

Philippians Chapter 3

A Deep Expository Study: The Rubbish and the Righteousness -- Counting All Loss, Knowing Christ, and Pressing Toward the Prize

Introduction to Philippians Chapter 3

The Chapter Where Paul Empties His Pockets and Calls It Gain

Philippians chapter 3 is one of the most autobiographically transparent and theologically radical passages in all of Paul's letters. It is the chapter where Paul reaches into his religious resume -- a resume that by any first-century Jewish standard would have been breathtaking in its credentials -- and declares every item in it to be rubbish compared to the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus his Lord. Not merely insufficient. Not merely secondary. Rubbish. The Greek word he uses is a word for waste, dung, the thing you throw away and do not look back at. The man who was blameless under the law, who advanced in Judaism beyond his peers, who was a Hebrew of Hebrews -- this man counts it all loss, and counts the counting itself as the most rational thing he has ever done.

But chapter 3 is not merely about what Paul has abandoned. It is equally about what he has pursued -- what he is still pursuing, with an urgency and an intensity that the chapter communicates through one of the most vivid athletic metaphors in the New Testament. The runner who has not yet crossed the finish line. The person who forgets what is behind and presses toward what is ahead. The one who strains every sinew toward the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Paul is not a man who has arrived. He is a man who is running with everything he has toward something he has not yet fully possessed -- and inviting the Philippians to run with him.

The chapter also contains one of the sharpest warnings in the letter. Between the personal testimony and the athletic metaphor stands a description of the enemies of the cross -- those whose god is their belly, whose glory is in their shame, whose mind is set on earthly things. Against them Paul sets the citizenship language -- 'our citizenship is in heaven' -- and the resurrection hope that is both the goal of the press and the guarantee of its completion.

The Structure of Chapter 3

The chapter moves through five major sections. First, the warning against the Judaizing teachers and the true circumcision of the Spirit (vv. 1-3). Second, Paul's religious credentials and their radical revaluation in the light of Christ -- all counted loss, all counted rubbish, for the surpassing worth of knowing Christ (vv. 4-11). Third, the

athletic metaphor -- the forward press toward the prize, the refusal to claim arrival, the straining toward what lies ahead (vv. 12-16). Fourth, the warning against the enemies of the cross and the contrast with the heavenly citizenship that defines the community of faith (vv. 17-21). Fifth, the closing resurrection declaration of verse 21 that is the foundation for the peace and joy of chapter 4.

Opening Prayer

Heavenly Father, we come to Philippians chapter 3 knowing that we are about to be asked to do what Paul does -- to open our hands and let go of everything we have been holding as the ground of our standing before You. Our religious performance. Our theological knowledge. Our ministry track record. Our moral achievement. Our family heritage. Our church credentials. Whatever it is that we have been quietly trusting in alongside Christ -- or instead of Christ -- Paul is about to call it what it actually is: rubbish. Not good but insufficient. Rubbish. The thing you throw away.

Lord, this is not easy to hear. We have worked hard for some of what we are holding. We have sacrificed for it. And some of it is genuinely good. But if it has become the ground of our standing before You -- if we are trusting in it rather than in the righteousness that comes through faith in Christ -- then Paul's word stands: let it go. Count it loss. And then, Lord, give us Paul's forward press. Not the smug complacency of the person who thinks they have arrived, but the urgent, joyful, all-in pursuit of the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Let us forget what is behind. Let us strain toward what is ahead. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Philippians 3:1-3 -- The Warning and the True Circumcision

Further, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord! It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you. Watch out for those dogs, watch out for those evildoers, watch out for those mutilators of the flesh. For it is we who are the circumcision, we who serve God by his Spirit, who boast in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh.

IN SIMPLE AMERICAN ENGLISH

Keep rejoicing in the Lord, brothers and sisters -- and I am glad to keep saying it, because it is a safeguard for you. Now: be on your guard. Watch out for those dogs. Watch out for the evildoers. Watch out for the ones who are insisting on physical circumcision as though it accomplishes something. Here is the truth: we are the real circumcision -- those of us who worship by the Spirit of God and who place all our boasting in Christ Jesus, not in anything the flesh has achieved or can achieve. We put zero confidence in external religious performance. Christ is the whole ground. He is everything.

"Rejoice in the Lord -- It Is a Safeguard"

The opening of chapter 3 appears at first to be a simple transitional instruction -- 'rejoice in the Lord!' But the addition 'it is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you' signals something more deliberate. Paul is about to repeat something he has said before because repetition of the truth is not tedious redundancy -- it is protective. In the face of the threat about to be named, the community that is deeply formed by the habit of rejoicing in the Lord has its mind anchored in the One who is the true source of joy, making it resistant to the substitutes that false teachers offer. The rejoice-in-the-Lord command is not a pious decoration. It is a theological posture that serves as a first line of defense.

Three Names for the False Teachers

Paul's language about the false teachers is the sharpest in the letter -- three consecutive 'watch out for' warnings, each one naming the same group with escalating precision. 'Dogs' -- in the ancient Jewish world, dogs were unclean scavengers. Jewish people sometimes used 'dogs' as a disparaging term for Gentiles. Paul reverses the epithet with devastating irony: the Judaizers, who pride themselves on their covenant identity, are themselves the dogs -- the unclean, the spiritually scavenging, the ones on the outside of the gospel's grace. 'Evildoers' (kakous ergatas -- evil workers) describes those whose work is not the building up of the gospel but its corruption. 'Mutilators of the flesh' -- the Judaizers prided themselves on circumcision. Paul reframes circumcision performed for the wrong reason as mutilation (katatomē -- cutting) rather than circumcision (peritomē -- the covenant cutting). The wordplay is deliberate and cutting: you are not circumcised -- you are mutilated.

"It Is We Who Are the Circumcision"

Paul's positive declaration is equally pointed: 'For it is we who are the circumcision, we who serve God by his Spirit, who boast in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh.' The true circumcision -- the covenant cutting that genuinely marks God's people -- is not performed by a knife on the body. It is the circumcision of the heart, performed by the Spirit (Deuteronomy 30:6, Romans 2:29). The genuine covenant community is identified by three characteristics: 'who serve God by his Spirit' -- the service (latreuō -- the word for priestly worship) is by the Spirit, not by external religious performance. 'Who boast in Christ Jesus' -- the community's ground of confidence is Christ Jesus alone. Not circumcision, not Torah observance, not ethnic identity. 'Who put no confidence in the flesh' -- zero confidence in any human-based religious qualification as the ground of one's standing before God.

Key Observations

- **Rejoicing in the Lord is a safeguard** -- the community whose center of gravity is Christ is more resistant to teaching that relocates that center.
- **The three names for the false teachers (dogs, evildoers, mutilators) are ironic reversals** -- Paul applies to the Judaizers the very labels they used to describe Gentile outsiders.

- **Circumcision of the heart by the Spirit -- not the body by the knife** -- is the true covenant mark.
- **The three marks of the true circumcision (Spirit-worship, boasting in Christ, no confidence in the flesh)** describe the community whose identity and standing rest entirely on what God has done in Christ.

Philippians 3:4-11 -- All Loss for the Surpassing Worth of Knowing Christ

though I myself have reasons for such confidence. If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless. But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ -- the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. I want to know Christ -- yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.

IN SIMPLE AMERICAN ENGLISH

If anyone wants to talk about confidence in the flesh -- in religious credentials and heritage -- I can compete with the best of them. Circumcised the eighth day, as the law prescribed. Born into the nation of Israel. Tribe of Benjamin -- one of the most distinguished tribal lineages. A Hebrew through and through, not some culturally diluted version. In terms of Torah commitment, a Pharisee -- the most serious of the serious. In terms of zeal, I persecuted the church. In terms of the righteousness the law demands, I was blameless by any external measure. All of that was real. And here is what I now count all of it: loss. Not just inadequate -- loss. Because knowing Christ Jesus as my Lord surpasses all of it so completely that everything else is garbage by comparison. I threw it all away so I could have Christ -- so I could be found in Him, not with a righteousness I built myself through law-keeping, but the righteousness that comes from God, received through faith in Christ. And what I want most of all is to know Christ -- to know the power of His resurrection, to participate in His sufferings, to be conformed to His death -- so that somehow I might attain to the resurrection from the dead.

Paul's Credentials -- the Most Impressive Resume in the Room

Paul's list of religious credentials in verses 4-6 is a genuine enumeration of the most impressive possible first-century Jewish religious pedigree -- offered for the specific purpose of establishing that when Paul counts all of it as loss, he is not dismissing something he never had or never valued. He knows what he is giving up. The credentials fall into two categories. Those he was born into: circumcised on the eighth day (not a proselyte or Ishmaelite, but a full covenant member by birth); of the people of Israel (a full member of the covenant nation); of the tribe of Benjamin (the most prestigious tribal identity -- the tribe of Israel's first king, whose territory included Jerusalem); a Hebrew of Hebrews (maintaining the ancestral language and customs in their most concentrated form). Those he achieved: a Pharisee (the most rigorous law-observance movement in first-century Judaism); as for zeal, persecuting the church (the violence of his persecution was the measure of the sincerity of his commitment); as for righteousness based on the law, faultless (by the external standard of Mosaic law observance, his record was without reproach).

"Whatever Were Gains to Me I Now Consider Loss for the Sake of Christ"

The pivot in verse 7 is one of the most dramatic moments in all of Paul's autobiographical writing. Everything in the preceding list was genuine gain by every available human standard. Paul does not deny that. He counts them as losses -- not because they were worthless in themselves, but because they occupied the place that belongs to Christ alone. The accounting language is deliberate (*logizomai* -- to reckon, to calculate, to count). This is not an emotional reaction. It is a considered, rational, fully informed assessment. Paul has looked at both sides of the ledger -- what he had in his religious achievements, and what he has in Christ -- and he has done the calculation. The conclusion is not even close. Everything in the gains column becomes loss when Christ is placed on the other side of the scale.

"The Surpassing Worth of Knowing Christ Jesus My Lord"

Verse 8 deepens the revaluation: 'What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.' The word for surpassing worth (*hyperechon* -- the exceeding value, the superiority that surpasses all comparison) describes something that so far exceeds everything else in value that the comparison is almost meaningless. It is not merely that knowing Christ is worth more than Paul's religious credentials. It is that knowing Christ makes the category of comparison absurd -- like asking whether the sun is worth more than a candle. And the knowing Paul describes is not merely intellectual or propositional. It is the comprehensive, personal, experiential, intimate knowing of a Person -- the knowing that is reserved for the deepest human relationships and that, applied to the knowledge of God, produces a life-reorganizing, identity-redefining, everything-else-relativizing encounter with the living Christ. The NIV's 'garbage' translates the Greek word *skybala* -- one of the bluntest words available: dung, refuse, the waste product you throw away without a second glance.

"Not Having a Righteousness of My Own -- But That Which Is Through Faith in Christ"

The goal of the relinquishment is stated with crystalline clarity: 'that I may gain Christ and be found in him.' The contrast between the two righteousnesses is the theological heart of the passage. 'Not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law' -- this is the righteousness Paul once possessed by his own reckoning: blameless, Pharisee, zealous, Hebrew of Hebrews. It was real. It was impressive. And it was entirely insufficient, because it was his own -- constructed by his effort, maintained by his discipline, graded by a standard that, honestly measured, no fallen human being can fully satisfy. 'But that which is through faith in Christ -- the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith' -- this righteousness is not his own. It comes from God. It is grounded in the perfect obedience, the substitutionary death, and the vindicating resurrection of the Son of God. This righteousness does not depend on Paul's performance. It depends on Christ's. And Christ's performance is flawless.

"I Want to Know Christ -- the Power of His Resurrection and Participation in His Sufferings"

Verse 10 is one of the most profound and most demanding statements of Christian aspiration in all of Paul's letters: 'I want to know Christ -- yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.' The order is notable. Paul does not say: I want to know Christ's resurrection power and then, if necessary, His sufferings. He names both together. The sufferings come before the resurrection glory -- as they did for Christ Himself. 'The power of his resurrection' -- the same power that raised Christ from the dead is available to the believer in the present, not merely as a future hope but as a present reality. 'Participation in his sufferings' (koinonia) -- the fellowship of His sufferings is the sharing in the experience of Christ through the suffering that comes from faithful gospel proclamation. 'Becoming like him in his death' -- the conformity to Christ's death is the progressive, ongoing process by which the pattern of Christ's self-giving death is reproduced in the life of the believer. And the 'somehow' (ei pos) of 'attaining to the resurrection' is remarkable in its honesty -- the humility of a man who knows that only grace, not merit, brings a person through to the final resurrection.

Key Observations

- **Paul's credentials are genuine and comprehensive** -- he knows exactly what he is relinquishing, making the revaluation all the more radical.
- **The accounting language (logizomai -- to count/reckon) establishes that the revaluation is rational and considered**, not emotional.
- **The surpassing worth (hyperechon) of knowing Christ makes the comparison with religious credentials almost meaningless** -- the sun and the candle.
- **Skybala (garbage/dung) is the bluntest word Paul could have chosen** -- the thing you throw away without a second glance.
- **The two righteousnesses stand in absolute contrast** -- one constructed by human effort; the other given by God, received through faith, grounded in Christ's perfect performance.

- **The threefold experiential aspiration (resurrection power, fellowship of suffering, conformity to His death)** describes a comprehensive, costly, progressive, and hope-filled Christ-knowing.

Philippians 3:12-16 -- The Forward Press: Forgetting What Is Behind, Straining Toward What Is Ahead

Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. All of us, then, who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. Only let us live up to what we have already attained.

IN SIMPLE AMERICAN ENGLISH

I have not arrived. I have not obtained everything I just described. I have not laid hold of it fully yet. But I press on -- I keep pursuing it -- because Christ Jesus has already taken hold of me and has an intention and destination for me that I am still pressing toward. Here is the one thing I do: I forget what is behind me and I reach hard for what is ahead of me. I press on toward the goal to win the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Those of us who are genuinely mature will see things this way -- understanding that maturity means still-pressing, not already-arrived. If anyone sees it differently, God will make it clear. But at minimum, let us all live up to what we have already received.

"Not That I Have Already Obtained All This -- or Have Already Arrived"

The athletic metaphor of verses 12-14 opens with a disclaimer that is as important as anything Paul says in the chapter. After the extraordinary testimony of verses 4-11, Paul immediately and emphatically says: I have not arrived. This is not false modesty. It is genuine theological honesty -- and it serves a specific pastoral purpose. The Philippian community may contain people who believe that spiritual maturity means a settled, arrived-at state -- a plateau of completion where the striving is over and the achievement is sufficient. Paul refuses that claim for himself with unusual directness. He uses the same verb (*katalambano* -- to take hold of, to seize, to apprehend) twice in verse 12 -- once of what Christ has done to him (Christ Jesus took hold of me) and once

of what Paul has not yet done for himself (I have not yet taken hold of it). If Paul has not arrived, no one has. And no one should be living as though they have.

"But One Thing I Do"

Verse 13 contains what is perhaps the most concentrated statement of focused intentionality in all of Paul's correspondence: 'But one thing I do.' Not many things, competing for priority. One thing. This is the radical simplification of the spiritual life to its essential movement -- the singular forward press toward Christ in all His fullness. The one thing has two complementary movements. 'Forgetting what is behind' -- the deliberate, active, ongoing refusal to allow the past to function as either a source of pride or a source of paralyzing regret. The achievements of the past are rubbish -- counted loss, thrown away. The failures of the past are also behind -- the grace that found Paul in his persecuting has made him a new man. Both must be forgotten -- not in the sense of amnesia, but in the sense of not allowing either to function as the governing reality of the present moment. 'Straining toward what is ahead' (epekteinomenos -- to stretch out toward, to extend oneself fully) is the image of the runner at full sprint, body extended, every muscle engaged, leaning so far into the finish line that the whole posture expresses the totality of the effort.

Maturity and the Shared Pursuit

Verse 15 makes a claim that at first appears paradoxical: 'All of us who are mature should take such a view of things.' What view? The view of someone who has not yet arrived, who is still pressing, who is forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead. Maturity is not the complacent arrival that some in the community may be claiming. Maturity is the sober, honest, forward-pressing self-assessment of someone who knows they are still on the way. The mature believer is precisely the one who knows that they have not yet obtained. The person who claims to have obtained has revealed, by that claim, that they do not yet understand what it is they are pressing toward -- because Christlikeness cannot be attained and then possessed as a completed achievement. Christ Himself is inexhaustible, and the knowledge of Him always opens onto more of Himself that remains to be known.

Key Observations

- **'Not that I have already arrived' is Paul's most direct repudiation of spiritual perfectionism** -- the man with the most extraordinary testimony has not yet arrived.
- **Christ taking hold of Paul (katalambano) is the prior and enabling reality** -- Paul's pressing is his response to being apprehended, not his effort to apprehend.
- **'Forgetting what is behind' means neither pride in past achievements nor paralysis from past failures** -- both are left behind in the grace that makes every yesterday the fuel for today's pressing.
- **'Straining toward what is ahead' is the most physically vivid word in the passage** -- full-body, total-effort, all-in pursuit.

- **Maturity is defined as the posture of ongoing pursuit, not the complacency of claimed arrival.**
- **The prize is the heavenward call of God in Christ Jesus** -- not a reward earned by striving but the destination of the grace that initiated the journey.

Philippians 3:17-21 -- Enemies of the Cross and Citizens of Heaven

Join together in following my example, brothers and sisters, and just as you have us as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as we do. For, as I have often told you before and now tell you again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.

IN SIMPLE AMERICAN ENGLISH

Follow my example, brothers and sisters -- and keep your eyes on those whose lives look like mine. Because I am telling you again, and I am telling you with tears: many people in our world are living as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destination is destruction. Their real god is their appetite. The things they are proud of are actually things they should be ashamed of. Their entire mental and emotional orientation is fixed on earthly things. That is not us. Our citizenship -- our real home, our true commonwealth, where our deepest loyalty and identity belongs -- is in heaven. And from there we are eagerly waiting for a Savior: the Lord Jesus Christ. When He comes, He will use His power -- the same power by which He brings everything under His control -- to transform our lowly, mortal bodies into bodies like His glorious resurrection body.

"Enemies of the Cross of Christ" -- With Tears

The description of the enemies of the cross is prefaced by a phrase that carries enormous emotional weight: 'even with tears.' Paul is weeping as he writes this. These are not people he can dismiss with cold theological condemnation. Their characteristics form a tragic portrait. 'Their destiny is destruction' (apoleia -- ruin, final loss) -- this is Paul's sober assessment of the trajectory their lives are on. 'Their god is their stomach' -- the belly (koilia) as god describes the life organized around appetite -- the insatiable drive to satisfy physical desires, to arrange life around the satisfaction of the self's cravings. 'Their glory is in their shame' -- what they boast in is precisely the things they should be ashamed of. Spiritual inversion at its most complete: the value system has become so corrupted that they celebrate what ought to produce repentance. 'Their mind

is set on earthly things' -- the governing orientation of their thinking and desiring is anchored in the categories and the values of this present age, this passing order, this visible and temporary arrangement of things.

"But Our Citizenship Is in Heaven"

The contrast Paul now draws is one of the most powerful in the letter -- and one of the most specifically calibrated to the Philippian context. 'But our citizenship is in heaven.' The word (*politeuma* -- commonwealth, colony, citizen-body) is the civic word for the body of citizens who share a common identity, common laws, and a common homeland. For the Philippians -- proud Roman colonists who understood deeply what it meant to live in a colony of Rome, to organize life around Roman law and Roman identity while living far from the motherland -- this language would have landed with extraordinary force. The Philippian colony existed to express the values and the identity of Rome in Macedonia. Paul is saying: you are a different kind of colony. Your commonwealth, your citizen-body, your true homeland is not Rome -- it is heaven. You are a colony of heaven planted in Philippi, called to express the values and the identity of heaven in the middle of a proudly Roman city. This reframing is not escapism. It is the reordering of the community's fundamental identity.

"Who Will Transform Our Lowly Bodies"

The return of the Savior brings with it the transformation of the body -- the final, physical, comprehensive redemption of the whole person. 'He will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.' The word for transform (*metaschematizō* -- to change the form, to transfigure) describes a comprehensive change of the physical form -- not the abandonment of the body but its glorification. The lowly body (the body in its present state of weakness, decay, limitation, suffering, and mortality) will be conformed to the glorious body of the risen Christ. This is accomplished 'by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control' -- the same power that has been described throughout the letter, the power that raised Christ from the dead. The same power will accomplish the final transformation that completes what the cross began.

Key Observations

- **The call to imitation is communal** -- the Philippians are to keep their eyes on those who are actually living the pattern, not merely describing it.
- **The tears before the description of the enemies of the cross reveal pastoral grief**, not cold theological condemnation.
- **The four characteristics of the enemies (destruction-bound, belly-god, glory-in-shame, earthly-minded)** form a tragic portrait of a life organized around the wrong things.
- **'Our citizenship is in heaven' is specifically calibrated to Philippi as a Roman colony** -- you are a different kind of colony, expressing the values of a different motherland.

- **The eager awaiting of the Savior is the forward orientation of the heaven-citizenship** -- looking for the One coming from the homeland to complete the rescue.
 - **The transformation of the body is accomplished by the power of the returning Lord**, not achieved by the believer's striving -- the final act of grace completing what the first act of grace began.
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What This Chapter Means for Us Today

1. Identify What You Are Trusting In Besides Christ -- and Count It Loss

The most practically demanding invitation of Philippians 3 is the one Paul models in verses 4-8. Everyone who reads this chapter has their own version of Paul's list -- the religious performance, the theological knowledge, the ministry track record, the moral achievement, the spiritual experience, the family heritage, the denominational identity that has quietly accumulated alongside Christ as a co-ground of confidence before God. Paul does not tell you that these things are bad. He tells you to count them loss. To hold them with open hands. To refuse to allow any of them to function as the basis of your standing before God. Only the righteousness that comes from God, received through faith in Christ -- not your own righteousness at all -- can actually bear the weight of your eternal standing. Everything else is rubbish in that role.

2. Live in the Forward Press -- Refuse Both Pride and Paralysis

The 'one thing' of verse 13 -- forgetting what is behind and pressing toward what is ahead -- is the posture that Paul models and recommends for everyone who would follow his example. The twin dangers that the one thing guards against are both forms of being stuck: the pride that looks back at past achievements and treats them as sufficient, and the paralysis that looks back at past failures and treats them as definitive. Grace addresses both. The achievements are counted loss -- not the basis of the present confidence. The failures are forgiven and forgotten -- not the definition of the present identity. Both are behind. The ahead is Christ. The posture is the press.

3. Take Your Heavenly Citizenship More Seriously Than Your Earthly One

'Our citizenship is in heaven' is not a platitude. It is an identity statement with comprehensive practical implications. The believer whose deepest loyalty, whose governing values, whose organizing principles, and whose ultimate allegiance belong to the commonwealth of heaven will necessarily live differently from the person whose citizenship is primarily earthly. Different relationship to money (it is the economy of a

passing order). Different relationship to political power (Caesar is not Lord). Different relationship to cultural acceptance (the values of the surrounding culture are not the community's constitution). Different relationship to suffering (the homeland is coming, and its arrival will transform even the lowly body). Take the heavenly citizenship seriously enough to let it actually govern how you live.

4. Keep Running -- Maturity Means Ongoing Pursuit, Not Achieved Arrival

The pastoral wisdom of verse 15 -- 'all of us who are mature should take this view' -- is a standing invitation to refuse the complacency of the person who believes they have arrived. The most spiritually advanced person in any community is the one who knows most clearly how much further there is to go. The deepest knowledge of Christ always opens onto more of Christ that remains to be known. The greatest love always finds more to love in the inexhaustible Person of the One who is love. The mature community is not the satisfied community. It is the pressing, straining, forgetting-what-is-behind, reaching-toward-what-is-ahead community -- running together, keeping their eyes on the models who live this way, eagerly awaiting the Savior who will complete what they are pressing toward.

5. Be Moved by the Losses -- and Grieve With Tears for Those on the Wrong Path

Paul's tears in verse 18 are a model of mature pastoral engagement with those who are walking toward destruction. The enemies of the cross are not objects of contempt for Paul. They are objects of grief -- people for whom the cross would have been sufficient, who have chosen the belly-god and the earthly mind and the glory-in-shame. The community that has genuinely pressed toward the prize of the upward call will not be able to watch people walk away from the cross without the tears that compassion produces. Not the bitter tears of disappointment -- the warm tears of genuine love for people who do not know what they are losing.

How This Chapter Relates to Today

Philippians 3 speaks with almost uncanny precision into some of the specific spiritual pathologies of the contemporary church. The Judaizing error -- the addition of human religious performance to the gospel as the ground of standing before God -- has not disappeared. It has simply changed its specific content. The contemporary versions include: the moralism that makes behavioral compliance the evidence and ground of divine acceptance; the spiritual-experience culture that makes the intensity of felt divine encounters the measure of authentic faith; the theological correctness culture that makes the accuracy of doctrinal positions the badge of spiritual authenticity; and the ministry achievement culture that measures spiritual significance by the size of one's platform or the impressiveness of one's organization. All of these are versions of the

Philippian error -- the quiet addition of human qualifications alongside Christ as the ground of confidence.

And Paul's answer to all of them is the same: count it loss. Not because the things themselves are necessarily evil -- Paul's credentials were real and impressive. But because the moment they become the ground of confidence before God, they occupy a place that belongs to Christ alone. And Christ, placed on the other side of the scale, makes the comparison absurd. Rubbish. The forward-press culture of verses 12-14 is equally countercultural in a church environment that tends toward either the complacency of the arrived or the anxiety of the perpetually insecure. Paul offers a third way: the confident, joyful, fully engaged, non-arrived forward press of someone who knows both where they are coming from (the grace of the One who took hold of them) and where they are going (the prize of the upward call in Christ Jesus). Not anxious. Not complacent. Pressing.

Closing Prayer

Heavenly Father, we have walked through Philippians chapter 3 and we are holding two things simultaneously -- the open hands that have let go of everything we were trusting in besides Christ, and the reaching hands of the forward press that is straining toward everything we have not yet fully possessed in Him.

Lord, we confess the lists we have been keeping. The credentials we have been quietly trusting. The religious performance, the theological knowledge, the ministry record, the moral achievement -- the things we have allowed to share the ground of confidence with Christ. We see them now in the light of the surpassing worth of knowing Him, and we want to count them what they actually are in that role: loss. Rubbish. The thing to be thrown away so that the hands can be open to receive the righteousness that comes from God through faith in Christ.

Give us the one thing. The forward press. The forgetting of what is behind -- both the achievements we have been proud of and the failures we have been paralyzed by. Give us the reaching, straining, full-body extension toward what is ahead -- toward knowing Christ more fully, toward the power of His resurrection breaking into the places of our deepest weakness, toward the fellowship of His sufferings that conforms us to His death, toward the resurrection from the dead that Your power will accomplish when the Savior comes from heaven.

Let our citizenship be genuinely, not merely theoretically, in heaven. Let us actually be what we claim to be -- a colony of heaven in the midst of an earthly city. And give us Paul's tears. Let us grieve with genuine compassion for those who are on the path that leads to destruction -- the belly-god worshipers, the glory-in-shame livers, the earthly-minded. Let us weep for them -- and let the weeping move us toward the kind of faithful, joyful, visible pressing that might, by the grace of God, make the prize visible enough that they too want to run toward it. To the One who took hold of us before we could take hold of Him -- be all glory, forever and ever. Amen.