

Chapter 8: Perseverance

Philippians 3:12–4:1

Human motivation is a tricky thing. On the one hand, fear can be a powerful motivation, but only to a certain degree. So, the fear of failure can drive people to do things that they otherwise would never attempt, pushing performing artists and athletes to practice and train so they can perform far beyond what they think they could to accomplish. Or, fear for the safety of another person has famously caused some people to achieve unimaginable feats of strength, like lifting cars to save another person in an emergency.¹ In large part, fear works powerfully because “losses loom larger than gains.”² But, on the other hand, using fear as motivation isn’t fool-proof. While the fear of a parent, boss, or leader can often conform our external behavior, fear is powerless to transform our internal desires. As the Apostle John writes, “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love” (1 John 4:18).

Love, then, can accomplish far more than fear, because love is the ultimate motivational tool. Love is more difficult to create than fear, but in the end, love motivates much more powerfully. Even fear itself depends on love, since we can only feel fear when something we love is threatened. The difference between love and fear, though, is that love gives us the ability to endure even the worst hardships for the sake of embracing what it is that we most love. But on the other hand, the power of love also means that the consequences can be disastrous when we love the wrong things, as the church father Augustine observed:

Reflect on this, then (and see the differences). Think of all the evils that greedy men are prepared to face. Think how they will put up with hardship, in order to win the things they are greedy for—things that seem unbearable to people who don’t share their greed. But love makes them brave. Love of evil, though, is called “greed,” love of good is called “charity.”

The question is not *whether* we love, but *what* we love.

In our study of Paul’s letter to the Philippians, we have puzzled over the riddle of how Paul could possibly rejoice in the midst of his deep suffering in prison (Phil. 1:12–14), in the face of rivals who preach against him (Phil. 1:15–17), and with the possibility of a death sentence looming over him (Phil. 1:18–26). So far, Paul has only told us *that* he is motivated to follow the self-sacrificial example of Christ in the midst of such deep, cruciform suffering. Now, we must ask *why* Paul would do these things. Here in Philippians 3:12–4:1, Paul finally provides those answers.

Up to this point, Paul has primarily echoed the language about the humble obedience and sufferings of Christ from Philippians 2:5–8. We will see more of that language in this passage, but we will also start to see Paul start to appropriate themes from the *exaltation* of Christ. Paul’s own motivations, as we will see, closely follow the motivations for why Christ willingly took the form of a servant to endure such great suffering at the cross: in order to obtain *glory* (Phil. 2:9–11). In part,

Paul presses on out of the fear of falling short of fully obtaining Christ. But more than that, Paul presses on from a desire to obtain the same kind of glory that Jesus Christ himself received when the Father highly exalted him after he obediently submitted to death on a cross.

The Process of Perseverance: Pressing On (Phil. 3:12–16)

In Philippians 3:9–11, Paul wrote about how believers possess a perfect, impeccable, bulletproof righteousness through their justification through faith in Christ. Against the Judaizers who insist that Gentile Christians must submit to the Law’s demands in regard to external behaviors and ceremonies, Paul insists that God alone can make us righteous by imputing the righteousness of Christ to us freely and graciously, through faith. Because believers are “found in” Christ (Phil. 3:9), we are clothed with Christ’s perfect righteousness without needing to provide anything of our own.

But in Philippians 3:12–16, Paul seeks to avoid a serious misunderstanding in the opposite direction. While Paul insists that we can stand with confidence in the righteousness that God freely imputes to us from Christ in our justification through faith, Paul also knows that we continue to struggle with the lingering presence of our old nature of sin and death so that our sinful tendencies are not completely removed in this life. As we discussed in our study of Philippians 2:12–18, this aspect of the Christian life is called *sanctification*, in which we struggle by the grace of God against our old, sinful nature. This work is never complete in this life. So, until we die or until Christ returns, we must live in the tension of having *already* received the righteousness of Christ through justification, but having *not yet* been made perfect in sanctification.

Apprehending Christ

Expressing the lifelong nature of this struggle, Paul writes, “Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own” (Phil. 3:12–13a). Paul uses three important verbs in this sentence to express this already/not yet tension that believers experience: “obtain,” “be perfected,” and “make it my own/be made his own.” While there are minor nuances between these words, Paul uses all three to point to the same goal.⁴ But what exactly is Paul’s goal?

This is a difficult question to answer, since Paul doesn’t define what he is “obtaining” or “making his own.” Grammatically, the Greek language allows Paul to write “not that I have obtained...but I press on to make my own” in a way that usually doesn’t make sense in English, since our language typically requires that we define what it is we are *obtaining*. The closest English equivalent to this Greek construction would be our word “arrived,” which we can use without explaining the sense in which a person has arrived: e.g., “not that I have *arrived*....”⁵ Paul, therefore, emphatically denies the possibility for a believer to have “arrived” in *this* life. We are declared righteous by faith through *justification*, but God does not finish his work of *sanctification* in us on this side of glory.

Interpreters have offered an abundance of ideas in speculation of what Paul might mean here.⁶ It cannot be, as some suggest, that Paul is speaking of not being fully justified, since that idea would contradict what he wrote just a few verses earlier in Philippians 3:9 about receiving a perfect righteousness from Christ.⁷ Instead, most interpreters hover around a general sense that Paul is speaking of not having received the full inheritance of Christ himself in a glorified state of perfection. This is the *eschatological* goal—that is, this is what we will receive at the end of time on

the day of Christ (Phil. 1:6), at the resurrection of the dead (Phil. 3:11), and when God renews creation to put away the curse of sin and death forever (Rev. 21:1–5).

We receive a foretaste of that reality through the righteousness we receive in justification, and through the work of God in us in sanctification as he gives us the desire and the ability to continue working out our own salvation (Phil. 2:12–13). Nevertheless, we will not know the fullness of that reality on this side of glory. Instead, Paul states that he must “press on” toward that goal, recognizing the paradoxical realities that he will *both* receive nothing apart from God’s gracious work in him, *and* that God’s grace is never an excuse for lazy living. Rather, God’s grace somehow both assures us of our righteousness in Christ *and* spurs us to strain and strive toward that eschatological prize (Phil. 3:13b–16).

Before Paul speaks much of his own effort in this process of sanctification, however, he demonstrates that everything *he* can do stems from what *Christ Jesus* has done for him, writing: “... [I] make it my own...because Christ Jesus has made me his own” (Phil. 3:12). On both sides of this phrase, Paul uses the same verb, but first in an active sense, and then in a passive sense. In the active sense, Paul portrays himself doing everything he can to attain the prize of glory in Christ. Then, in the passive sense, Paul describes how “Christ Jesus has made me his own.” In this phrase, Paul seems to recall the day when he first met Christ while on the road to Damascus, “at which time Christ laid violent hands on him, so to speak, forcefully arrested him and set him off in a new lifelong direction.”⁸ To capture Paul’s wordplay in English, then, Gerald Hawthorne suggests using the word “apprehend” (“I *apprehend* it...because Christ Jesus has *apprehended* me”) as a suitable equivalent: “For ‘to apprehend’ can mean both ‘to lay hold of with the understanding,’ as well as ‘to arrest or seize.’”⁹

In this way, Paul links his own ability to “apprehend” eschatological glory with the manner in which Christ Jesus “apprehended” him. Through this, Paul captures the idea that the grace of God stands above, below, behind, and in front of all that he is subsequently able to do. In many ways, Paul is reiterating what he wrote in Philippians 2:12–13, urging the Philippians to “work out” their salvation with fear and trembling, but to do so in the knowledge that it is God who “works in” them, “both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”¹⁰

On this point, Frank Thielman points out another interesting wordplay Paul employs here: “Had that event [when Christ apprehended Paul] not taken place, Paul might still be busy ‘persecuting (*diōkō*) the church’ (Phil. 3:6) instead of pressing on (*diōkō*) toward these goals (vv. 12, 14).”¹¹ The grace of God not only prevented Paul from continuing further down his former wickedness of the persecution of the church, but God’s grace also redirected him toward a life of no longer pressing *down* on (i.e., persecuting) the church, but pressing *forward* toward glory.

Pressing on Toward the Prize

To illustrate how he strives toward glory, Paul employs the metaphor of a runner competing in a race.¹² Capturing the dedication and competitiveness of an athlete putting everything on the line to win the prize, Paul writes, “But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 3:13b–14). We should make a few observations about this language.

First, Paul again insists that the running he does is a response to the grace of God. He does not imagine that he will conquer the world in order to take a prize for himself. On the contrary, the race he runs has been set out before him by the “upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” He runs with

abandon because he runs to please a master who has promised a definite prize. Paul runs not to *earn* something but to *receive* what God promises to give by grace.

Second, Paul contrasts the dual task of “forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead” in language that sounds something like what the author of Hebrews writes: “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us...” (Heb. 12:1). There, however, the “weight” that must be set aside seems to be anything that distracts the runners from their race, and their “sin” must be laid aside because of the way it can cling too closely so as to cause the runners to stumble. Are distractions and sins the things that Paul has in mind when he speaks of “forgetting what lies behind”? Is he perhaps thinking back to his former life under the law as a Pharisee and a persecutor of the church that he wrote about earlier in this chapter (Phil. 3:4–8)?

Certainly, his former legalism and sins are part of what Paul must forget as he strives forward. Paul must count the entirety of his former life as “rubbish,” abandoning even the things that he used to consider as “gain” (Phil. 3:8). Nevertheless, in the context, Paul is primarily writing about the fact that he has not yet “obtained” this goal, and that he has not been made “already perfect,” so that he must “press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own” (Phil. 2:12). Then, he says that he does not “consider that I have made it my own” before insisting that he does only one thing: “forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead” (Phil. 2:13). For this reason, it seems that Paul is speaking mainly about forgetting the *good progress* he has already made in order that he might *continue* pressing forward to apprehend all that he has *not* yet obtained.¹³

In the Christian life, Jesus calls us to set aside everything that would hinder us from moving forward to follow him. Whether we are bogged down by guilt and shame, or whether we are tempted to passivity by thinking that we have arrived, Paul exhorts us through his own example to continue pressing on to attain the fullness of the glory that God has prepared for us in Christ Jesus.

Mature Thinking

Paul writes, “Let those of you who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. Only let us hold true to what we have attained” (Phil. 3:15–16). The ESV has rendered a smooth translation of this verse that masks its notorious challenges of interpretation. To start, the word rendered as “mature” here is the word *teleioi*, the same root word that Paul used in a verb form, *teteleiōmai*, to insist that he had not “been made perfect” (Phil. 3:12). If we consistently translated the words, Paul would be saying, “Not that I...am already *made perfect*, but...let those of us who are *perfect* think this way.” So, which is it? Is it possible to be made perfect in this life, or not?

While Paul may indeed be employing a touch of “tongue in cheek irony” here,¹⁴ we should not overlook the fact that he is making a serious point. In this, Paul is demonstrating the continuity between, on the one hand, the perfection that we must continually strive to attain through the power of the Holy Spirit in sanctification with, on the other hand, the perfection that is ours already through justification. What we have gained *perfectly* now, we await to receive *perfectly* on the day of Christ Jesus.

This already/not yet tension is, after all, the larger point that Paul has been making throughout this entire third chapter of his letter to the Philippians. Just as we have already received righteousness

in Christ so that we are infallibly and impeccably righteous on the basis of Christ's alien righteousness that is imputed to us (Phil. 3:9), it is also true that we have not yet obtained and apprehended the full, eschatological righteousness of gaining Christ himself (Phil. 3:12). In the same way, while we have not "been made perfect" (Phil. 3:12), we are nevertheless the "perfect ones" (*teleioi*; Phil. 3:15) in light of the perfection (i.e., completion) that God has already given us in Christ. Critically, this is the same word that Paul used in Philippians 1:6: "And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will *bring it to completion* [*epiteleset*] on the day of Christ Jesus." What we have in Christ, we have *completely*, but not yet *in complete maturity*.¹⁵ Unfortunately, the ESV drops the conjunction "therefore" at the beginning of Philippians 3:15: "*Therefore*, let those of us who are *teleioi*..." The word "therefore" clarifies here the idea that Paul is drawing a logical conclusion to what he has already written: "In consequence of what I have been narrating...let us now hear the application."¹⁶

Therefore, let us hear the application Paul is making here. First, Paul tells those who are perfect to "...think this way..." (Phil. 3:15), echoing what he wrote in Philippians 2:5: "Have this mind..." This time, Paul includes himself in the passage, "Let *us* have this mind..." rather than speaking to the Philippians without including himself, as he did earlier ("[*You*] have this mind...").¹⁷ Otherwise, the language is identical, suggesting that our mindset/thinking as we persevere toward the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus directly reflects the mindset/thinking of Christ's. Because Christ emptied himself, took the form of a servant, and humbled himself in obedience all the way to death on a cross, God highly exalted him. Along the same lines, Paul urges us to persevere in the hope of obtaining the goal of the prize, striving to apprehend whatever we are still missing.

This perspective clarifies Paul's next words: "...and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. Only let us hold true to what we have attained" (Phil. 3:15b–16). The "otherwise" thinking would seem to be anything that distracts us from continuing to persevere, so Paul is saying that if we are indeed striving toward the prize, then God will reveal to us areas where we might not realize we are falling short. Moreover, Paul urges us to hold true to what we have attained, refusing to relinquish even an inch of our progress. Taken together, Paul gives us here a comprehensive picture of mature Christian thinking as we strive for the perfection that we have not yet attained.

Still, we cannot pretend that this kind of perseverance is easy. Even if we have the maturity to recognize that we *should* continue to press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus, our task does not suddenly become easy. So, to motivate us to do what we should do, Paul appeals first to *fear* and then to *love* in order to exhort us to continue pressing on toward the goal of Christ himself.

The Pattern of Perseverance: Paul (Phil. 3:17–19)

Paul's words in Philippians 3:17 are surprising: "Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us." Shouldn't Paul be urging us to imitate *Christ* instead of imitating *himself*? In fact, imitating Paul is not necessarily at odds with imitating Christ. As Paul writes elsewhere, "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ" (1 Cor. 11:1). In other words, Paul is not urging the Philippians (or the Corinthians, or even *us*) to imitate him in *himself*, but rather to imitate his pattern of striving to imitate Christ. To the degree that Paul is able

to imitate Christ, the Philippians should join in imitating him in the same respect. Paul wants the Philippians to see what it looks like for a justified sinner to press on toward in Christ.

Also, Paul has already encouraged the Philippians to follow after his example. In Philippians 1:27, Paul exhorted the Philippians to follow his lead as he rejoices at the progress of the gospel through his imprisonment (Phil. 1:12–26). Here, Paul has spent the entire third chapter writing about the righteousness that he has gained through faith in Christ and his dedication to press on toward the goal of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus (Phil. 3:2–14). As in Philippians 1, it is only after Paul establishes this example that he calls the Philippians to “join in imitating me.”

The Enemies of the Cross

Still, Paul has yet another reason for exhorting the Philippians to imitate him: Paul wants to keep the Philippians from imitating another group of people: “For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things” (Phil. 3:18–19). Who are these “enemies of the cross”? Paul does not give many clues as to the identity of this group, so, commentators range widely in their interpretations. On one side, some believe that these enemies are legalistic Jews¹⁸ or Judaizers.¹⁹ On the other extreme end of the spectrum, another group of commentators believe Paul is referring here to libertines of the most gluttonous, sensual variety.²⁰ Then, one commentator argues that this is a group of people who are never mentioned again, having served their purpose of contrasting with Paul’s own example.²¹ In response, another commentator suggests that Paul might be addressing here the same false teachers that he addressed in his letters to Corinth, another Macedonian city, in 1 and 2 Corinthians.²² Additionally, commentators have offered many other possibilities.²³

Licentious Living

In my judgment, the most natural understanding of this passage would follow what William Hendriksen writes, along “with very many interpreters,” that these enemies of the cross of Christ are “sensualists, men who catered to the flesh, gluttonous, grossly immoral people, all this though they pretended to be Christians.”²⁴ There are at least three reasons why this interpretation best fits what Paul writes, especially in contrast with the competing option to read this passage as relating to the Judaizers whom Paul spoke about in Philippians 3:2–11.

First, the descriptions Paul uses in Philippians 3:19 (“Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things”) sounds more like a description of lawless libertines than of legalistic Judaizers, although some of the phrases might go either direction. Certainly, the end for both legalists and libertines is destruction, and both groups glory in their shame,²⁵ with their minds set on earthly things.²⁶ The phrase “their god is their belly,” however, almost certainly cannot refer to legalism, despite the arguments of some commentators who attempt to explain this as a reference to Jewish kosher food laws.²⁷ The problem with such arguments is that, for the Judaizers, they did not slavishly serve the lusts of their belly as a god, but rather the demands of the law. That is, the *law* is what ordered what they would eat, so that they did *not* obey the cravings of their belly, as libertines do.

Second, it is important to note that, while Paul calls this group “enemies of the cross,” we should note that he does not view them as his *own* enemies.²⁸ In contrast to the strong line he takes against

Judaizing legalists in Philippians 3:2–11 and through the entire letter of Galatians, Paul here writes that he instead writes about these people “with tears” (Phil. 3:18). This change in tone—a stern warning followed by a gentle pleading—seems to indicate that Paul has two different groups, with two different errors, in mind. Paul does not want to renounce them, but to reform them.

Third, the immediate context better fits with understanding these people as libertines than it does to understand them as Judaizing legalists. The reason Paul so explicitly laid out the doctrines of justification by faith alone through the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ in the previous passage was to counter the justification by works doctrine of the legalistic Judaizers. In this passage, however, Paul urges the Philippians to continue pressing on to attain all that they have not yet attained in Christ. In other words, Paul shifts from writing primarily about justification to writing about sanctification and perseverance toward glorification. Therefore, in this context, libertines (not legalists) are the obvious contrast.

Fourth, this entire letter urges the Philippians to press on toward obedience and purity elsewhere at several points in this letter (e.g., Phil. 1:9–11, 1:27–2:5, 2:12–18, 4:8–9). Therefore, Paul’s letter to the Philippians is fundamentally different from Paul’s letter to the Galatians, where he wrote with the one problem of Judaizing legalism in view. Here, Paul seems to be combatting threats from both sides. So, while Paul exhorts the Philippians to trust in Christ over against the false promise of righteousness through works of the law, he also rejects any idea that they can embrace self-centered, lustful, shameful behavior.

Although we cannot be certain, it therefore seems most likely that these people were engaging in morally licentious behavior because of a false understanding of the doctrine of justification by faith alone.²⁹ They falsely believed that their being counted righteous in Christ meant that they could “continue in sin that grace may abound” (Rom. 6:1). So, Paul pleads with the Philippian believers not to follow their example. Justification is not a license for loose living. Instead, justification gives us confidence to press forward toward Christ. In light of God’s free gift of justification through faith, Paul exhorts us to persevere according to the grace of God working in us to will and to work for his good pleasure (Phil. 2:12–13).

As the Protestant Reformers so frequently reminded us, our justification comes by faith alone; however, true, justifying faith is *never* alone. Real faith always produces the fruit of good works, flowing from the grace of God in our lives (Phil. 2:12–13; cf. Jas. 2:14–26). Paul, therefore, urges believers to join in imitating him as we strive together to apprehend Christ in his fullness. In contrast, Paul pleads with the Philippians not to follow the example of a group of libertines who stopped seeking after Christ in order to indulge the lusts of their flesh. Paul weeps over such people, since their end is destruction, and their lives are devoted to shame as they pursue earthly things.

The Purpose of Perseverance: Glory (Phil. 3:20–4:1)

Paul recognizes, though, that fear is not enough of a motivation to keep believers away from the temptations of this world. We are not stoics who seek to leverage the fear of punishment in order to maintain perfect discipline and self-control. Instead, as Paul explains in the next three verses, we are heavenly citizens striving for something far greater than the pleasures of this broken world could possibly offer to us. In the last three verses of this section in Philippians 3:20–4:1, Paul describes the glory that we are seeking through a tightly written section that interacts (once again!) with the

Christ-hymn from Philippians 2:6–11.

The foundation of his argument rests on the idea of our heavenly citizenship: “But our citizenship is in heaven...” (Phil. 3:20). This word for “citizenship” is the noun form of the verb that Paul had used in Philippians 1:27: “Only behave as citizens worthy of the gospel of Christ, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ...”³⁰ In both locations, Paul talks about our citizenship as an identity which ought to shape the content and character of our conduct.³¹ This identity is not based primarily on nationality, and certainly not on the basis of race (cf. Phil. 3:5) or of external signs such as circumcision (Phil. 3:3), or any earthly things whatsoever (Phil. 3:19). Instead, our identity is in the Lord Jesus Christ, our Savior, with whom we are united through faith (Phil. 3:9).

Glorified with Christ

For Paul, the scope of our identity in Christ stretches as an all-encompassing transformation. We are imputed with Christ’s righteousness (Phil. 3:9), conformed to Christ’s death while sharing in the fellowship of his sufferings (Phil. 3:10), and we will ultimately attain fully to Christ’s resurrection glory (Phil. 3:11). Just as Christ was exalted as a suffering servant (Phil. 2:9–11), so also we will be glorified through being conformed to his sufferings. So, Paul here undertakes one of his deepest theological reflections on the nature of our glorification in Christ. He writes, “[the Lord Jesus Christ] will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself” (Phil. 3:21). Through this section, Paul writes seven words, phrases, or themes that correspond directly with the Christ hymn of Philippians 2:6–11. By this, he demonstrates how closely our own future of glory mirrors the glory that Christ entered into through his own resurrection.³²

First, the specific word Paul chooses for “is” (“But our citizenship *is* in heaven...”; Phil. 3:20) is the word *huparchō*, the same word that Paul had used to describe Christ’s “being” (*huparchōn*) in the form of God (Phil. 2:6). Notably, this word is not the common word for “is” (*einai*), but a word that carries a slightly stronger nuance. Although New Testament writers employ this word “as a widely used substitute...for *einai*,” it is sometimes used in a similar sense to our word “exists” to carry the sense of “be inherently (so)” or “be really.”³³ In other words, this word may hint at a deeper, more inherent “existence” than the standard word for “is” would necessarily convey. In Philippians 2:6, Paul stressed the actual humanity of Christ, avoiding the suggesting that he simply appeared in the fashion (but not the reality) of a human being. Here, Paul is stressing the absolute, intrinsic reality of our heavenly citizenship as the rock-solid basis for our future glorification.

Second, the Savior whom we await, the “Lord Jesus Christ” (*kurion Iēsoun Christon*; Phil. 3:20) corresponds with the phrase “Jesus Christ is Lord” (*kurios Iēsous Christos*) from Philippians 2:11.³⁴ In this way, Paul connects our glorification with the glorification of Christ. When Christ the servant was exalted from the depths of the cross and the grave in his resurrection, God highly exalted him by bestowing upon Christ the name which is above every name as Lord (*kurios*). Stunningly, Paul explains that one of the chief functions of Christ’s lordship, then, is to glorify the citizens of his kingdom through the power of his own resurrection (Phil. 3:10).

Third, the word Paul uses for “transform” is *metaschēmatisō*. Critically, Paul used the word *schēma* in Philippians 2:8 to speak of the “human *fashion*” in which Christ was found. In other words, just as Christ took on human nature and human appearance, so also we will be changed in our own nature and appearance. This time, however, the transformation will work in the opposite direction, so that

we will be transformed *from* fallen human fashion into the fashion of the glorified Christ.

Fourth, the word for “lowliness” (*tapeinōseōs*) in the phrase “body of lowliness” is the same verb that was used in the Christ hymn to describe the way in which Christ “humbled” (*etapeinōsen*) himself (that is, “made himself lowly”) by becoming obedient to the point of death, in the form of a servant (Phil. 2:8). The idea here is that just as Christ emptied himself by taking the form of a servant in lowliness, so our present lowliness is temporary as we await our exaltation and glorification.

Fifth, the word “form” goes semi-untranslated in the ESV version of Philippians 3:21, which says, “who will transform our lowly body to be *like* his glorious body....” It is not that we will merely be *like* his glorious body, but the text says that we will be like the *form* (*summorphon*) of his glorious body. In Philippians 2:6 and 7, Paul had used the similar word *morphē* to describe Christ’s existences first in the “form of God” (*morphē theou*) and in the “form of a servant” (*morphēn doulou*). Again, Paul is stressing the deep reality of our transformation: we will gain not just an appearance of glory, but the reality of glory as we are transformed to be like the *form* of his glorious body. Additionally, Paul used the verbal form (*summorphizomenos*) of this noun (*summorphon*) back in Philippians 3:10 to speak of our “*being conformed* to [Christ’s] death.” There, our transformation/conformity was to the sufferings and death of Christ, but here Paul promises that we will also be *conformed* to Christ’s glorification.

Sixth, as we speak of his “glorious body” or “body of glory,” that is importantly the same word (*doxēs*) used in Philippians 2:11: “to the *glory* [*doxan*] of God the Father.” Additionally, Paul sets this word in contrasts with the “glory” (*doxa*) of shame that the libertines foolishly embrace (Phil. 3:19). *Glory* is a recurring theme of this passage, since Paul contrasts the true, Christ-like glory that we seek over against the false, shameful glory that the libertines seek.

Seventh, the word for “power” (“by the *power* which enables him even to subject all things to himself”) is the word *energein*. This comes from the same root as the word used in Philippians 1:6 (“he who began a good *work* [*ergon*] in you...”) and Philippians 2:12–13 (“*work out* [*katēgazesthe*] your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who *works* [*energōn*] in you, both to will and to *work* [*energein*] for his good pleasure”). Here again, God’s grace is the catalytic “power” for the transforming “work” of God in our lives. Apart from grace, we can do nothing toward this glorification. By God’s grace, however, we will attain a reality that we cannot currently imagine. The same power by which he subdues all things to himself is the same power that enables him to glorify our lowly bodies.³⁵ This is the power by which he commands the bowing of every knee in heaven and on earth and under the earth (Phil. 2:10) and the confessing of every tongue that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father (Phil. 2:11). Jesus Christ applies his lordship not only to subduing his enemies, but also to glorifying his people with his own glory.

Stand Firm

Finally, Paul urges his brothers, whom he loves and “longs for” (cf. Phil. 1:8, 2:25), to “stand firm” thus in the Lord. Previously, Paul urged them to “stand firm” (Phil. 1:27), but now Paul writes in the light of their absolute hope of complete, glorious transformation in and through Christ, on the day of Christ Jesus. This is not a call to white-knuckle our way through the Christian life. Rather, this is a summons to stand firm on the unshakable righteousness of Jesus Christ which is already ours and to pursue the hope of glorification that we have not yet attained. There is more glory to be gained, so let’s go get it!

The way Paul writes this letter seriously challenges us, no matter which error we might trend toward. On the one hand, if we err toward the side of slavish, servile fear, Paul reassures us with the hope of glory. Of course, this is not just any glory, but the same glory into which our Lord Jesus Christ has entered, with the same power that our Lord is using to subdue all the nations before him. We can enjoy complete, absolute, unshakable confidence because Christ himself applies his lordship toward our glorification!

On the other hand, we we err toward lazy passivity, content only to have been justified by faith alone and uninterested in the hard work of sacrificial love and self-discipline. If so, Paul pleads with us not to fall into the fate of the enemies of the cross over whom he weeps. Instead, he exhorts us to keep going, pressing on to take hold of the glory Christ offers to us. We don't work to *earn* what Christ freely gives to us, but we do work to *lay hold of* what what Christ promises to us by grace.

Paul therefore appeals to the love of glory, teaching us to learn to love *most* the glory that only Christ can give to us. At the beginning of this chapter, I quoted one of Augustine's sermons. Later on in that same sermon, Augustine points to the example of the martyrs that have given everything for the sake of Christ: "Still, my brothers, make the invisible goals of the martyrs your aim. Love the things they loved. Even though you don't need to endure what they endured, still prepare your spirits to endure it. Choose your cause first of all, as far as you can."³⁶ Even if we are not called to die for Christ, we must still choose what—or, rather, *whom*—we will love. As we grow in love for Christ by God's grace, we gain the ability to persevere through any kind of hardship because we will settle for nothing less than the Lord Jesus Christ in all his glory.

Therefore, let us stand firm by pressing forward to apprehend what God promises to us in Christ, with the hope that Christ has already apprehended us, and that he will one day finally transform us to be like him.

Discussion Questions

1. What fear motivates you to action? Or, what are you so worried about losing that you change your behavior, whether in good ways or bad ways? How does Paul's use of fear as a motivational tool address your own fears? What are the strengths of motivating someone by fear? What are the weaknesses of challenges someone by fear?
2. What do you love? Or, what do you desire so much that the prospect of gaining it causes you to change your behavior, whether in good ways or bad ways? How does Paul's use of love as a motivational tool address your own loves? What are the strengths of motivating someone by love? What are the challenges of motivating someone by love?
3. In what ways does your own contentedness with justification by faith alone hinder you from the growth of sanctification? How can the promise of glory help you continue to persevere through suffering in your life? What specific situations in your life require you to remind yourself to the glory God is bringing into your life in Christ?
4. Why does Paul so closely tie our current lowly state and our eventual glorification to the previous lowly state and current glorification of Christ? What does that tell us about God? What does that tell

us about ourselves? How does that affect our desire for that glory in the life to come?

Notes

1. Jeff Wise, “Stealth Super Powers,” in *Psychology Today*, Nov. 1, 2010. <<https://www.psychologytoday.com/articles/201011/stealth-super-powers>> Accessed Sept. 3, 2016.

2. For substantial research that demonstrates the truthfulness of this proverb, see Sheena Iyengar, *The Art of Choosing* (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2010), Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking: Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Strous, and Giroux, 2011), and William Poundstone, *Priceless: The Myth of Fair Value (and How to Take Advantage of it)* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010).

3. Augustine, “Sermon 335C: The Sermon of the Blessed Bishop Augustine on the Feast of a Martyr,” in *Augustine: Political Writings*, edited by E. M. Atkins and R. J. Dodaro (New York: Cambridge UP, 2001), 53.

4. “If we focus first on the negative clauses, we are immediately impressed by the variety of terms Paul uses here to express one basic concept: λαμβάνω (*lambanō*, take, obtain, receive), τελειόω (*teleioō*, [passive] be finished, accomplished, perfected), καταλαμβάνω (*katalambanō*, attain, grasp, seize). Whatever semantic distinctions we may be able to discover (here or elsewhere) among these verbs, we must give greater weight to the simple fact that all three have the same referent in view, namely, the attainment of Paul’s ultimate goal.” (Silva, *Philippians*, 173.)

5. Thielman, *Philippians*, 195.

6. “Some say that Paul disclaims having already attained to the resurrection of the dead.... Others say that he denies having fully achieved righteousness..., or moral and spiritual perfection..., or the prize at the end of the race.... Still others say that Paul deliberately left the object of the verb unexpressed to counter the arrogance of the Gnostics who claimed to know everything, to have attained everything, to have reached the goal, to have become perfect....” (Hawthorne, *Philippians*, 150–51.)

7. “Despite an early scribe who thought otherwise and added, ‘or am already fully justified,’ it is unlikely that Paul considers his present ‘righteousness’ as something yet to be realized. Righteousness is the given, which has made possible his ‘knowing Christ’ in the present at all. What he has not yet ‘obtained,’ therefore, is the eschatological realization of the goal expressed in vv. 10–11, the kind of knowing of Christ that will be his only when he has ‘attained unto the resurrection from the dead’—of its equivalent, as vv. 20–21 clarify.” (Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, 343.)

8. Hawthorne, *Philippians*, 152.

9. Hawthorne, *Philippians*, 152.

10. “Christ’s work is the prior one, and...all his own effort is simply in response to, and for the sake of, that prior ‘apprehension’ of him by ‘Christ Jesus my Lord.’” (Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, 346.)

11. Thielman, *Philippians*, 196.

12. Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Philippians*, 102–06. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom42.iv.iv.iii.html>>

13. On this point, see Peter O’Brien, who writes that this phrase does “...not describe Paul’s pre-Christian advantages and privileges of vv. 5–6, since such an explanation is at variance with the context; rather, the expression must apply to what Paul has already achieved in his apostolic service, since it stands over against that which he, as one apprehended by Christ, has not yet apprehended (v. 12). It denotes that part of the Christian race which he has already covered, and thus does not specifically describe his experience as a persecutor, however, much he may have wished, for other reasons, to forget that. On the other hand, the text must not be over-interpreted in the opposite direction....He will not allow either the achievements of the past (which God has wrought) or, for that matter, his failures as a Christian to prevent his gaze from being fixed firmly on the

finish line. In this sense he forgets as he runs.” (O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, 428–29.)

14. Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, 355.

15. Along these lines, Frank Thielman helpfully demonstrates that Paul frequently uses this word *teleioi* throughout his writings to speak “not of perfection in the ultimate sense but of the maturity necessary to distinguish the wisdom of God from the wisdom of the world (1 Cor. 2:6; cf. Col. 1:28) and to use spiritual gifts appropriately (1 Cor. 14:20; Eph. 4:11–13).” (Thielman, *Philippians*, 197.)

16. Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, 355.

17. “Second, the most striking thing about this application is that it concludes his narrative on the same note with which he begins the Christ narrative in 2:5, thus returning to the crucial verb which dominated the appeal in 2:1–5 (and will occur again in v. 19 and 4:2). Just as he told the Christ story so that they would have a ‘mindset’ (*phronēte*) in keeping with Christ’s, so now he has told his story so that they will ‘take a view’ (*phronōmen*) of things in keeping with his own. Given that he specifically applies both stories by means of this verb, it seems hardly coincidental that Paul’s story corresponds at several crucial points with Christ’s. But as always for Paul, correct ‘thinking’ leads to right living, so he concludes this application (v. 16) by urging them to conform their lives to their knowledge of Christ, as it has now been put on display through his own story.” (Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, 354.)

18. Hawthorne, *Philippians*, 163.

19. Lenski, *Interpretation of Philippians*, 857–60.

20. Hendriksen, *Philippians*, 178.

21. Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, 374–75.

22. Thielman, *Philippians*, 197–201.

23. For a substantial list, see Hawthorne, *Philippians*, 163.

24. Hendriksen, *Philippians*, 178.

25. In the case of libertines, this would be an obvious reference to shameful gluttony and sexual practices. In the case of legalistic Judaizers or Jews, it is (in my judgment) a reasonable argument to understand “shame” as a reference to the false circumcision where they “mutilate the flesh” (Phil. 3:2). Hawthorne, for example, writes this: “Furthermore, if, as is argued here, Paul is alluding to punctilious, Law-keeping Jews rather than to libertines, then αἰσχύνη (“shame”) is more likely to be a reference to “nakedness,” one’s private parts meaning those parts of the body that are unrepresentable (cf. 1 Cor 12:23) than it is to shameful lusts. Αἰσχύνη, therefore, becomes Paul’s way of pouring bitter scorn on the rite of circumcision (cf. 3:2), when in his judgment circumcision becomes that in which a person boasts (cf. Gal 6:13) and upon which one depends for salvation.” (Hawthorne, *Philippians*, 166.)

26. As with “shame” (see footnote above), the idea of “earthly things” for libertines would obviously refer to earthly lusts (e.g., food, drink, sex). For legalists, the “earthly things” in view would be the law and the earthly worship mandated by the law.

27. Lenski, *Interpretation of Philippians*, 860.

28. “They are enemies of the cross, to be sure, but that is because of the way they live, rejecting a cruciform existence and a sure future for present self-indulgence. Paul weeps over them, and warns the Philippians against them; but he does not set them up as personal ‘opponents.’” (Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, 374–75.)

29. Gordon Fee is perhaps too cautious on this point: “[Paul] is probably describing some itinerants, whose view of the faith is such that it allows them a great deal of undisciplined self-indulgence. Whether they have taken Paul’s view of ‘Justification by faith’ to a libertine conclusion, as many think, is plausible, but probably too specific in terms of what Paul actually says in the text.” (Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, 375.)

30. ESV: “Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ...”

31. See Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, 378–81.

32. For a chart of the words and phrases, see Hawthorne, *Philippians*, 169.

33. *BDAG*, ὑπάρχω, 1029–30.

34. The difference in spelling does not imply any difference in *meaning*, but only a difference of usage and function (nominative case in Philippians 2:11 vs. objective case in Philippians 3:20).

35. Hawthorne, *Philippians*, 173.

36. Augustine, “Sermon 335C,” 57.