



Kingdom Citizens

Philippians 3:12-4:1

The Christian author, CS Lewis, once wrote: “It would be rash to say that there is any prayer which God *never* grants. But the strongest candidate is the prayer we might express in the single word *encore*. And how should the Infinite repeat Himself? All space and time are too little for Him to utter Himself in them *once*.”¹

These famous words are a challenge to most of us who face the constant temptation to want to pin down our understanding of God, to have our religious beliefs and activities frozen at a previous moment in time. It might be more comfortable for us to feel that we have our faith all ‘worked out’ but to do so means we are vulnerable to the serious risk of losing out on a deeper understanding of the God who is limitless and always ready to give more to his children.

Another counterpoint to this temptation can be found in Philippians 3:12-14. Paul has just been writing about his desire to ‘know Christ,’ both ‘the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings.’ But in the opening verses of this week’s reading, he acknowledges that he has not yet ‘arrived at my goal.’ There is an intensity and energy in his writing as he speaks of his willingness to forget the past and to press on so that he can finally take hold of ‘the prize for which God has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus’ (3:14). As Daniel Migliore notes, ‘Paul’s image of Christian life and ministry as being constantly on the move and running toward a goal not yet reached is far different from perennial tendencies in the church to shut down the dynamism of Christian faith.’²

Paul is eager for the Philippian Christians to come round to his way of thinking, but in verse 15 we discover that he is reluctant to impose his thinking on everyone in the church. His expectation would seem to be that those who are mature will agree with his perspective, but, at the same time, he is quietly confident that in the fullness of time God will reveal more truth to those who are currently unable to accept his views. We can’t be exactly sure what Paul is referring to. The phrase ‘if on some point’ suggests disagreement on relatively minor issues. Paul clearly believes that God will eventually bring the Philippians to a united perspective on such matters.

From verse 17, the tone of this passage changes again. Paul’s relaxed certainty gives way to another set of warnings concerning those who ‘live as enemies of the cross of Christ’ (v18). At the start of the chapter, Paul’s note of alarm concerned those who were pre-occupied with Jewish religious rituals. Now his caution seems to be about self-indulgence and greed (he refers in verse 20 to those whose ‘god is their stomach’).

In Philippians 3:20, Paul concludes with a memorable image that would have been meaningful to those who were living in this Roman colony, this outpost of the Empire, a reminder to the early Christians that their ‘citizenship is in heaven.’ As Daniel Migliore notes, ‘Paul’s point is that Christians are to be clear about their deepest loyalties and are called to

¹ CS Lewis, *Prayer: Letters to Malcolm*, 1964, 29

² Daniel Migliore, *Belief: Philippians*, 2014, 138

follow the way of Christ in their daily lives here and now. They refuse to give their ultimate allegiance to the powers that be.³

For discussion

1. How do you feel your faith compares to the 'forgetting what is past and straining toward what is ahead' language used by Paul to describe himself in verse 12? Why do you think some people end up getting stuck at a certain point in their understanding of God while others retain a curiosity and desire to grow?
2. In verse 14, Paul makes it clear that the ultimate prize to which he is referring is one which he will attain in heaven. In many churches now, we seem to talk less about heaven and focus on what we're doing in the here and now of life on earth. In what ways do you think we are poorer for such a change? How can our thinking about our heavenly future make a practical difference to our present attitudes and practices?
3. Paul's relaxed tone about points on which 'you think differently' in verse 15 is in marked contrast to the stern warnings which we find at the beginning and end of this chapter. What can we learn from this contrast? How can we decide which issues we need to take firm action on and which matters can be left alone until God reveals more truth to people?
4. Paul's tone in Philippians 3:18 is not entirely judgemental. He also expresses a deep sadness about the lives of those who don't know Christ, referring to his 'tears' about those who 'live as enemies of the cross of Christ.' How does the way Paul speaks about such people compare to the way we refer to them in Selsdon Baptist Church?
5. What do you think are the biggest challenges currently facing Christians in the UK in 2018, as they seek to live as those whose 'citizenship is in heaven'?

³ Daniel Migliore, *Belief: Philippians*, 2014, 147