

Rethinking Your Future

A Study of Philippians 3:12-16

Characteristic of Completeness: Eternity

Big Idea: Forgetting the past, focus on the next step to the finish.

Related Scriptures: Romans 6:4, 11-13; 8:10-17; 1 Corinthians 9:24-27; Ephesians 2:10; 4:11-13; Colossians 1:28-29; 2 Timothy 4:7-8; Hebrews 11:35

Introduction:

- A. If you like puzzles, you'll like our text this morning because it's puzzling. Some parts of Scripture are harder to understand than others, and this is definitely a hard one for me.

It's Philippians 3:12-16. Let me read it through, and as I do, I invite you to consider ► two questions. What is "it"? And how do we attain "it"? My entire message is build around these two questions, so you might as well start thinking about them now. What is "it"? And how do we attain "it"?

- B. Beginning in ► Verse 12, the Apostle Paul talks like a coach to his football team in the locker room at halftime, saying,

^{NAU} Philippians 3:12 Not that I have already obtained *it* or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. ► 13 Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of *it* yet; but one thing *I do*: forgetting what *lies* behind and reaching forward to what *lies* ahead, ► 14 I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. ► 15 Let us therefore, as many as are perfect, have this attitude; and if in anything you have a different attitude, God will reveal that also to you; ► 16 however, let us keep living by that same *standard* to which we have attained [underlining mine].

Coach ► Paul is using some very emotive, inspirational language, and there is a sense that, whatever he's talking about, it's very important stuff, and so some of the Christian players start to whoop it up: "Let's get *it* done, baby!" "Let's get *it* on!" "Let's get after *it*!"

I'm the out-of-shape stick-in-the-mud water boy in the back with the glasses raising my hand with a question: "Excuse me. What is *it*? Just asking."

- I. What *is* "it"? We have to answer this ► first question before we entertain the second. What is Paul talking about? Simple question. Difficult answer.

Which raises another question: Why does God make some parts of Scripture so hard to figure out? The short answer is "I'm not sure." The longer answer seems to be that, in His wisdom,

God has seen to it that some veins of Scripture will not yield their riches to the casual prospector. It seems that God wants us to work at mining some parts of Scripture, like a prospector works at searching for gold. Proverbs ► 2:1-5 reflects the mining metaphor:

^{NAU} Proverbs 2:1 My son, if you will receive my words And treasure my commandments within you, ► 2 Make your ear attentive to wisdom, Incline your heart to understanding; ► 3 For if you cry for discernment, Lift your voice for understanding; ► 4 If you seek her as silver And search for her as for hidden treasures; ► 5 Then you will discern the fear of the LORD And discover the knowledge of God.

We ► live in a superficial, sound-bite culture that does not encourage the discipline of sitting still long enough to sift slowly, to observe carefully, to think deeply, to reflect prayerfully in order to discover “hidden treasures” of truth. If the nuggets don’t immediately jump out of the text and into the pan, we can get frustrated or bored, and we’re tempted to abandon the process altogether. Or just take a shortcut and find some motivational Bible guy or commentary to tell us what to think. We may even suspect God is holding out on us with this hard-to-get stuff, when in reality, it’s usually our problem, not His. We need to learn *how* to think, not just *what* to think.

In trying to determine *what* to think about our text, we’re going to go through a process that reveals a little something about *how* to think. It will require a little more patience than usual this morning, but some valuable nuggets of truth will pan out in the end.

A. The first step in how to think is to simply observe. We look carefully at the text and context and gather clues about the nature of “it.” What data can we glean? What evidence do we have to help crack the case? Let me offer nine observations. These aren’t the only observations that can be made; they’re just a few of the more important ones.

1. Observation ► 1: Whatever “it” is, it seems to be an extraordinary kind of resurrection. I get this from the immediately preceding context. In ► Verses 10-12, Paul says,

^{NAU} Philippians 3:10 that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; 11 in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead. 12 Not that I have already obtained *it* . . .

It seems clear that the ► “it” of Verse 12 refers to the “resurrection” of Verse 11. That’s the nearest antecedent.

That this must be an extraordinary kind of resurrection is an inference based on some other facts.

- a. You see, the Greek word Paul uses for “resurrection” in Verse 11 is very unusual. In fact, this is the only place it is used in the entire Bible. The Greek word is ► *ekanastasis*. It is a compound word made up of “*ek*,” meaning “out,” and “*anastasis*,” the usual word for resurrection. It could literally be translated “out-resurrection.”
 - b. The usual word for ► “resurrection,” *anastasis*, appears in Verse 10, where Paul describes the resurrection of Christ.
 - c. If Paul had in mind the exact same kind of resurrection in Verses 10 and 11, he probably would have used the same word, or at least words commonly recognized as synonymous. He doesn’t. As such, the extraordinary word in Verse 11 seems to point to an extraordinary kind of resurrection.
2. Observation ► 2: Whatever “it” is, it had not yet been attained by Paul. He hadn’t experienced it yet. It’s in the future. We see this in ► Verse 12, where Paul says,

^{NAU} Philippians 3:12 Not that I have already obtained *it* . . .

We also see it in ► Verse 13, where Paul says,

^{NAU} Philippians 3:13 Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of *it* yet . . .

Later in Verse 13, he says he is . . .

^{NAU} Philippians 3:13 . . . reaching forward to what *lies* ahead

He’s not there yet.

3. Observation ► 3: Whatever “it” is, it appears to be a goal of Paul’s. He hasn’t laid hold of it yet, but in Verse 14, he says,

^{NAU} Philippians 3:14 I press on toward the goal . . .

It’s his aim, his purpose.

4. Observation ► 4: Whatever “it” is, it may or may not be attained. It is conditional. It depends on certain things. In ► Verse 11, Paul says, “I *may* attain” it. In ► Verse 12, he says, “I *may* lay hold of” it. The Greek verbs here are in the subjunctive mood, which is normally used to indicate something may or may not happen. It’s not a sure thing.

5. Observation ► 5: Whatever “it” is, it is linked to a prize to be earned. In Verse ► 14, Paul says,

^{NAU} Philippians 3:14 I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

The term for ► “prize” is associated with athletic contests and is something to be earned.¹ In the athletic metaphor, “it” seems to be the goal or the finish, and the prize comes with a good finish.

The prize is associated with ► “the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” As such, the finish appears to be when God “calls” believers—those “in Christ Jesus”—to go “upward” to their heavenly home. This doesn’t necessarily mean the prize *is* the upward call, but they are linked much like the judge’s call to the Olympic medal stand is linked to the awarding of medals.

6. Observation ► 6: Whatever “it” is, it is earned by pressing on. In ► Verse 12, Paul says,

^{NAU} Philippians 3:12 . . . I press on so that I may lay hold of [it] . . .

In ► Verse 14, he says,

^{NAU} Philippians 3:14 I press on toward the goal . . .

7. Observation ► 7: Whatever “it” is, it is associated with becoming perfect or complete or mature. In ► Verse 12, Paul says,

^{NAU} Philippians 3:12 Not that I have already obtained *it* or have already become perfect . . .

Here he seems to equate “it” with becoming perfect. The word for ► “perfect” does not mean sinless or without faults. It means complete or fulfilled or mature.²

8. Observation ► 8: Whatever “it” is, it is the reason why Christ laid hold of Paul. In ► Verse 12, Paul says,

^{NAU} Philippians 3:12 . . . I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus.

¹ Joseph Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings: A Study of Eternal Security and the Final Significance of Man*, 2d ed., (Hayesville, NC: Schoettle Publishing, 1993), 560.

² W. Bauer, F.W. Danker, W.F. Arndt, and F.W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3d ed., s.v. “τελειόω,” (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), hereinafter abbreviated BDAG.

The ► “that” refers to “it.” And “it” is a reason Paul “was laid hold of by Christ Jesus.” So whatever “it” is, “it” is a reason why Christ chose or adopted or saved Paul. It involves the Lord’s purpose for his life.

9. Observation ► 9: Whatever “it” is, it is a goal to be shared by believers. After explaining his own attitude of pressing on, in ► Verse 15, Paul says,

^{NAU} Philippians 3:15 Let us therefore . . . have this attitude . . .
[underlining mine]

“This attitude” is an attitude of pressing on toward this goal, whatever it is.

- B. Now ► we’ve got some data to work with. Our next task is to evaluate alternative explanations or interpretations of the data. The most plausible alternative will be the one that best fits the data and harmonizes with the rest of Scripture. I want to present five alternative interpretations in order, from least plausible to most plausible.
1. The first alternative is what I call ► the Threat View. This view takes “it” to be the ordinary, bodily resurrection to life with Christ experienced by all true believers when Christ returns. This view asserts that Paul is unsure of his own resurrection to life with Christ, and is, therefore, unsure of his own salvation. He’s got to run well and run hard right on through the finish if he wants to get the prize of heaven.

This is the least plausible alternative for a host of compelling reasons.

 - a. First, it doesn’t fit ► Observation 1: It doesn’t recognize that the resurrection of Verse 11 is an extraordinary kind of resurrection. It assumes it is the ordinary, bodily resurrection to life with Christ experienced by all true believers when Christ returns.
 - b. And with this assumption of an ordinary resurrection, this view fails to fit ► Observations 2, 4, 5, 6, and 7 because the ordinary resurrection of believers to life is not conditional; it is not earned.
 - (1) Elsewhere in the Bible Paul is convinced that all true believers will be resurrected to life, regardless of their works.³
 - (2) In Philippians 1:23, it seems clear that Paul expects to be with Christ when he dies. He says,

³ He devotes an entire chapter to this in 1 Corinthians 15.

^{NAU} Philippians 1:23 But I am hard-pressed from both *directions*, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for *that* is very much better;

- (3) Elsewhere in the Bible, Paul has made it unmistakably clear that we are saved by grace, not works.⁴ Having believed in Jesus for eternal life, there is no uncertainty about heaven.
 - (4) For these reasons, most scholars reject the Threat View and agree that Paul is not expressing doubt about heaven or his participation in the bodily resurrection of believers to life with Christ.⁵
2. That brings us to ► the second view. I call it the Humility View. Like the first view, this one takes “it” to be the ordinary, bodily resurrection to life with Christ experienced by all true believers when Christ returns. But it attempts to resolve the apparent uncertainty of it by asserting that Paul isn’t really uncertain at all; he just gives the appearance of uncertainty in order to be humble. He knows he’s got it in the bag, but he doesn’t want to act like it.
- a. This view doesn’t fit ► Observation 1: It doesn’t recognize that the resurrection of Verse 11 is an extraordinary kind of resurrection.
 - b. This view also asserts that ► Observations 2 and 4—the ones that that seem to cast doubt on the attainment of “it—are mistaken. Paul doesn’t really mean what he says. It raises the question: What else was Paul so humble about that he didn’t tell us the truth?

It seems nearly inconceivable that Paul, a careful scholar and master of communication, would risk deceiving people or casting doubt on their own resurrection to life with Christ for the sake of appearing humble. For this reason, very few scholars hold this view.

3. The ► third view is more common. I call it the Means View. It takes “it” to be the *means* of Paul’s resurrection to life with Christ, not the *reality* of it. It’s the view that Paul was certain about the reality of his resurrection, but uncertain about the means of it.⁶ He didn’t know how he was going to die,

⁴ Romans 3:23-26; 4:5; Galatians 2:16; 3:6-14; Ephesians 2:8-9; Titus 3:5.

⁵ Peter T. O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians: A Commentary on the Greek Text, The New International Greek Testament Commentary*, eds. I. Howard Marshall and W. Ward Gasque, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1991), 412.

⁶ Robert P. Lightner, “Philippians,” *The Bible Knowledge Commentary, New Testament*, eds. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, (USA: Victor Books, 1983), 661; J.A. Motyer, *The Message of Philippians, The Bible Speaks Today*, ed. John R. Stott, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1984), 170; O’Brien, 413; John F. Walvoord, *Philippians: Triumph in Christ, Everyman’s Bible Commentary*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1971), 88.

whether by martyrdom or natural means. He didn't even know whether or not he was going to die before Christ returned. Maybe the rapture would occur and he would be taken up to heaven before he died. In that case, he wouldn't experience a resurrection from the dead because he wouldn't have died.

This is a plausible explanation. But a problem with this view is that it doesn't fit all the data. It is inconsistent with ► Observations 5 and 6. Namely, it's hard to see how the means of Paul's resurrection is something to be earned. For example, how does a person earn the rapture? Or how does somebody earn a natural death? This doesn't quite make sense to me, so I don't favor the Means View.

4. The ► fourth view is what I call the Rewards View. It's the idea that "it" is eternal rewards that believers will receive at the Judgment Seat of Christ.⁷ Some will receive rewards; others won't.
 - a. This is quite plausible for a number of reasons.
 - (1) The extraordinary resurrection—the *ekanastasis* of Verse 11 seems to suggest a special separation or calling out from among those who are resurrected according to the more common, *anastasis*. It appears that some believers will have a better, more rewarding resurrection than others.
 - (2) The idea of some believers experiencing a better resurrection—an "out-resurrection"—seems to be confirmed by Hebrews 11:35, which recounts biblical heroes of faith who chose to endure suffering for God in order to experience a "better resurrection."
 - (3) Also, Paul uses the word "prize" in only one other place: 1 Corinthians 9:24-27. There he speaks of running the race of life, and the idea of receiving rewards at the Judgment Seat of Christ is clearly in view.
 - (4) Elsewhere Paul speaks of heavenly rewards for believers who are faithful on earth. For example, in 2 Timothy 4:7-8, he says,

^{NAU} 2 Timothy 4:7 I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; 8 in the future there is laid up for me the crown of

⁷ Dillow, 559-561; O'Brien, 413.

righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing.

- b. The Rewards View has much to commend it, but it may not fit all the data perfectly. If “it” is rewards, then what about ► Observation 8? Are personal rewards the reason why Christ laid hold of Paul? Maybe *a* reason, but probably not *the* reason. Seems like Jesus came to save us for a bigger purpose than just to give us rewards.
5. That’s why I tend to favor ► the fifth view. I call it the Complete in Christ View. I think the “it” of our text refers to completeness in Christ or Christlikeness.⁸ Let’s see how this fits the data.
- a. How is becoming complete in Christ an ► extraordinary kind of resurrection (Observation 1)?
- (1) I think the resurrection of Verse 11 is extraordinary because it’s not referring to physical resurrection at all. I think Paul is talking about spiritual resurrection—a spiritually resurrected life of Christlikeness to be lived on earth now. Elsewhere in the Bible, Paul links spiritual maturity with spiritual resurrection, not physical resurrection.⁹ For example, in Romans 6:4, he says,
- ^{NAU} **Romans 6:4** Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.
- Here, spiritual resurrection is linked with walking in newness of life on earth. So, the extraordinary resurrection of Verse 11 in our text may simply refer to “walking in newness of life,” with a view to the goal of it: completeness in Christ.
- (2) One prominent Greek lexicon says that the extraordinary word for “resurrection,” *ekanastasis*, “connotes a coming to fullness of life.”¹⁰ This idea fits well with becoming complete in Christ.

⁸ O’Brien, 420-421; W.E. Vine, *Vine’s Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, unabridged ed., s.v. “attain” (McLean, VA: MacDonald Publishing, n.d.); Robert Wilkin, “Raised to Run: Philippians 3:11,” available from <http://www.faithalone.org/news/y1991/91aug3.html>; internet; accessed 25 July 2006.

⁹ Romans 6:4, 11-13; 8:10-17.

¹⁰ BDAG, s.v. “ἐξανάστασις.”

- b. The idea that “it” is completeness in Christ fits the other observations as well. Paul had not yet ► attained completeness in Christ (Observation 2), but that ► is his goal (Observation 3). It’s a goal he ► may or may not achieve completely (Observation 4). His efforts to achieve the goal will ► be rewarded with a prize at the finish (Observation 5).¹¹ And so, Paul ► presses on toward becoming more and more like Christ (Observation 6). He wants to ► become perfect (Observation 7). The word for “become perfect” is a verbal form of *teleos*—a Greek word he uses elsewhere for being complete or mature in Christ.¹²

It also makes good sense, and other Scriptures corroborate,¹³ that the reason God saved us is ► so that we might become Christlike and represent Him well on earth (Observation 8). And so, we should adopt as ► our goal to become complete in Christ (Observation 9).

It all fits. We’ve discovered what I believe is the most plausible interpretive option, and in doing so, we’ve answered the first question.¹⁴ What is “it”? It is becoming complete in Christ. In fact, the “it” is symbolized nicely by the image printed on the back of your sermon notes. We join Paul in striving to become complete in Christ—to become like Christ in our motivations, our virtues, our beliefs, and our conduct.

- II. That ► leads us to the second question: How do we attain it? How do we become complete in Christ? The answer is in the text and it constitutes the big idea of my message this morning. Here’s ► the big idea: Forgetting the past, focus on the next step to the finish.

Let me explain how I arrived at this from the text.

- A. Paul emphasizes the importance of forgetting the past in ► Verse 13, when he says,

^{NAU} Philippians 3:13 Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of *it* yet; but one thing *I do*: forgetting what *lies* behind . . .

When it comes to being complete in Christ, we’re all a work in process and we will be until we die. At the time of Paul’s writing, after nearly thirty years as a Christian, he

¹¹ Notice this view doesn’t deny that rewards are part of the passage (e.g. the prize of v. 14), but says *ek Anastasis* has to do with Christlikeness as a means to that end.

¹² BDAG, s.v. “τέλειος,” and “τελειόω,” cf. Ephesians 4:11-13; Colossians 1:28-29.

¹³ Ephesians 2:10.

¹⁴ A possible criticism of The Compete in Christ View is that some Scriptures seem to indicate that all believers already have the resurrected life (Ephesians 2:5-6; Colossians 3:1). A counter argument would be that, while we do have the resurrected life positionally, Paul is talking about living it out experientially such that we attain increasing Christlikeness.

had not “laid hold of” completeness yet. He had experienced great victories, performed miracles, and yet, he still struggled and stumbled and had sinful setbacks.

But he doesn’t dwell on the past because looking back has at least two dangers. Dwelling on past accomplishments can invite pride or complacency, and dwelling on past failures can invite needless guilt and shame.¹⁵

Guilt and shame constitute a useful emotional red light on our dashboard, but it’s not intended to be on all the time. It tells us when some dirty oil in our life needs to be changed. We change it through confession and repentance. And having changed that oil, we need to turn off the red light and drive on.

Some think forgetting the past means disconnecting the red light of guilt and shame altogether so that it no longer serves its purpose to warn. And they’re strangely surprised when their engine blows up because they never change the oil.

To forget means to confess, to repent, and move on, recognizing that God forgives.

- B. Paul also encourages us to focus on the finish. In ► Verses 13 and 14, he says,

^{NAU} Philippians 3:13 . . . reaching forward to what *lies* ahead, 14 I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

We need to live with the end in mind, and the end is not death. The end is eternity. In fact, our ► Characteristic of Completeness for the week is Eternity. In eternity, believers will experience heaven; that is certain. What is not certain is the degree to which we will enjoy rewards in heaven, collectively referred to as “the prize.”

Many Christians think that, having believed in Jesus, heaven is assured and nothing in eternity is still at stake. They’re only half right. Heaven is indeed assured, but rewards in heaven are still very much at stake. And that’s why Paul presses on toward Christlikeness; he presses on toward the finish, knowing that if he finishes well, Christ will be honored and he will be rewarded for eternity.

Working hard at becoming more and more like Christ is a highly leveraged investment. We do it for what little time we have left in this life, and it pays off for eternity.

- C. The prospect of becoming complete in Christ can be daunting because there is so much to learn. So Paul wraps up by telling us to focus on the next step toward the finish. I get this from ► Verses 15 and 16, where Paul says,

^{NAU} Philippians 3:15 Let us therefore, as many as are perfect, have this attitude; and if in anything you have a different attitude, God will reveal that

¹⁵ Charles R. Swindoll, *Laugh Again*, (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1991), 148.

also to you; 16 however, let us keep living by that same *standard* to which we have attained.

1. In saying, “as many as are perfect,” it almost sounds like Paul is addressing those who are already “perfect” or complete in Christ. That would be nobody.

I think Paul is instead addressing those who have attained *a certain level* of completeness or maturity. That would be all believers to varying degrees. His main point is, ► “let us keep living by that same standard” or level of maturity “to which we have attained.”¹⁶ In short, apply what you know.

Don’t worry about how much you don’t know. Don’t fret about what a long way you have to go in becoming complete in Christ. Just concentrate on the next step in applying what you know. Maturity is not a matter of how much you know; it’s what you do with what you know.

2. In taking one step at a time in applying the Scriptures, God will guide and correct us. That’s what I think Paul means when he says in ► Verse 15,

^{NAU} Philippians 3:15 . . . if in anything you have a different attitude,
God will reveal that also to you

It is so good to know that God has not left us to fend for ourselves in the journey toward Christlikeness. As we move along, He is there, revealing, guiding, correcting, encouraging, empowering.

- III. This week, ► I encourage you to take some time to pray and to reflect on the three aspects of the big idea: the past, the finish, and the next step.
 - A. The past. Do you need to forget? Do you need to confess and repent before you can forget?
 - B. The finish. What is your goal in life? What are you chasing? What does it have to do with eternity and becoming more and more like Christ?
 - C. The next step. What is the very next step—however small—God wants you to take right now? What needs to change? Who or what would that involve?

¹⁶ Homer A. Kent, Jr., “Philippians,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 11, ed. Frank E. Gaebelain, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 1978), 143.