

EXEGESIS: PHILIPPIAN 3:17-4:1

A Paper

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Introduction

Paul's letter to the Philippians promoted Christian living in a vibrant and anticipatory manner. Much of the letter revolved around emotive themes such as joy, praise, and thankfulness. Paul displayed his great affection for the Philippian church throughout the letter demonstrating his gratitude for their contributions to his ministry as well as his concern for their spiritual welfare. In light of the uplifting tone of this brief epistle, one may notice that though Paul's situation seemed to be bleak, his optimistic resolve laid comfortably elsewhere. In each chapter, Paul unveiled the Christological background by which he viewed all of life. Awareness of the final resurrection in Jesus Christ sustained him during his times of hardship on earth; this truth caused him to view death with a high heart and an expectant mindset due to what he knew beyond any doubt would occur the moment his earthly life ceased. Paul's intensified reliance upon his understanding of the person and work of Christ and its implications for the present life as well as the afterlife, provided inspiration for Christians to live holy lives in the face of blessing and tribulation.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze and exegete Philippians 3:17-4:1 in order to demonstrate that Paul's main point in this text was for believers to live as citizens of heaven while they were residents on earth. To accomplish this goal the paper will display an in-depth exegesis of the selected passage. The exegesis will include an overview of linguistic and interpretative issues of the text. In addition, the conclusion will evaluate the results from the exegesis in order to support the main purpose of the paper coupled with contemporary applications.

Exegesis

In Philippians 3:17-4:1 Paul specifically referred to the delight the church at Philippi shared in being a Roman colony in an area where they were set apart. In fact, he drew upon their territorial pride in an attempt to issue a warning and an exhortation to them so that their mindset may be grounded upon Christ and the benefits of salvation rather than Rome and the benefits of colonization.

In Phil 3:17, Paul began this new paragraph calling for the attention of the ἀδελφοί, the brothers. He used the word in the vocative case in order to signify that the next few statements necessitated their observation. Paul proceeded to introduce his desire for them to become imitators of him. In v. 17 two main issues need to be addressed. First, scholars have often debated the translation of *συμμιμηταί μου*. Because of the compounded nature of *συμμιμηταί*, scholars have placed a great amount of emphasis upon the prepositional prefix *συν* (with) in their translations. The noun *συμμιμηταί* cannot be identified anywhere else in Greek literature. Therefore, the initial translation of this noun posed some ambiguity.¹ However, assistance from the syntactical understanding of *μου* shed light upon finding the most comprehensive translation of *συμμιμηταί*. As an objective genitive, *μου* ensured that Paul intended himself to be the object of their imitating. Therefore, translating *συμμιμηταί μου* as “join with me in imitating” does not seem to be plausible. This translation would of course reference Christ as the object of their imitation which does not fit into the context of the second half of this verse nor the previous affirmations of Timothy and Epaphroditus (Phil 2:19-

¹Peter T. O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary, eds. I. Howard Marshall and W. Ward Gasque (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1991), 445.

30). Thus, a clear understanding of *συμμιμηταί μου* in relation to the prefix *συν* ought to be translated as a statement which upholds the unity factor which Paul transitions towards in Phil 4. Also, placing Paul as the object of joint imitation among Christian brethren in Philippians would coincide with previous exhortations mentioned in 1 Corinthians 4:16 and 11:1. Ultimately, Paul desired for the Philippian church to “join in one accord” or “join in with others” in the imitation of his Christ-like lifestyle.²

The second part of v. 17 appeared to be a re-statement of Paul’s command for them to be united in their effort to imitate him. He chose *σκοπεῖτε* which meant “to pay attention to, look out for, or notice” in order to sympathize with the Philippians that it may be difficult for them to imitate someone who was going to be absent from their community.³ This line of thought corresponded to Paul’s affirmation of their exemplary Christian living in and out of his presence. Therefore, the *τύπον* (pattern, example) Paul demonstrated was not limited to him alone, but was applicable to all who chose to imitate his lifestyle which implicitly meant in Pauline theology as his direct imitation of Christ.⁴

In Phil 3:18, Paul further supported his previous exhortation to live in accordance with the example he set in Christ by admitting that not all professing Christians lived as sacrificial-givers and sufferers for the sake of gospel. Instead, Paul labeled these people as *τοὺς ἐχθροὺς τοῦ σταυροῦ τοῦ Χριστοῦ* (the enemies of the cross

² Moises Silva, *Philippians*, 2nd ed. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 188.

³ Walter Bauer, Frederick W. Danker, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2000), 6715, CD-ROM.

⁴ Gerald F. Hawthorne, *The Word Biblical Commentary*, eds. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker, *Philippians* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1983), 160.

of Christ). The conjunction *γαρ* near the beginning of v. 18 qualified the reason he communicated in pleading with the Philippian church to be careful of how they lived. A parallel seemed to be existent in these two verses because of the two references of *περιπατέω* (to conduct one's life, comport oneself, behave, live).⁵ Within v. 18, Paul presented the opponents of the cross of Christ in a manner that contrasted them from the obvious pattern that he already established. Previously in v. 17 the Apostle Paul exhorted believers to live or walk (*περιπατοῦντας*) according to his example and the example of others. Subsequently, in v. 18 he affectionately warned the Philippian church members that there also existed people who lived (*περιπατοῦσιν*) totally opposite of their holy conduct.

Most commentators attributed these opponents to one of either two categories: Judaizers and Antinomians (libertines). Though this passage does not deliver sufficient evidence capable of leaning heavily in either direction, one may assume that these opponents were undeniably professing believers. In light of Paul's emotive manner of his constant mentioning of these "enemies of the cross of Christ", it is doubtful that only unbelievers would have provoked him to weeping (*κλαίων*) over their misrepresentation of the gospel.⁶ In addition, the referencing of the "cross of Christ" as well as the parallel usage of *περιπατέω* directed a coordinating link between the Philippian church and the possible influence the "enemies" may have had on them due in part probably to the existence of personal relationships between these two groups.

In Phil 3:19, Paul implicitly continued his exhortation for the Philippians to

⁵BDAG, 5855.

⁶O'Brien, *New International Greek Testament Commentary*, 452.

become imitators together of him as he further developed the characteristics of the false model of Christian lifestyle defined by those he identified as “enemies of the cross of Christ.” In v. 18, τοὺς ἐχθροὺς functioned as the head noun, and in v. 19 all which followed acted in apposition to the opponents. Therefore, Paul listed four different descriptions of “enemies of the cross of Christ.”

First, the phrase ὧν τὸ τέλος ἀπώλεια (whose end is destruction) returned Paul’s thought back to an eschatological theme. The word τὸ τέλος which meant end or goal⁷ was more than likely a wordplay referencing his previous discourse concerning the “the prize and the upward call of God in Christ” in Phil 3:14. Here, he contrasted the destiny of those who did and did not follow the example he gave to them in Christ.⁸

Second, the next two credentials of the opponents modified a single relative pronoun ὧν. The first part, ὧν ὁ θεὸς ἡ κοιλία, has encountered much debate over whether or not Paul was referring to food laws with regard to Jewish asceticism. In the same respect, concerning the second part, ἡ δόξα ἐν τῇ αἰσχύνῃ αὐτῶν, scholars have also argued over whether or not τῇ αἰσχύνῃ (shame) pointed towards an allusion to Jewish glorying in circumcision. In addition, commentators offered valid arguments for these two traits to be understood as licentiousness with respect to Antinomianism as the identity of the “τοὺς ἐχθροὺς”. However, there does not appear to be enough detail in Paul’s revelation to make such clear cut decisions based upon linguistic evidence.⁹ His

⁷BDAG, 7310.

⁸Gordon D. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, ed. Gordon D. Fee (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1995), 370.

⁹Silva, *Baker Exegetical Commentary*, 181.

usage of ὁ θεὸς and ἡ δόξα reflected the false perception of whoever these opponents were concerning their religious activity which inevitably would lead to ἀπώλεια (destruction), namely hell.

Finally, Paul encompassed all three of these traits within a particular mindset. The concluding description, οἱ τὰ ἐπίγεια φρονοῦντες (lit. their mindset is earthly), perhaps harkened back to Paul's previous mentioning in Phil 3:3 of putting "no confidence in the flesh".¹⁰ The participle τὰ φρονοῦντες syntactically functioned as the substantive subject of the phrase, thus identifying the overlying mentality of the unnamed "enemies" in v. 18. This final point set the stage for the stark contrast he made in v. 20 in relation to the orientation believers ought to configure their own mindsets towards.

In Phil 3:20, Paul transitioned to a much more exuberant and joyful tone. Once again, he used γὰρ to introduce and connect a new thought with the continuing theme of Christian living in Phil 3:17-4:1. The key concept in this verse was Paul's exclamation of heavenly citizenship. The Greek phrase, ἡμῶν γὰρ τὸ πολίτευμα ἐν οὐρανοῖς ὑπάρχει (For our commonwealth exists in heaven), probably dealt a humbling blow to the Philippian pride concerning their rights and privileges as a Roman colony. Paul's word choice for "commonwealth, state, or citizenship"¹¹ (τὸ πολίτευμα) was not found anywhere else in the N. T. Therefore, Paul operatively employed this concept in order to accomplish two goals. First, this concept set in obvious juxtaposition to the earthly-

¹⁰Karl Barth, *Epistle to the Philippians*, 40th anniversary ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 113.

¹¹BDAG, 6034.

mindedness of the opponents in v. 19.¹² Everything Paul mentioned in vs. 18-19 duly noted the worldly mindset which dominated the “enemies of the cross.” However, in v. 20 Paul asserted the alien mentality which was the driving force behind the thoughts and actions of Christians who were a part of the colony of heaven. Second, Paul’s word choice of τὸ πολίτευμα allowed the Philippian church to make a very personal application of this principle in light of their political and economical status.¹³

Throughout vs. 20-21, Paul continued to relate and define what a heavenly-mindset entailed as opposed to the “destruction” that awaited the ones who dwelt upon earthly things in v. 19. The prepositional phrase ἐξ οὗ (from which) modified τὸ πολίτευμα declaring the state in which a believer must embody in order to properly inherit the eschatological results of salvation. Therefore, mindful of their eternal commonwealth, the Philippians as well as all believers were expectantly awaiting the second coming of Christ.

In v. 21, Paul turned to an attitude of hopefulness as he explained what kinds of rights and privileges the citizens of heaven would enjoy at the resurrection. The relative pronoun ὅς (who) modified κύριον Ἰησοῦν Χριστόν (Lord, Jesus Christ) in v. 20. Undoubtedly, the object of Paul’s hope and joy as a citizen of heaven found its meaning in knowing Jesus Christ.¹⁴ This point followed from his previous affirmations in Phil 1:21-24, 2:5-10, and 3:7-14. This verse along with the entire letter to the Philippians

¹²Jac. J. Muller, *The Epistle of Paul to the Philippians*, 2nd ed. The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1984), 133.

¹³Markus Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, ed. Henry Chadwick, *Black's New Testament Commentary* (Peabody: MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998), 233-4.

¹⁴Silva, *Baker Exegetical Commentary*, 185.

exemplified Paul's extensive Christological orientation. His emphasis upon Christ's resurrection power was not dulled by certain frustrations with earthly bodies as signified by the phrase τὸ σῶμα τῆς ταπεινώσεως ἡμῶν (our humiliated/lowly body). Here, τὸ σῶμα functioned as the head noun while τῆς ταπεινώσεως served as an attributive genitive. Therefore, the genitive case offered a more distinct and precise adjectival syntactical function which placed greater emphasis upon the humiliated nature of the body.¹⁵ Here, Paul appeared to be drawing a connection back to the humbled earthly existence that even Christ experienced in Phil 2:7-8.

The Apostle Paul further defined the nature of the resurrection and the transformation of the believers' bodies in the remaining phrases of v. 21. However, the main point of the last half of this verse was not the resurrection, but instead the power and authority of Christ. The future verb μετασχηματίσει (to change the form of something)¹⁶ denoted the mode in which Christ will completely change the resurrection body into the same σύμμορφον (having a similar form, nature)¹⁷ as the glorified body of the risen Lord himself. Therefore, the prepositional phrase, κατὰ τὴν ἐνέργειαν (according to the power), modified the future verb μετασχηματίσει which qualified the enablement of Christ's transforming ability. Moreover, the operative power that Christ will exert in the alteration of "lowly bodies" is the same power that he possesses "to subject all things to himself" (ὑποτάξει αὐτῷ τὰ πάντα). With this final phrase of

¹⁵Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 87.

¹⁶BDAG, 4859.

¹⁷Ibid., 6961.

assurance in the resurrection, Paul delivered a firm final attack against any earthly pride which is totally abolished under the eschatological power and authority of Christ. His power is capable not just to resurrect and to transform the dead, but also to bring all of creation into subjection to his rule and dominion.¹⁸

A new chapter begins where this flow of thought ends. In Phil 4:1, Paul reiterated his initial command in v. 17. In fact, both 3:17 and 4:1 include ἀδελφοί in the vocative case as well as second person plural imperatives. Possibly, the grammatical parallels of 3:17 and 4:1 functioned as an inclusio to the contents of 3:18-21. If so, then the compactness of Paul's thought process is further solidified, and the meanings behind his imperatival commands in 3:17 and 4:1 are better understood. The adverb οὕτως (in this manner, thus, so) connected στήκετε ἐν κυρίῳ (stand firm in the Lord) to the previous passage, namely 3:17-21. Paul characterized the manner in which the "brothers" were "to stand firm" by exhorting them to live and set their minds on heaven; their commonwealth entailed the hope and joy of the future resurrection which Christ purchased and bestowed upon them as legal citizens of his kingdom.¹⁹

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is to analyze and exegete Phil 3:17-4:1 in order to propose that Paul's main point of this passage is to exhort Christians to live mindful of their citizenship in heaven rather than dwelling upon their residence on earth. The climax of this passage is Phil 3:20. Paul's main issue in this text served to contrast two

¹⁸Silva, *Baker Exegetical Commentary*, 185.

¹⁹O'Brien, *New International Greek Testament Commentary*, 475-6.

completely different worldviews. The person who is steered by the earthly issues and concerns develops his own man-made religion. Their god is not the God of the Bible, their glory is not in the cross of Christ (Galatians 6:14), and their eternal destination is not in heaven, the fatherland of all believers. Instead, the Christian who is watchful to imitate Christ by following his example and the lifestyles which others have patterned in his likeness will enjoy the final resurrection of their lowly bodies and eternal joy in heaven (Romans 8:15:23; Psalms 16:11). According to Paul's theology in this passage, a heavenly mindset affords the believer the right mentality, attitude, and practical theology in order to rightly live in the imitation of Christ which he has exemplified.

Paul laced the whole epistle to the Philippians with this sojourner mentality which one may notice in texts such as follows: Phil 1:21-24, 28-30; 2:5-10; 3:3-11, 12-16, 17-21; 4:10-13. In addition Paul also referenced the heavenly-Jerusalem in Gal 4:26. Other N. T. writers as well identified believers as citizens of a greater kingdom such as Hebrews 11:13-16 and 1 Peter 2:11. Even Jacob, at the end of his life, told Pharaoh, "The days of the years of my sojourning are 130 years (Genesis 47:9)."

Paul's appeal to live as citizens of heaven ought to be contemporarily applied in three main ways. First, this mindset should cause the Christian to live according to a separate standard of ethics, good works, and success which is indicative of the kingdom of heaven as taught in the Word of God. Second, this mindset enables the believer to endure all trials, tribulation, tragedy, and suffering with an attitude of hope and contentment due to the underlying premise of the final resurrection in Christ and the inherited rights and privileges of salvation bestowed upon believers as adopted children of the living God. Last, this mindset ought to cause the Christian to worship and to

glorify Jesus Christ, the Lord and Savior, because of his great power and authority over all sin, salvation, hell, heaven, and all creation. After all, may every believer be quick and content in answering “no” to John Piper’s main question in his book, *God is the Gospel*: “If you could have heaven, with no sickness, and with all the friends you ever had on earth, and all the food you ever liked, and all the leisure activities you ever enjoyed, and all the natural beauties you ever saw, all the physical pleasures you ever tasted, and no human conflict or any natural disasters, could you be satisfied with heaven, if Christ was not there?”²⁰

²⁰John Piper, *God is the Gospel* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2005), 15.

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APPENDIX 1

AUTHOR'S TRANSLATION OF PHILIPPIANS 3:17-4:1

(17) Brothers, join in imitating me and look out for those who walk in the same way just as the example you have in us. **(18)** For many, of whom I often spoke to you about, and even now I speak weeping, live as enemies of the cross of Christ, **(19)** whose end is destruction, whose god is the stomach and they glory in their shame, the ones whose mindset is earthly. **(20)** But our commonwealth exists in heaven, from which we await the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, **(21)** who will transform our lowly body having the same likeness of his glorious body according to the power that enables him also to subject all things to himself. **(4:1)** Therefore, my beloved and longed-for brothers, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord, beloved.

APPENDIX 2

PREACHING OUTLINE

I. Introduction: Read passage; give Superman illustration to set up dichotomy between living as a citizen of the earth as an alien whose real home is in another world.

II. Message: Phil 3:17-4:1

A. Christians are to be imitators of Christ (v. 17).

1. Christians may use other godly men and women as valid examples of how to imitate Christ.

B. Everyone who is not a citizen of heaven is an enemy of the cross (vs. 18-19).

1. Have compassion for the Lost.
2. Recognize the Lost.
3. There must be a totally different set of values and standards between believers and non-believers.

C. Christians ought to live like they are citizens of heaven (v. 20-21).

1. The object of our affection is the Savior.
2. The final resurrection ought to motivate Christians to live under Paul's motto in Phil 1:21.

D. Christian are to stand firm in the Lord (4:1)

1. The Lord Jesus Christ is the example, the foundation, and the object of the entire Christian life.

