



# PHILIPPIANS 3 AND THE RAPTURE

BY DR. RON J. BIGALKE JR.

**A**ccording to Acts 16:11-40, the Apostle Paul visited Philippi on his second missionary journey. He traveled from the island of Samothrace to Neapolis (modern Kavalla), which was the seaport utilized by the Philippian residents. The city of Philippi was approximately nine miles northwest of the seaport. The city was named in honor of King Philip II of Macedonia (the father of

Alexander the Great). Philippi became a Roman military colony in 42 BC, following the defeat of Brutus and Cassius in battle by the triumvirs (Antony, Lepidus, and Octavian). The citizens benefited from an autonomous government, immunity from taxation, and conduct as if living in Italy.<sup>1</sup> The first convert of the missionaries in Philippi was “a woman named Lydia,” whose heart was opened gra-

**The city of Philippi was approximately nine miles northwest of the seaport. The city was named in honor of King Philip II of Macedonia (the father of Alexander the Great).**

ciously and sovereignly by the Lord “to respond to the things spoken by Paul” (Acts 16:14). The church at Philippi was founded through the faithful ministry of Luke, Paul, Silas, and Timothy (16:1, 10, 12, 19; 20:6).<sup>2</sup>

The Epistle to the Philippians was written during Paul’s first Roman imprisonment. Epaphroditus was sent from the church at Philippi to bring a monetary gift to the Apostle, which occasioned the writing of Philippians as an expanded letter of thanks (Phil 4:10-20; cf. 1:3, 5; 2:25, 30).<sup>3</sup> Epaphroditus became “sick to the point of death” in Rome, which was cause for the Philippians’ expression of concern. Consequently, the Apostle informed the church with regard to Epaphroditus’ return to Philippi (2:25-28). Paul also reported the status of his trial before the Roman imperial court (1:7, 13-17), and even attempted to reconcile a church conflict (4:2). The theme of Philippians is “joy,” which is used 13 times. Christ is also mentioned 38 times, and therefore, “rejoicing in the Lord” is a prominent emphasis. The epistle contains significant revelation concerning Christ’s kenosis (2:7), which means His self-emptying of the prerogatives and powers that were His eternally by virtue of His divine attributes. The passage concerning His humiliation explains that by not asserting His divine prerogatives and powers, the



Lord Jesus took the form of a servant (while never emptying Himself of His divinity) to become true humanity (2:5-11). The epistle may be outlined quite basically as follows: (1) rejoicing in prison (1:1-30); (2) rejoicing in others (2:1-30); (3) rejoicing in the future (3:1-21); and, (4) rejoicing in all things (4:1-23). The focus of this article will be upon section three (“rejoicing in the future”), especially Philippians 3:20-21.

### THE CONTEXT OF PHILIPPIANS 3:20-21

Philippians 3:15-21 focuses upon an attitude of life that is pleasing to God. Paul urged his readers to know the truth of what had been written previously. Moreover, he promised that those who were not living as they ought (i.e. “forgetting what *lies* behind and reaching forward to what *lies* ahead,” 3:13) would have this “different attitude” revealed to them by God. Christians should always live consistently with an understanding

---

**Paul concluded his admonition by exhorting believers to watchfulness (3:17-19) and hopefulness (3:20-21). For a second time (cf. 3:15), Paul exhorted his readers to follow his example. Not only was it necessary to pursue maturity in Christ, but it was also crucial to be watchful because many live “as enemies of the cross of Christ,” whose “end is destruction” (3:18-19).**

of the truth and not postpone a life of maturity. The immature, for instance, were not living maturely; rather, as the result of incomplete understanding of what God has revealed, they were postponing maturity as opposed to living in accord with the truth that they did understand. Therefore, the Apostle urged his readers to pursue maturity in Christ (3:15-16).<sup>4</sup> The life that pleases God must always focus attention upon the Person and work of Jesus Christ, as the believer is transformed into His likeness.

Paul concluded his admonition by exhorting believers to watchfulness (3:17-19) and hopefulness (3:20-21). For a second time (cf. 3:15), Paul exhorted his readers to follow his example. Not only was it necessary to pursue maturity in Christ, but it was also crucial to be watchful because many live “as enemies of the cross of Christ,” whose “end is destruction” (3:18-19). These false teachers are described threefold: (1) their “god is their appetite” (i.e. fleshly and sensual); (2) their “glory is in their shame” (i.e. disgraceful living); and, (3) they “set their minds on earthly things” (i.e. the material and physical as opposed to the eternal and spiritual) (3:19). Therefore, the believer is to be watchful (observant) of those who live according to the standard of Christlikeness and to imitate such behavior, in contrast to those whose lifestyle indicated them as enemies of God (cf. Gal 4:3, 9-11; Col 2:21-22).

The reason to pursue maturity in Christ and to be watchful is related to

the hope of the believer (Phil 3:20-21). Christians do have citizenship on earth, but also have citizenship in heaven (3:20). Maturity in Christ is the goal of the Christian life because heavenly citizenship is eternal, as opposed to the earthly life that is but a vapor (Jas 4:14; cf. Gal 4:26; Heb 11:10). Paul’s exhortation is an obvious contrast to those whose minds are focused upon “earthly things” and whose destiny is destruction. One challenge of the Christian life is learning to live as “strangers and exiles on the earth” (Heb 11:13; cf. 1 Pet 2:11).<sup>5</sup> Consequently, the believer is to “eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ” (Phil 3:20).

### THE COMING OF THE SAVIOR IN PHILIPPIANS 3:20-21

Philippians 3:20 first asserts that the believer’s “citizenship is in heaven.” Regarding the meaning of the Greek (*to politeuma*), *The Expositor’s Greek Testament* is noteworthy. “This world has a characteristic spirit of its own. Worldliness is the common bond of citizenship in it. There is another commonwealth,<sup>6</sup> not of the world (John xviii. 36), which inspires its members with a different tone of life. They ‘seek the things above where Christ sitteth at the right hand of God.’ . . . The stability and security of the *pax Romana* (one of the most favorable influences for Christianity) filled the thought of the time with high conceptions of citizenship and its value. This would specially appeal to the Philippians,” who would have greatly esteemed the right to possess all the

**In this earthly life, the believer's body is humbled by death, disease, persecution, and sin. The body is earthly, perishable, weak, natural, and mortal (1 Cor 15:35-58), so that believers "groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of the body" (Rom 8:23).**



privileges of Italian citizens (i.e. *jus Italicum*)<sup>7</sup> (Acts 16:12, 21).

The believer eagerly waits for the Savior's return from (*ex ou*) heaven. The believer's citizenship is in heaven; therefore, the Christian may "have a claim on the Saviour, just as the Philipians might rightfully look for protection to Rome [as saviour]."<sup>8</sup> The double compound (*apekdechometha*) translated "eagerly wait"<sup>9</sup> indicates anticipation and eagerness for the return of the Lord Jesus Christ as the habitual perspective of the Christian, whose citizenship is in heaven. The normal attitude of the Christian is eager anticipation of the Lord's return (and Paul, of course, included himself in that anticipation). The longing for the coming of the Savior is also an incentive for holy living (cf. Tit 2:13; 1 John 2:28). It is noteworthy that no other events are mentioned that must precede the coming of the Lord.<sup>10</sup> In-

deed, if the rapture of the church were understood to occur at any time other than pre-tribulationally, it would be difficult to have such eager anticipation. For example, if Scripture revealed the rapture of the church as occurring midtribulationally or posttribulationally, then the eager anticipation would be for the commencement of the seven-year tribulation, for then and only then, could the believer "ea-

gerly wait" for the Lord's return. The expectation of the Lord's return as imminent and personal is cause for great joy and hope to the early church and the church throughout the ages.

The Lord Jesus Christ will come from heaven as Savior to "rescue" His saints "from this present evil age" (Gal 1:4) and take His church to His "Father's house" (John 14:2). Coinciding with the Lord's return, the body of the believer's "humble state" will be transformed "into conformity with the body of His glory" (Phil 3:21). The transformation of the believer's body will be into a glorified body just like the Son of God (1 John 3:2). The distinction is between the "the body of our humble state" and "the body of His glory." In this earthly life, the believer's body is humbled by death, disease, persecution, and sin. The body is earthly, perishable, weak, natural, and mortal (1 Cor 15:35-58), so that believ-

---

**The expectation of the Lord's return should produce a purifying hope, as we are citizens of heaven while sojourning on earth (1 John 3:1-3). The transformation will occur "by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself" (Phil 3:21).**

ers "groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of the body" (Rom 8:23). At the Lord's return, the transformation will occur whether by resurrection of the dead or by the rapture of the living (cf. 1 Cor 15:50-58; 1 Thess 4:13-18; 5:9-10). The glorified and resurrected body will be just like the Son of God ("the body of His glory," Phil 3:21), and the believer's sanctification will be ultimate. The expectation of the Lord's return should produce a purifying hope, as we are citizens of heaven while sojourning on earth (1 John 3:1-3). The transformation will occur "by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself" (Phil 3:21). The same power that will ultimately subject all things in the universe to the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ is what accomplishes the transformation.

## CONCLUSION

Philippians 3 concludes with an exhortation to "press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (3:14). The believer will demonstrate this persevering attitude by pursuing maturity in Christ (3:15-16); watching for those who imitate the biblical standard (and follow their example); being aware of those who are "enemies of the cross of Christ" (3:17-19); and "eagerly" waiting for the "Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ" (3:20-21). The heavenly citizenship of the believer parallels Jesus' words in John 14:1-3, and challenges every Christian to live with an eternal perspective. The hope of the Lord's imminent and personal return has sustained the church throughout the present evil age. The expectation of the

Lord's return should stimulate the church to live holy and pure lives "so that when He appears, we may have confidence and not shrink away from Him in shame at His coming" (1 John 2:28). 349

## ENDNOTES

- 1 F.J. Foakes Jackson and Kirsopp Lake, eds., *The Acts of the Apostles*, 5 vols. (Reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979) 4:187-90.
- 2 Although he is not mentioned specifically in Acts, the "we" sections in the narrative are understood as references to Luke, the "beloved physician" (cf. 16:10-17; 20:6—21:18; 27:1—28:16) (cf. Richard Belward Rackham, *The Acts of the Apostles* [London: Methuen & Co., 1901] xv-vii).
- 3 Peter T. O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) 513.
- 4 Although the NASB translates *teleios* as "perfect" (3:15), it would be better rendered as "mature" (NIV).
- 5 John A. Witmer, "The Man with Two Countries," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 133 (October 1976): 338-49.
- 6 The author noted Tertullian's reading as "*municipatus*," and "*conversatio*" in Cyprian and Irenaeus.
- 7 H. A. A. Kennedy, "The Epistle to the Philippians," in *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, 5 vols., ed. W. Robertson Nicoll (reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) 3:462.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 For other usages of the Greek word, see Romans 8:19, 23, 25; 1 Corinthians 1:7; Galatians 5:5; and, Hebrews 9:28.
- 10 The various views regarding the timing of the rapture are *primarily* (sc. there are always exceptions) among those who affirm premillennialism as true, which means amillennialists and postmillennialists would respond to the doctrine of imminency in a manner different than premillennialists since they believe the second coming of Christ is a single event.