

The Prize of the Upward Call in Christ

Anchors in the Darkness: Words of Hope in Our Troubles / Philippians 3 / May 3, 2026

Introduction:

It seemed fitting to end our “Anchors in the Darkness” series by unpacking those powerful words Perry shared from Philippians 3:12-14 at his retirement. The key to understanding Paul’s words is found in their relation to the whole of chapter 3, where Paul moves from a call based on who we are in verses 1-7 to his example in verses 8-14, before giving a charge in verses 15-21. Start with the call in verses 1-7,

Put No Confidence in Earthly Achievements

Follow the flow of verses 1-7. Look at verses 1-6, “Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you. Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh. For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh— though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for 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; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.” After opening with call to rejoice in Christ, Paul calls them to beware of people he calls dogs, evil doers, and mutilators of the flesh. Who are these people? Some Jews, claiming to follow Christ, insisted on circumcision and adhering to Jewish purity laws for true access to covenantal blessings. Paul turns their insistence on its head by calling them “dogs”—a common slur for unclean Gentiles— “evildoers,” and “mutilators of the flesh.” Note the reason in verse 3, “For we are the circumcision.” These Jews used the title, “the circumcision,” to claim special covenantal access but Paul shows that is a false claim by joining himself with the Gentiles as the true circumcision. And what defines God’s people? God’s true covenant people, whether Jew or Gentile, are those who worship in the Spirit, boast only in Christ, and put no confidence in the flesh. This is the central ground for Paul’s appeal, and verses 4-7 explain what it means to put no confidence in the flesh as Paul shares his previous achievements in life. These seven things form a portrait of Jewish perfection. Starting with his heritage, Paul says he was circumcised perfectly, fully belongs to Israel, and can trace his lineage to the tribe of Benjamin, known for Israel’s first king, loyalty to the Davidic monarchy, and its inherited territory containing Jerusalem. The term “Hebrews” sums up his heritage, often used to distinguish Jews from Gentile converts. Then, moving to his achievements, Paul achieved a high social status as a Pharisee for adherence to the law. His zeal was evident through persecuting the church. And he was blameless in observation of the law, including participation in the sacrificial system. Paul is saying, “I was the best of the best.” Yet notice verse 7, “But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ.” Using accounting language, he says all his achievements are really on the debit side of the ledger. Family, Paul is saying our confidence can’t be found in any earthly achievement. His example in verses 8-14 shares why, showing that,

Christ is Our Hope and Prize

Ten times, in three verses, Paul uses the name or pronoun of Jesus Christ. Look at verses 8-11, “Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order 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 comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.” We could unpack a lot here but focus on his main points. Paul moves beyond just his previous achievements to counting “everything as loss.” Then, he expands “for the sake of Christ” in verse 7 to “the surpassing worth of knowing Christ” in verse 8. An overwhelming value that causes him to count all things he lost in this world as rubbish. The term literally means excrement or manure. To what end?

To gain Christ and be found in him, which he explains is having the righteousness of God through faith and deeply knowing Christ, that involves both experiencing His resurrection power and sharing in His sufferings. Gordon Fee is right to say, “Sharing in his sufferings is the clue to everything. While our sufferings do not have the saving significance of Christ’s, they are nonetheless intimately related to his” (Gordon D Fee, Philippians, p. 149). Suffering takes on a whole new meaning for the believer. Bury this in your heart family, there is a unique intimacy with Christ found in suffering for His sake, because we become like Him in His sacrificial death. And note his final goal in verse 11, “that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection of the dead.” Paul’s ultimate goal lies beyond this earthly life. He considers all things of value here—worldly comforts, material blessings, personal piety, religious status and honor—all of it is worthless compared to intimately knowing Jesus and being raised to be with Him forever. Church, the gospel is not a ticket to a better earthly existence. Because Christ dwelt among us, died for us, and was raised and exalted, we have access to an everlasting treasure and prize beyond this world, knowing Jesus and being with Him forever. This is the call of faith that moves us beyond all worldly pleasures. Notice how verses 12-14, which Perry shared, relate to this, “Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” Consider two questions. First, what hasn’t Paul obtained yet? The complete and full knowledge of the one who died to purchase Paul with His blood. Knowledge that will come in his perfect state that allows him to be in Christ’s presence forever, free from sin, death, and suffering. Paul says he hasn’t gained all of Christ there yet, and because he hasn’t, he does one thing: forgets what lies behind and presses on for that prize. Second question, what is Paul forgetting? Perhaps you’ve heard it taught that Paul forgets his past pleasures of sin or failures. I am sure he does forget those things, but I’m not persuaded that’s what he has in mind here. In context, “what lies behind” refers to his heritage, status, and personal achievements in verses 4-6. Further, “what lies behind” refers to every part of the race he has completed so far. The idea is being a runner that never looks over his shoulder but only at the finish line. Family, Paul was so focused on Christ that even achievements since believing weren’t worth dwelling on. I think is so important to see. Even achievements for Christ can distract us from Christ. Our hope and prize are not any achievement in this life. It isn’t family thriving, serving or giving well, rising up in church leadership, being a strong believer or successful person, having a strong marriage, the list could go on. Our hope and prize have and always will be Christ Himself. This brings us to Paul’s charge in verses 15-21,

Live Like Those Who Seek to Gain Christ

Paul has purpose in sharing his example. Look at verses 15-16, “Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. Only let us hold true to what we have attained.” We have to think carefully here. Paul says the mature should think this way, but then appears to give allowance to think differently. Is that what he’s doing? I’m not persuaded he’s giving an allowance to think differently because he will say “imitate me” in verse 17. So, he doesn’t envision you saying, “You do you Paul, but that’s not for me.” I believe Paul is confident God will confirm this way of life, while keeping us from being ashamed by where we currently are and trusting God will continue His work in our lives. He’s saying be faithful to what you know and keep pressing on in a deeper pursuit of Christ as God will call you to. Look at verses 17-19, “Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. For,” here’s the reason to imitate Paul and others who live like this, “many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things.” Imitate Paul and those who live this way to keep from becoming like those who are enemies of the cross. Who are these people? I’m persuaded it’s those to beware of in verse 2. These false believers were placing requirements on others beyond Christ’s perfect atoning sacrifice to receive the full blessings of

belonging to God's covenant people in this life. Paul has said Christ is your only hope in life and death. They claimed Paul must be wrong because of his sufferings and people needed more for God's blessings. But Paul says their appetites for worldly pleasure and comfort have caused their minds to be set on earthly things and their glory now would only be their shame because their end is destruction. Family, consider what this reveals to us. Sin is more than doing bad things, it is any turn to earthly treasures over Christ.

Jeremiah 2:13 sums up all of Israel's sin as denying God's all satisfying presence and seeking satisfaction in other things. That is the root of sin. And sometimes seemingly good pursuits can fall into that category. Notice the contrast in verses 20-21, "But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself." The contrast to having minds set on earthly things is a singular focus on our true home and reward. Here is where this gets especially pointed for us today. Paul uses a term for "citizenship" directly related to Roman citizenship. Philippi was a Roman Colony and there was a lot of pride in Roman citizenship. Roman citizens were expected to always promote the values, worth, and interests of Rome. Do you see what this is calling us to do? Paul calls us to view ourselves not citizens of an earthly colony but a heavenly one, living to promote the interests of that homeland and its King, Jesus Christ. Why? Because Jesus will return one day to take us to our true hope. And when He does, he will reward us with a resurrected body like His to live fully in the joy of His presence forever.

Conclusion:

Our application comes from this lofty charge of Paul. Think this way. Live as those who belong to another nation and kingdom. Anchor your hope in gaining Christ. Don't let anything in this world, including privileges of earthly citizenship, get in the way of pressing on toward that goal. And don't let earthly accomplishments, false expectations of worldly comfort, and suffering cause you to look back at what once was. Forget what lies behind and press on toward the upward call of God in Christ. Set your minds on your hope and prize.