tie existed between Paul and the church.

**EXHORTATION.** Out of this friendship grew exhortation. Paul urged them to steadfastness. Perhaps the language came from the military and, therefore, had significant meaning for the city populated by military families. The Roman armies were known for standing unmoved against the enemy. The church was to stand in the same way. A more significant question is, How was it to stand? The words “that is how” translate the Greek *houtōs*, a word that shows manner. The church was not to be weakened by disunity, turmoil, or wrong values. It was to stand together to accomplish God's will. The exhortation recalls 1:27, and it was an important aspect of church life.