

## Chapter 7: Righteousness

### *Philippians 3:1–11*

Deep down, all of us are terrified at the thought of being exposed for what we really are. In our work, psychologists call this “imposter syndrome,” a term coined in the 1970s to describe the persistent fear of being exposed as a fraud in one’s field.<sup>1</sup> In pop culture, we love the terrifying thrill of stories about frauds, such as the movie *Catch Me if You Can*, about the true-life notorious con artist Frank Abagnale, or the television series *Suits*, about the (fictional) attorney who forged a law degree from Harvard. Even in our subconscious imaginations, who hasn’t dreamt about feeling a mortified when you suddenly realize that you have gone out in public without wearing any clothes?

All of these fears flow from a common source at the Fall, where the first reaction of Adam and Eve to their original sin was to feel a sense of shame at their nakedness: “Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths” (Gen. 3:7). In their innocence, they were “naked and were not ashamed,” (Gen. 2:25), but in their guilt they immediately felt a sense of such deep shame that their first impulse was to cover up. Ever since Adam and Eve sewed together those first fig leaves to cover their shame, every human being has understood this sense of fear at being exposed.

The only difference between us and Adam and Eve, then, is that we use more sophisticated fig leaves. Sometimes, we carefully curate our social media profiles to create a falsely positive image of our lives. Other times, we devote ourselves to doing good deeds, but more out of a desire to feel better about our evil deeds than out of a desire to serve. Still other times, we go through the motions of worshipping God at church to impress those around us, even though our hearts are far from God. No matter how well all of these fig-leaf garments keep our deepest insecurities and vulnerabilities covered up from the sight of the world, we still feel like frauds, living under the constant fear of being exposed.

What we really need, then, is something much more powerful than a simple papering over of our shame. We need to be clothed in a perfect righteousness that doesn’t simply mask our sin and guilt, but that exchanges them for a real righteousness that is bulletproof from condemnation. With that kind of righteousness, we could stand with confidence before even the omniscient Judge of all the Earth.

It is this desperate need for righteousness that stands behind what Paul writes about circumcision, specifically, and the entire Mosaic law, generally. At the most basic level, Philippians 3:1–11 addresses one key question: Will we depend on some kind of fig leaves to cover over our sin, or will we trust in Christ to give us his own, genuine righteousness through faith? As Paul will explain, our participation in the resurrection from the dead on the last day depends on our answer that question.

### **False Righteousness: Circumcision and the Law (Phil. 3:1–3)**

To transition into the deep theological controversy that he must address, Paul reorients the Philippians to the message he has been preaching since the beginning of the letter: “Finally, my

brothers, rejoice in the Lord” (Phil. 3:1a). The word “finally” in this context is not introducing a concluding paragraph, but Paul is saying something more like “as for the rest [of what needs to be spoken to].” Paul is now entering the home stretch of what he wants to communicate with the church at Philippi.

In this passage, Paul must confront the false teaching of the group called the Judaizers. The Judaizers insisted that Gentiles must keep the entire Mosaic law and be circumcised before they could follow Jesus. Although Paul never names the Judaizers in this section, the themes he addresses surrounding circumcision, the law of Moses, and righteousness before God almost certainly point to Paul’s ongoing battle against this group. Paul vehemently opposed their doctrine, especially his letter to the Galatians, and he was not alone. At the Jerusalem Council, the entire Christian church rejected this false teaching (Acts 15:1–35). The Judaizers, then, were promoting a serious distortion of the gospel that could poison the church at Philippi if it gained a foothold there.

So, this exhortation to “rejoice in the Lord” functions as “Paul’s first antidote to their being taken in by the possible attractiveness of the Judaizing option.” Where the Judaizers sought to lay the burden of rigorous law-keeping on the backs of the Philippians, Paul instead urges the Philippians to “rejoice in the Lord” on the basis of Christ’s completed work of keeping the law for us. Our confidence in the gospel keeps us from fearing exposure. Therefore, we can rejoice in the Lord.

Paul continues, explaining that, “To write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you” (Phil. 3:1b). It is Paul’s highest joy to encourage others in the gospel—*no trouble* at all! Furthermore, the gracious gift of God’s righteousness in the gospel unravels any illicit compulsions we might feel to establish our own righteousness by the law, apart from Christ, keeping us *safe*. Therefore, rejoice in the Lord!

### Judaizers who Have Become as Gentiles

The Judaizers, however, are not safe. Regarding these false teachers and their doctrine, Paul tells the Philippians to beware: “Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh” (Phil. 3:2). While Paul certainly uses strong language of denunciation here, these words mean something different to Paul than they do to us. Paul is not hurling insults; he is actually demonstrating that the Judaizers have cut themselves off from the gospel, thereby making themselves *Gentiles* in their attempts to preserve and promote *Jewishness*.

The first word Paul uses, “dogs,” is one of the worst insults in modern English without resorting to outright profanities. In Paul’s context, however, the word “dog” had a very different meaning: “Gentile.” Moisés Silva helpfully explains:

For the Jews, however, the term had a distinctly religious sense: it referred to the Gentiles, those people who, being outside the covenant community, were considered ritually unclean. When Jesus drew a comparison between the Syro-Phoenician woman and dogs (Mark 7:27), the woman recognized the analogy not as a vulgar insult but as a religious statement. Paul, therefore, is making a startling point: the great reversal brought in by Christ means that it is the Judaizers who must be regarded as Gentiles.<sup>4</sup>

Along the same lines, the second description Paul uses to describe the Judaizers as “evildoers” (or, “evil workers”) directly contradicts their claims to be doing the righteous works of the law.<sup>5</sup> Finally,

Paul writes a devastating rejection of the Judaizers' insistence on circumcision in particular with a word play that sounds much worse in the Greek:

Paul warns, "beware the mutilation," an ironic reference to Gentile circumcision. The Greek word for circumcision is *peritomē* (= to cut around); *katatomē*, used here, denotes "cutting to pieces," hence "mutilate."<sup>6</sup>

Even circumcision, the sign and seal of the old covenant, no longer bears the same meaning as it had during the days of the old covenant. Rather than continuing to signify and seal God's covenantal promises to Abraham, circumcision now goes so far as to cut someone off from those very promises. Since the promises have now been fulfilled in Christ, circumcision no longer accomplishes anything more than so much genital mutilation.

Therefore, when the Judaizers insist that Gentiles must essentially become Jewish before becoming Christian, they are not merely incorrect. This error goes far beyond pie-in-the-sky theological speculation. In fact, this false teaching can cut people off from the covenant promises of God altogether.

### The True Circumcision

Paul opens the next sentence with the word "for," signaling that he is about to give us the reasons behind the strong statement that he just wrote: "For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh..." (Phil. 3:3). Critically, we should notice that Paul does *not* reject the importance and value of circumcision altogether. Furthermore, Paul does not even to suggest that circumcision is obsolete or unspiritual, and he puts circumcision at the center of new covenant Christianity. Paul's argument is not against circumcision itself, but against the *physical* circumcision that now stands in opposition to *true* circumcision.<sup>7</sup> What, then, is this true circumcision that Paul discusses here?

Paul does not define true circumcision here in Philippians 3, but he does in his letter to the Romans 2:

[25] For circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision. [26] So, if a man who is uncircumcised keeps the precepts of the law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? [27] Then he who is physically uncircumcised but keeps the law will condemn you who have the written code and circumcision but break the law. [28] For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. [29] But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God. (Rom. 2:25–29)

There, Paul clarifies that circumcision (a symbol representing the entire law; Rom. 2:25–27) originally held both a physical component and a spiritual component. Paul does not create a new idea, but he is simply restating what the Old Testament itself teaches regarding the nature of circumcision. For, while God had insisted that every male among the people of Israel be circumcised (Gen. 17:9–14), the physical sign of circumcision had always pointed beyond itself to what God

really wanted: the circumcision of his people's *hearts* (Deut. 10:16; 30:6; Jer. 4:4). Now that Christ has come, the shadow of *physical* circumcision has given way to the reality of *spiritual* circumcision: "In him you also were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, but putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ" (Col. 2:11).

Circumcision and the law *pointed* toward righteousness, but Christ *accomplished* righteousness. Therefore, the only way for us to gain that righteousness is to receive it from God, by grace and through faith. Anyone who attempts to establish his own righteousness through circumcision, the law, or some other means, will cut himself off entirely from receiving Christ's righteousness. Or, to put it in Paul's language from Romans 2, even their circumcision will become uncircumcision. On the other hand, to all those who look to Christ in faith, God will freely give them the full righteousness to which the law and circumcision testified.

### Gospel Circumcision

It is striking, then, that Paul does not even use the word "true" or "real" to describe new covenant, Spirit-wrought circumcision: "For we are *the* circumcision...."<sup>8</sup> If he had instead written, "For we are the true/real circumcision," he would be, to some degree, acknowledging alternative views of circumcision; by this, however, he slams the door on the Judaizers' doctrine altogether. There *is* no other circumcision. *We* are the circumcision "who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh" (Phil. 3:3).<sup>9</sup> Toward this end, he identifies three criteria that differentiate the glory of spiritual circumcision in the gospel from the mutilation of physical circumcision.

First, Paul writes that those of the true circumcision worship by the Spirit of God. This phrase echoes Jesus' words that the Father is seeking true worshipers who will worship him in Spirit and truth (John 4:23–24). The old covenant ceremonial law had prescribed external worship forms that functioned as symbols and shadows. Beyond circumcision, these ceremonies included the temple, priests, sacrifices, and festivals. New covenant worship is not characterized primarily by compliance with these outward forms of worship, but with the inward work of the Holy Spirit.<sup>10</sup>

Second, spiritual circumcision enables worshipers to "glory in Christ Jesus." Jesus Christ is the one who has attained the perfect righteousness that God freely credits to believers. Therefore, we do not slavishly obey every jot and tittle of the ceremonies of the law in order to attain our own righteousness. Rather, we glory in what Christ Jesus has *already* done to attain a perfect righteousness that God freely gives to us. Because of Christ, physical circumcision is not only unnecessary, but it undermines the true gospel.

Third, those who are circumcised by the Spirit "put no confidence in the flesh." This is the same message, but put into negative language of what these Spirit-circumcised people *don't* do.<sup>11</sup> If we have indeed received the perfect righteousness of Christ by faith, then we have no confidence in the flesh—that is, no reason to trust in our own ability to keep the law for ourselves. But also, as Gerald Hawthorne observes, Paul's use of the word *flesh* "seems to cast at least a passing glance at the rite of circumcision, an operation performed on the body—in the flesh—as the sign and seal of membership within the covenant community of God."<sup>12</sup> We who are the true, spiritual circumcision put no confidence in flesh-mutilating bodily procedures (or in any other work) in the hopes of attaining our own righteousness. Instead, we are made righteous through the gracious work of our Triune God: the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.<sup>13</sup>

## Rejoice in the Lord

Physical circumcision, then, does not provide the covering of righteousness that we so desperately need. Physical circumcision only pointed forward to the spiritual circumcision that Christ accomplished for us. So, to cling to physical circumcision now that Christ has come is to cling to fig leaves rather than the righteous garments of Jesus Christ. The fig-leaf loincloths at least *covered* the genitals of Adam and Eve. On the other hand, the point of circumcision was to *expose* the genitals. Physical circumcision represented our need to *cut away* the flesh; it could never symbolize our ability to *gain* righteousness by the flesh. To expect that circumcision could cover our shame was as foolish as expecting the blood of bulls and goats to atone for our sins (Heb. 10:4), or for the ceaseless (that is, ineffectual) sacrificial ministry of the Levitical priests to take away our sins finally (Heb. 10:11). These symbols provided a shadow that pointed forward toward the coming reality of Jesus Christ, but they could never accomplish *in themselves* what they promised. Therefore, since Jesus has accomplished what neither circumcision nor the entirety of law could do, then let us rejoice in the Lord!

## Lost Righteousness: Abandoned for the Sake of the Gospel (Phil. 3:4–8)

From this point, Paul continues his argument through an ironic appeal to his own, personal qualifications. Paul argues that if anyone could attain their own righteousness by the law, *he* could: “...though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more” (Phil. 3:4). Similar to 2 Corinthians 11, where Paul speaks “as a fool” (2 Cor. 11:16) to demonstrate his apostolic authority, the apostle here digresses into “boasting” about his credentials for righteousness. But, where Paul boasts in an attempt to reestablish his Christ-given authority with the Corinthian church, he now tramples on his righteousness in this letter to the Philippians in order to point them exclusively toward Christ.<sup>14</sup>

## A Hebrew of Hebrews

To begin, Paul touts his flawless qualifications as a Hebrew, born into a Hebrew family, according to the law: “...circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews...” (Phil. 3:5a). These first four qualifications are baseline credentials that would be true for any Jew, but, significantly, they would not be true for the Gentile Philippians. If the Philippians were to follow the advice of the Judaizers, the best they could do as Gentile converts would be inferior to Paul’s Jewishness from birth. Elsewhere in this letter, Paul appeals to the Philippians’ pride in their Roman citizenship, urging them to take greater pride in their gospel citizenship in heaven (Phil. 1:27, 3:20). Here, his argument works in the opposite direction: Paul’s status of citizenship in the nation of Israel is impeccable and unattainable for the Philippians. If Paul counts “as loss” (Phil. 3:7) his *greater* status as a Hebrew, then why should they consider pursuing a *lesser* status as a Gentile converts to Judaism?

Next, more than mere birth and eighth-day circumcision, Paul lists three credentials that push his ability to take confidence in the flesh far above anything that the Philippians could *ever* hope to attain: “...as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless” (Phil. 3:5b–6). As a Pharisee, Paul was educated in Jerusalem at the feet of the

great rabbi Gamaliel himself (Acts 22:3). If Paul were an American lawyer, this would be like graduating from Harvard Law School and clerking with the Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court. Could even the Judaizers claim similarly exceptional training to what Paul received as a Pharisee?

Paul's righteousness extended beyond the classroom. As "a persecutor of the church," Paul was a zealous activist who hunted down and executed Christian apostates. The book of Acts specifically mentions the involvement of Paul (then, "Saul") in the execution of Stephen: "And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul" (Acts 7:58), and, "Saul approved of his execution" (Acts 8:1). In fact, Saul was headed out on another mission to Damascus to arrest more Christians when he encountered the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 9:1–19). Have the Judaizers accomplished as much as Paul did before his conversion?

Finally, Paul insists that he was "blameless" under the law. By this, Paul does not mean that he never sinned. In fact, the law assumed the presence of sin by appointing regular sacrifices and cleansing rituals to cleanse worshipers from their inevitable sin. Rather than claiming to be without sin, Paul is instead claiming that he is blameless in the sense of having pursued all the right courses of action for obeying the law, and then offering sacrifices as atonement for the places where he fell short. Could the Judaizers boast of a similar level of obedience to the law?

### Losses and Gains

Taken together, Paul lays out a flawless résumé for confidence in his own flesh. Nevertheless, Paul rejects all of it: "But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ" (Phil. 3:7–8). In fact, Paul has already spoken of "gain" in this letter, back in Philippians 1:21: "For me to live is Christ, and to die is *gain* (*kerdos*)." Here in Philippians 3, Paul uses the same word to speak of what he formerly held as "gain" (*kerdē*; Phil. 3:7) as loss for the sake of Christ, in order that he may "gain" (*kerdēsō*; Phil. 3:8) Christ himself. In Philippians 1, Paul's point was that living meant Christ (that is, fruitful labor for Christ; Phil. 1:22), so that dying can be classified as gain by allowing him "to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better" (Phil. 1:23). Whether in living or dying, Paul's chief concern was to gain *Christ*. As long as he gained Christ, he could rejoice, regardless of the suffering of his surrounding circumstances.

Here, "gain" refers to the false-righteousness of Paul's lifetime achievements he accomplished as a pureblooded Hebrew and as an accomplished Pharisee. Despite his flawless credentials in this area, Paul's accomplishments are "empty and meaningless."<sup>15</sup> It is as though Paul gave his life to amass a treasury of pyrite, which is sometimes called "fool's gold." He possesses many shiny things, but they have no real value. On this point, Moisés Silva points out the connection between Philippians 3 and Jesus' own words regarding gain and loss in this life:

Considering the vocabulary of verses 7–8 as a whole, it seems reasonable to find here an echo of Jesus's words, "What profit will a man have if he gains [*kerdēsē*] the whole world and suffers the loss...of his life?" (Matt. 16:26 and parallels). That question in turn is closely related to the parables of the hidden treasure and of the pearl (Matt. 13:44–46); the protagonist in each of these parables "sells all he has" for the sake of a priceless possession.

Whether Paul was familiar with these sayings—and if so, whether he alluded to them deliberately—cannot be demonstrated. In any case, Paul’s own experience constitutes a dramatic illustration of the truth taught by our Lord.<sup>16</sup>

The wider question that these passages raise surrounds how we can find *true* gain. Just as Paul rejects Gentile circumcision so as not to miss out on spiritual circumcision (the spiritual reality to which physical circumcision always pointed), Paul argues that our credentials for confidence in the flesh get in the way of the very *gain* that we are seeking. Gordon Fee is right to contrast our obsessive gain-seeking with the willing, self-sacrificial loss of Christ: “While Christ did not consider God-likeness to accrue to his own advantage, but ‘made himself nothing,’ so Paul now considers his former ‘gain’ as ‘loss’ for the surpassing worth of knowing Christ.”<sup>17</sup>

### Seeking Gain

This accounting framework of “gain” and “loss” gives us a helpful diagnostic tool to evaluate our own spiritual condition. In a business, not all losses are equal—sometimes money is lost because it is squandered or stolen, while other times money is gladly spent as an *investment*. The difference between a loss and an investment is dependent upon whether the company gains a return. Then, when the returns diminish or disappear altogether, smart investors begin to put their investments elsewhere to avoid further losses. There is no way to regain what is lost, so the crucial issue is simply to avoid further losses.

Think through your own life. Into what are you *investing* your time, treasures, and talents? What kind of a return are you expecting to gain from those investments? Can those things possibly cover over your shame, giving you perfect confidence to stand before God Almighty, your Judge? Additionally, how does your expected return compare to the surpassing worth of knowing Christ? Should you consider cutting your losses anywhere? Even if you must count your most impressive gains as rubbish, what might you gain instead by loving Christ with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength?

### True Righteousness: Christ’s Righteousness through Faith (Phil. 3:9–11)

In the previous two sections of this passage of Scripture, Paul (1) laid out an introductory rejection of the doctrine of the Judaizers, and (2) demonstrated that not even he, an accomplished law-keeper, could attain genuine righteousness through physical circumcision and the law. In this final section, Paul explains God’s glorious alternative in the gospel. For Paul, the gospel addresses our need for righteousness through the doctrines of union with Christ, imputation, justification, sanctification, and glorification. Paul touches on each of those doctrines in Philippians 3:9–11.<sup>18</sup>

### Union with Christ and Imputation

To begin, Paul writes: “...and be found in him [Christ], not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith” (Phil. 3:9). When Paul speaks of “being found in” Christ, he is describing the critical doctrine of our *union* with Christ. Christianity announces that God forgives sinners even though sinners do not deserve God’s forgiveness. But sinners do not merit forgiveness, how can God remain righteous as he forgives them?

The gospel proclaims God’s gloriously creative (and righteous!) solution to this problem. Rather than judging each of us individually, God *unites* us to Christ, and he judges his people *in* his Son. Uniting us with Christ causes two serious consequences: (1) Christ gains our guilt, and (2) we gain Christ’s righteousness. Theologically, this is called the doctrine of double imputation, where imputation means “to credit to another’s account.” Our guilt is credited to Christ, and Christ’s righteousness is credited to us. Even though *Christ* has done nothing to deserve our guilt, he was punished in our place when he endured the outpouring of the wrath of God on the cross. Then, even though we have failed to attain a righteousness of our own through the law, God freely clothes us with Christ’s righteousness, replacing our shame with confidence to stand before him.

Importantly, we should not imagine that this double-imputation represents some kind of accounting fraud, as though God were cooking the heavenly books. If we imagine that God is moving righteousness around on his ledgers in order to paper over our guilt with an accounting sleight-of-hand, then we completely blaspheme the glory of God in his gospel. This, then, is where the doctrine of our *union* with Christ becomes supremely important to understand *how* God is working in the gospel.

God does not forgive us by *fraud*, but by causing us to be *found* in Christ. This union with Christ is like a *marriage* (cf., Eph. 5:22–32; Rev. 19:6–9).<sup>19</sup> In any marriage, the assets and liabilities of each spouse are *united* with those of the other spouse. In the case of our marriage to Christ, our deep liabilities become united with the infinite assets of Christ. So, in Colossians 2:14, Paul writes that God forgave our sin “by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.” God imputed *our* guilt to Christ, requiring *him* to go to the cross in order to cancel its debt for us. Our forgiveness is not an accounting trick; Christ, our bridegroom, has paid our debt in its entirety at the cross.

### Justification by Faith Alone

In the other direction, God imputes *Christ’s* righteousness to us. It is not enough simply to be forgiven through the cancellation of our debts, because God requires something more than the absence of *unrighteousness*. Additionally, God requires the *righteousness* of “personal, perfect, and perpetual obedience” to God’s law.<sup>20</sup> But, if our own obedience to the law cannot produce the righteousness that God requires, then our only hope is that we might gain righteousness from somewhere else outside of us. For this reason, Martin Luther called the righteousness that we receive from Christ an “alien righteousness.”<sup>21</sup> We gain this by being “found” in Christ (Phil. 3:9) through our union with him.

Additionally, Paul explains *how* we become united with Christ: through faith. Insisting that we do not have a righteousness that comes from the law, he goes on to write, “but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God *that depends on faith*” (Phil. 3:9). This does not mean that our faith is some kind of work that makes us righteous, but rather that we gain the righteousness of God through faith in Christ. When we receive Christ’s perfect righteousness through faith, God “justifies” us, declaring us to be righteous by virtue of that righteousness. So, while *faith* itself is not righteousness, faith functions as an “instrument of justification”<sup>22</sup> in the same way that a pipe functions as an instrument of transferring water into our homes.

John Calvin unfolds Paul’s contrast between the false “righteousness of my own that comes from the law” and the “righteousness from God that depends on faith” in this way:



He thus, in a general way, places man's merit in opposition to Christ's grace; for while the law brings works, faith presents man before God as naked, that he may be clothed with the righteousness of Christ. When, therefore, he declares that the righteousness of faith is from God, it is not simply because faith is the gift of God, but because God justifies us by his goodness, or because we receive by faith the righteousness which he has conferred upon us.<sup>23</sup>

Where the debt of our sin condemned us, Christ took our condemnation upon himself. Then, where we stood naked, without a righteousness to present before God, Christ clothed us with his own, perfect righteousness through faith. Finally, on the basis of Christ's righteousness, God declares us righteous in his sight. In this way, God justifies sinners through faith alone, in Christ alone, by grace alone.

### Sanctification through Suffering

Still, Paul does not in the least believe that our justification represents the totality of Christianity. We cannot merely receive this righteousness and then go back to living our lives as though nothing has happened. Our union with Christ not only imputes our guilt to Christ and Christ's righteousness to us, but our union with Christ also conforms us to the sufferings of Christ as we live out the cruciform life. Paul continues: "that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death..." (Phil. 3:10). To be united with Christ leads us into a life that is conformed to Christ.

When Paul writes that he wants to "share" in Christ's sufferings, he uses the word *koinōnia*, the word that Paul has used a few times in this letter to describe not only his partnership with the Philippians (Phil. 1:5), but also their participation in the grace of God (Phil. 1:7) through their participation in the Holy Spirit (Phil. 2:1). Additionally, although he does not use the word *koinōnia* in Philippians 1:29–30, Paul there spoke about the fact that God has graciously called us to suffer for the sake of Christ, engaged in the same struggle in which Paul has himself been engaged. Bit by bit, Paul has revealed throughout this letter that part of what it means to participate in *koinōnia* with each other and in the Spirit. Through this *koinōnia*, we not only share in the power of Christ's resurrection, but also in Christ's sufferings. Then, pressing this point further, Paul writes also that Christ calls us to a life of "becoming like him in his death." Part of what this means to become like Christ in his death is to die to our former self-righteousness in order to receive the righteousness of God that depends on faith through our union with Christ.

Yet, there is even more. The ESV choice to use the preposition "like" ("becoming *like* him in his death") masks a much richer theological word (*summorphizomenos*) that Paul uses here. A better translation choice would be something like "conformed to" (NASB), or even "being made conformable to" (KJV). The word "conform" is preferable because it includes the word "form" in conform (*summorphizomenos*). This helps us to see the clear connection Paul is making between our *conformity* to Christ's *death*, with Christ himself, who took the form (*morphē*; Phil. 2:8) of a servant and humbled himself in obedience to the point of *death*. When we see this connection, we can recognize, as Gordon Fee explains, that "Christ's sufferings do not refer to sufferings in general,' but to those sufferings that culminated in his death, all of which was for the sake of others...in some way on behalf of the gospel."<sup>24</sup> The sufferings the conform us to Christ's image are *cruciform* sufferings.

In a nutshell, this is the nature of our sanctification, where we are being conformed to the mindset that Christ himself had (Phil. 2:5) by willingly emptying himself to become a servant for us and for our salvation (Phil. 2:6–8). We die to Christ not only by repenting of our own abilities to attain righteousness through the law, but also by putting to death the deeds of our sinful flesh, turning instead to serve others rather than to protect and preserve our own privileges (cf. Rom. 6:1–14). This is the life that Timothy, Epaphroditus and Paul walked, and it is the life that God calls us to live out today in his word and by his Spirit.

### Glorification through Resurrection

In the last verse of this passage, Paul reveals that all of this is leading toward his greatest hope: “that by any means I may attain the resurrection from the dead” (Phil. 3:11). The phrase “that by any means” suggests an element of uncertainty, such as in Acts 27:12, where this same phrase is used: “... the majority decided to put out to sea from there, *on the chance that somehow* they could reach Phoenix.”<sup>25</sup> This does not mean that Paul is doubtful of the certainty of his salvation, since he has expressed his certainty in salvation multiple times throughout this letter (e.g., Phil. 1:6, 1:19–23, 2:12–13). Probably, Paul’s tentative language in Philippians 3:11 reflects a “spirit of deep humility and commendable distrust of self...[as well as] earnest striving.”<sup>26</sup> This kind of humility transitions well into the next section, where Paul stresses the fact that he has not yet attained perfection in Philippians 3:12–16.<sup>27</sup>

But if Paul is humble in regard to *himself*, he does not lack any confidence about the power of the resurrection of Christ. Christ’s righteousness is perfectly sufficient, giving us confidence to stand before God on the last day. In the same way, Christ’s cruciform sufferings in which we share in this life are not in vain, since they lead directly to the resurrection life that Christ will share with us on the last day. Just as Christ himself was glorified after his humiliation (Phil. 2:9–11), so also we will be glorified with him as the result of our union with him through faith to share in his righteousness and in his sufferings.<sup>28</sup> To reinforce this point, Paul will later use the noun form of the word “conformed” (*summorphos*; Phil. 3:21). This conformity, however, is not to the *death* of Christ, but to his resurrection life, for Christ will “transform the body of our humble state *into conformity with* the body of His glory” (Phil. 3:21; NASB).

### Life in Union with Christ

The Christian life is not about striving to be “good enough” before God. The gospel of Jesus Christ rejects our ability to attain righteousness on our own. Instead, Christ promises to give us his perfect righteousness by faith, through our union with him. Because of this righteousness, God justifies us, covering over our shame with the righteous garments of Jesus Christ himself. Then, God makes us holy by conforming us to the sufferings and death of Christ in good works. God calls us to good works, but not out of servile fear and slavish duty. Rather, our good works are the fruit of our sanctification, borne out of hope as we anticipate the resurrection that we will one day share with Christ. This order in which God brings to fruition his salvation in our lives is specific and critical.

In all this, we must neither over-emphasize our death in Christ, nor our eventual, triumphant glorification. Instead, we must rather hold those two elements in tension on this side of glory. As Gordon Fee writes:

Thus, there is not a moment of triumphalism in this first phrase [regarding our conformity to Christ's death]; but neither does Paul emphasize suffering in such a way as to diminish the power of Christ's resurrection as genuinely present for us. Paul knows nothing of the rather gloomy stoicism that is so often exhibited in historic Christianity, where the lot of the believer is basically that of "slugging it out in the trenches," with little or no sense of Christ's presence and power. On the contrary, the power of Christ's resurrection was the greater reality for him.<sup>29</sup>

Just as Jesus endured the shame of the cross for the hope set before him (Heb. 12:2), we also ought to be conformed to the death of Christ in the hope of the power of his resurrection.

The gospel is the only hope we have to live genuinely and vulnerably with other people in community, exposed without any fig leaves to hide behind. We do not have to cover over our sin in shame because we all understand that our righteousness comes from Christ. Furthermore, when we see sin in someone else's life, we can look on him with real love, knowing that Christ died to cleanse and to make him righteous. Instead of putting him in his place or quietly backing out of the relationship, the gospel gives us confidence that all of us are awaiting the day when Jesus Christ will bring all things to completion (Phil. 1:6). On that day, he will remove our shame altogether, covering us forever with the robes of his perfect righteousness.

Therefore my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord!

## Discussion Questions

1. How do you fear being exposed? What do your fears tell you about where you are putting your hope and confidence? What does your identity as someone "found in [Christ]" (Phil. 3:9) say to your fears? Practically speaking, how might you take confidence in the righteousness that Christ gives to you through faith?
2. What standards of righteousness does the world insist upon? These are not the standards of God's law found in the Old Testament, but the world has a certain righteousness that it demands with violence. What kinds of actions or words spark outrage? What does the world admire? How sufficient are those fig leaves to cover over unrighteousness in someone? What might it cost you to count those values as loss for the sake of gaining Christ?
3. How is justification different from sanctification in terms of passivity and activity? Can you bring anything that will count toward your justification? By grace, what does God seek in terms of your sanctification? How do you keep the two distinct in your mind and heart when you sin? How do you keep the two distinct as you seek to obey God?
4. What does the resurrection of Jesus mean for believers today, practically speaking? What does the resurrection mean for the Spirit-wrought power you can expect in your life? How does the resurrection transform the way you see your own suffering? What hope does the resurrection give?

## Notes

1. Pauline Rose Clance and Suzanne Imes, “The Imposter Phenomenon in High Achieving Women: Dynamics and Therapeutic Intervention,” in *Psychotherapy Theory, Research and Practice* 15, no. 3 (Fall, 1978): 241–247. doi:10.1037/h0086006.

2. Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, 288.

3. Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, 291.

4. Silva, *Philippians*, 147.

5. “The phrase τοὺς κακοὺς ἐργάτας (*tous kakous ergatas*) does not merely indicate “people who do what is wrong” or “sinners” (cf. Ps. 6:9 LXX et al.; Matt. 7:23; Luke 13:27). In this context, the phrase is surely meant to refute the Judaizers’ claims that they were doing the works of the law (*erga nomou*; cf. Gal. 3:10; 5:3; 6:13). Genuine good works are done only by true believers (2 Cor. 9:8; Eph. 2:10; Col. 1:10). The Judaizers were earthly-minded false brothers, whose teaching led to the works of the flesh (Gal. 2:4; 5:13–21; Phil. 3:18–19). In this way too they were spiritual Gentiles.” (Silva, *Philippians*, 147–48.)

6. Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, 296.

7. For similar understandings of the relationship between physical circumcision of the old covenant and spiritual circumcision of the new covenant, see Silva, *Philippians*, 147–49; Thielman, *Philippians*, 167–69; O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1980), 147–66; and Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Edinburgh, UK: Banner of Truth Trust, 1975), 88–90.

8. While earlier versions of the ESV translate this phrase as “For we are the real circumcision,” later editions rightfully opted for a more literal translation, “For we are the circumcision.”

9. “The English rendering ‘true circumcision’ weakens the force of the apostle’s language, for his point here is that ‘the circumcision’ should not be applied to Israel at all.” (O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, 358.)

10. Of course, new covenant worship still includes external forms, especially in the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper; however, the primary emphasis in new covenant worship is on the work of the Holy Spirit to teach—and even to enable—us to worship in truth (cf. Rom. 8:23–24; 1 Cor. 2:10–16; 2 Cor. 3:12–18; Gal. 3:2–5, 6:16–26; Eph. 1:13–14; 1 John 2:20–27, 5:6–12).

11. Hendriksen, *Philippians*, 152.

12. Hawthorne, *Philippians*, 127.

13. Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, 302.

14. “There is, however, an important difference between the two passages. In 2 Corinthians, Paul’s object is to demonstrate his apostolicity (rather than his Jewishness) in the face of personal attack. Here in Philippians the listing of credentials has a more direct theological purpose—to serve as a foil for his exposition of the Christian message in verses 7–11.” (Silva, *Philippians*, 150.)

15. Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, 310.

16. Silva, *Philippians*, 158.

17. Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, 314–15.

18. “A striking feature of this passage is the way it reflects a distinction among the three basic categories present in the application of salvation: justification (righteousness through faith, v. 9), sanctification (experiencing the power of Christ’s resurrection as well as participating in his sufferings, v. 10), and glorification (bodily resurrection, v. 11).” (Silva, *Philippians*, 159.)

19. On the analogy of marriage to describe the nature of our justification through union with Christ, see

Martin Luther, “Two Kinds of Righteousness,” in *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress: 2005), 134–40.

20. *Westminster Larger Catechism*, #20.

21. Luther, “Two Kinds of Righteousness,” 135.

22. *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 11.2.

23. Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Philippians*, 97–98. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom42.iv.iv.ii.html>>

24. Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, 334.

25. Silva, *Philippians*, 166.

26. Hendriksen, *Philippians*, 170, original emphases removed.

27. Silva, *Philippians*, 167.

28. “Finally, as Christ’s humiliation was followed by God’s ‘glorious’ vindication of him, so present ‘suffering’ for Christ’s sake will be followed by “glory” in the form of resurrection. As he has appealed to the Philippians to do, Paul thus exemplifies Christ’s ‘mind-set,’ embracing suffering and death. This is what it means ‘to know Christ,’ to be “found in him” by means of his gift of righteousness; and as he was raised and exalted to the highest place, so Paul and the Philippians believers, because they are now ‘conformed to Christ’ in his death, will also be ‘conformed’ to his glory.” (Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, 315.)

29. Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, 331.