

THAT I MAY ATTAIN TO WHOSE RESURRECTION? PHILIPPIANS 3:11

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I. INTRODUCTION

Philippians 3:10-11 reads, “that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.” At first glance, these words may seem to suggest that Paul worried he might not be resurrected (in the first resurrection). One could ask, “Did Paul worry that, if he did not strive sufficiently, he would go to the lake of fire?” There are three possible answers to this question (view 2 being common among Reformed interpreters):

1. Yes, Paul feared ending in the lake of fire.
2. Although Paul knew that it is impossible for him or for any Christian to end up in the lake of fire, in deep humility, he worked diligently, so that he might escape it.
3. No, Paul knew that it would be impossible for him to end up in the lake of fire.

Twenty-eight years have passed since 1984, but double-speak is alive and well in Christendom. Those advocating views 1 and 2 fundamentally misunderstand that eternal life is a gift that neither requires works to receive nor to keep. Let us consider the three answers given to the initial question.

II. PAUL FEARED ENDING UP IN THE LAKE OF FIRE

Helmut Koester spoke of “the element of uncertainty concerning one’s own participation in the resurrection (*ei pōs*) [if somehow].”¹

Morna Hooker broadens the use of *I* from Paul to Christians in general (not to the Philippians in particular). Writing from an Arminian standpoint, she suggests that, “...it is necessary to go on ‘being conformed’ to Christ’s obedience and death if they [Christians] are to attain the resurrection.”

The introductory “if somehow” in v. 11 seems to introduce an element of doubt, but Paul can hardly be dubious about whether those who are in Christ [at the time of death] will share his resurrection. The phrase is intended, rather, to remind the Philippians that Christians have not yet arrived at their final destination. Christ’s resurrection has already occurred, but their [Christians] own lies in the future, and *it is necessary to go on “being conformed” to Christ’s obedience and death if they [Christians] are to attain the resurrection.* The fact that their [Christians] righteousness is “from God” does not absolve them [Christians] from moral endeavor, for the goal still lies ahead— a theme Paul elaborates on in vv. 12-16.²

Similarly, George Turner thought that Paul feared not attaining to the first resurrection, that is, he feared facing the second death:

Therefore he [Paul] believed in the general resurrection of the last day. If Paul expected to participate in the general resurrection, why was he eager to “attain unto the resurrection of the dead,” as if to imply that he might not thus attain? Here he means [attaining] to the resurrection of the just. The Apocalypse states that there is a

¹ Helmut Koester, “The Purpose of the Polemic of a Pauline Fragment (Philippians III),” *NTS* 8 (1962): 323.

² Morna D. Hooker, “Philippians,” in *New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 11:529. Italics mine.

first resurrection: “blessed and holy is he who shares in the first resurrection, over such the second death has no power” (Rev. 20:6). In other words, Paul wanted to be among the saints and the first-fruits of the resurrection. Only then would salvation be final. Full salvation can be experienced in this life, but final salvation only after the resurrection.³

Ernest Scott also claims that Paul strove to attain to the resurrection of the body. He (as an Arminian) imagined that Paul could (as a believer) live in the resurrection power of Christ, but end up unredeemed:

The one object which he now set before himself was “to attain, if possible, to the full resurrection.” He uses a compound word (*exanastasin*) to denote not merely the inward resurrection of which every Christian is conscious even in this life, but the ultimate rising from the dead. Here on earth, as he says in Rom. 8:23, “We...groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body.” For this Paul must continue to strive, so as to make certain that he will attain.⁴

Karl Barth had no concept that Paul even possessed probationary Christian life—let alone eternal life. He viewed martyrdom as Paul’s only way to (1) attain to resurrection and life or (2) attain to certainty (in this life) that he would be resurrected and live eternally:⁵

³ George A. Turner, “Philippians,” in *Wesleyan Bible Commentary*, ed. Charles W. Carter (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 473.

⁴ Ernest F. Scott, “The Epistle to the Philippians,” in *Interpreter’s Bible*, ed. G. A. Buttrick (New York: Abingdon, 1955), 11:87.

⁵ Whether Barth means (1) or (2) is not entirely clear. The final statement of the citation (“So, and only so—by assenting to his killing—are we on the way to life.”) suggests (1). However, another statement (“But precisely in its [life] being taken away from him—by his inclusion in the fellowship of his sufferings, by his entry into the form of his death—he is undeniably also given the hope of his own resurrection.”) seems to suggest (2). I suspect that Barth means (2), because he is not noted for saying that Christianity is to no avail, unless one dies as a martyr. See Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, trans. James W. Leitch (London: SCM, 1962; Richmond, VA: Knox, 1962), 104f.

In the hope that so—i.e. as *symmorphizomenos tō thanatō autou* (by entering into the form of his [Christ’s] death, v. 10)—**I may be on the way to the resurrection of the dead**... But precisely in its [life] being taken from him—by his inclusion in the fellowship of his *sufferings*, by his entry into the form of his *death*—he is undeniably also *given* the hope of his own resurrection. ‘If we are dead with Christ, we believe that we shall also *live* with him’ (Rom. 6:8)—*synzēsomen!* That is the hope! And therefore here *katantēsō*... So, and only so—by *assenting* to his killing—are we on the way to life.⁶

Carolyn Osiek also denies that Paul knows he will be resurrected,

“He hopes, but does not know for certain, that he will be able to endure to the end (see Otto 1995). The uncertainty expressed in the statement is not about [the fact of] the future resurrection but about his own fidelity [and, therefore, whether or not he will participate in it].”⁷

The foregoing writers all think that Paul worried that he might not participate in the first resurrection, because unfaithfulness would forfeit his standing as a believer. The next group offers a typical Reformed answer. It is not *Yes* or *No*, but *Yes-No*.

III. PAUL KNEW HE WOULD NOT GO TO THE LAKE OF FIRE, YET WORKED DILIGENTLY TO ESCAPE IT

This answer attributes false humility to Paul. If a natural-born American citizen were to say, “I hope someday to become an American citizen,” no one would call that humility. Rather than humility, it would evidence confusion. In John 11:25-27 Jesus promises resurrection and everlasting life to every believer. Any doubt by Paul that he would not participate in believer resurrection would evidence disbelief, not humility. Those who call

⁶ *Ibid.*, 104f.

⁷ Carolyn Osiek, *Philippians, Philemon*, Abingdon New Testament Commentaries, V. P. Furnish, gen. ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2000), 95.

Paul's supposed denial (of the certainty of his participation in the first resurrection) humility fundamentally misunderstand and disbelieve the message of life.⁸

I-Jin Loh and Eugene Nida offer a *Yes-No* answer

The expression "if in some way" appears to suggest some doubt in the apostle's mind, but in reality what he expresses here is his sense of expectation and hope with humility. TEV [Today's English Version] accordingly renders the expression as *in the hope that* (Gpd [Goodspeed] "in the hope of"; JB [Jerusalem Bible] "that is the way I can hope to"; NAB [New American Bible] "thus I hope that"; Phps [Phillips] "so that I may somehow").⁹

The *Yes* part finds expression in "appears to suggest some doubt," while "in reality" introduces a supposed tension between Paul's "sense of expectation and hope" with his "humility."

Marvin Vincent says, "His words here are an expression of humility and self-distrust, not of doubt."¹⁰ To characterize unbelief as humility, not as doubt, is an exercise in sophistry.

Gerald Hawthorne agrees with Vincent, "...it would appear that Paul uses such an unexpected hypothetical construction simply because of humility on his part, a humility that recognizes that salvation is the gift of God from start to finish and that as a consequence he dare not presume on this divine mercy (Caird)."¹¹

Likewise, Jacobus Muller denies that Paul "express[es] uncertainty," but requires that the apostle "watch and pray continually," concerning this "matter of certainty" and "object of hope." Muller engages in doublespeak.

The last expression "if by any means I may attain unto the resurrection from the dead"

⁸ Saying that some presently disbelieve the message does not assert that they had never believed it.

⁹ I-Jin Loh and Eugene A. Nida, *A Translators Handbook on Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, *Helps for Translators*, vol. 19 (Stuttgart, GER: United Bible Societies, 1977), 106.

¹⁰ Marvin R. Vincent, *The Epistles to the Philippians and to Philemon*, ICC (New York: Scribner, 1897), 106.

¹¹ Gerald F. Hawthorne, *Philippians*, WBC, D. A. Hubbard and G. W. Barker, gen. eds. (Waco, TX: Word, 1983), 146.

does not express uncertainty but rather humble expectation and modest self confidence. Even the apostle—and together with him all who have attained the righteousness of God through faith—must watch and pray continually... By speaking of the resurrection “from the dead,” Paul does not refer to the general resurrection of all the dead but definitely to the resurrection in glory in which only believers will share... To faith this truth is not only a possession of the present but always also still an expectation of the future. It is a matter of certainty but at the same time also an object of hope [as in “hope so”].¹²

William Hendricksen asserts that Paul expects to be resurrected (because he expects to persevere), but warns the Philippians, so they will persevere (and be resurrected). Note his final sentence.

When Paul...writes, “If only I may attain,” he is not expressing distrust in the power or love of God nor doubt as to his own salvation. Paul often rejoices in assurance of salvation (Rom. 6:5, 8; 7:25; 8:16, 17, 35-39). In this assurance he was strengthened as the years went by (I Tim. 1:15-17; II Tim. 1:12; 4:7, 8).¹³ But he wrote it in the spirit of *deep humility* and commendable distrust *in self*. The words also imply *earnest striving*. They show us Paul, the Idealist, who applies to himself the rule that he imposes on others (Phil. 2:12, 13).¹⁴

Those who answer the question (*Did Paul fear going to the lake of fire?*) with *Yes-No* as well as those replying *Yes* give evidence of being fundamentally confused. By contrast, this article will argue for the third position: Paul raises no doubts concerning his own resurrection.

¹² Jacobus J. Muller, *The Epistles to the Philippians and to Philemon*, NICNT, N. B. Stonehouse, ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 117f.

¹³ Clearly, Hendricksen in one way or another would reject the proposition that assurance is of the essence of believing Jesus for His promise of everlasting life.

¹⁴ William Hendricksen, *Exposition of Philippians*, NTC (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1962), 170. One cannot trust his understanding of any passage he cites here.

IV. PAUL KNEW HIS ETERNAL DESTINY, BUT WAS UNSURE OF HOW HE WOULD DEPART THIS LIFE

Peter O'Brien offers a good characterization of this view:

...while a number of earlier scholars thought that the expression reflected Paul's 'humble admission of his own frailty and unworthiness' in reaching this final destiny, more recently it has been claimed that while the goal of the resurrection is certain, the way or route by which the apostle will reach it is unclear. On this view the element of uncertainty lies with *pōs* (= 'somehow, in some way'): he might reach the resurrection through [1] martyrdom (or [2] by some other kind of death), or [3] he might be alive at the coming of Christ¹⁵ (cf. Phil 1:20-26). 'The resurrection is certain; the intervening events are uncertain.'¹⁶

Those advocating this view focus on the three ways Paul might depart this life (as a martyr, not as a martyr, or as one living at the time of the rapture). It is true that Philippians 1:20 speaks of Paul desiring that "Christ will be magnified in my body, whether by life or by death." This view certainly has precedent within the book.

However, the word *attain* (*katantaō*) suggests a goal toward which Paul strove. The date of the rapture was out of his control (not a goal to which Paul could strive). Martyrdom was also something Paul was prepared to accept, but his efforts to defend himself and to use his Roman citizenship are not consonant with striving for martyrdom.

¹⁵ It is not likely that O'Brien distinguishes between the rapture and the second advent, but any Dispensationalist holding this view would interpret his words "the coming of Christ" as a reference to the pre-tribulational rapture. That would be the only coming for which Paul could have hoped to be on planet earth.

¹⁶ Peter O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, NIGTC, ed. I. H. Marshall and W. W. Gasque (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Carlisle, ENG: Paternoster, 1991), 412f. The secondary citation of J. A. Moyer, *The Message of Philippians*, BST, 170, who holds this view, quotes him accurately. Cf. also R. P. Martin, *The Epistle of Paul to the Philippians*, NCB, ed 135; I. H. Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God* (London: Epworth, 1969; reprint, Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2007), 120; F. F. Bruce, *Philippians*, GNC, ed. W. Ward Gasque (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983).

The word *katantaō* (*attain*) is the biggest obstacle to the view. The lack of a goal to which Paul sought to attain is fatal to it.

V. PAUL WAS SURE OF HIS ETERNAL DESTINY BUT UNSURE ABOUT HIS REWARDS

R. E. Neighbour proposed that the out-resurrection is a reward, a special resurrection for the most faithful Christians. He argued,

What then did Paul have in view when he wrote *of attaining unto the OUT-RESURRECTION OUT OF THE DEAD ONES?*

...Paul meant that *out of the saints who partake of the resurrection out of the dead, there will be some who will attain to a special "placing;" this placing he called the "OUT-RESURRECTION out of the dead."*

This *OUT-RESURRECTION* was a grouping together of certain ones from among the raised believers, a grouping made possible by virtue of their having known Christ, and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His suffering, being made conformable to His death.

The Apostle, himself, tells us plainly what he means by the *OUT-RESURRECTION*. In one breath he says, "If by any means I may attain unto the out-resurrection out of the dead;" in his next breath he says, "Not as though I have already attained...but I press forward"—toward what? It was toward "the prize of the up-calling." Therefore, we conclude that the *out-resurrection and the PRIZE of the up-calling are one and the same thing.*¹⁷

Another way of expressing this is that it looks at those with the highest rewards at the Bema. This view has found favor within grace circles. He emphasizes the unusual word for resurrection in Phil 3:11, *exanastasis*, rendering it the *out-resurrection*.

¹⁷R. E. Neighbour, *If by any Means...* (Elyria, OH: Gems of Gold, 1935; reprint, Miami Springs, FL: Conley and Schoettle, 1985), 57f.

Neighbour sees this as a reward experienced after the resurrection of believers (in which all believers will participate). Although he correctly observes that Paul aims here at attaining both intimacy with Christ and reward, his approach to *exanastasis* focuses on *ek* (from), while *anastasis* (resurrection) seems an afterthought.

Neighbour clarifies his view, “The Word does not teach that resurrection out of the dead ones is a reward, but that reward [the out-resurrection] will be meted out after the saints are raised.”¹⁸ His view of the out-resurrection is that the entire Church is raptured, then at the Bema, the most highly rewarded believers are separated out of all resurrected saints.

That is an unlikely rendering of the compound word, *ex-anastasis*. If, by analogy, one rendered the *ex* in *exodus tōn huiōn Israēl* (departure of the sons of Israel) in Heb 11:22 similarly, it would be “departure out of the sons of Israel.” However, the passage does not distinguish one group of Israelites from another group of Israelites. Neighbour did not realize that the *ek* (from) in *ek-anastasis* modifies *tōn nekrōn* (“the corpses”), not *anastasis*. Thus, it is properly, resurrection from among the corpses. Neighbour’s approach to this word is not supported by the lexicons, because it is an instance of special pleading.

Those who hold Neighbour’s view tend to note that this exact construction does not appear elsewhere in the NT. Actually, Scripture combines *anastasis* (resurrection), *ek* (from), and *nekrōn* (corpses) in three ways:¹⁹ the first, *anastasis + nekrōn*, omits *ek* ²⁰ the second is *anastasis + ek + nekrōn*,²¹ and the third is *exanastasis + nekrōn* (Phil 3:11). If every other passage phrased resurrection from the dead one way (with Phil 3:11 being the sole exception), Neighbour might have a little credibility. Instead, there is no stock phrase: the NT combines the words in three distinct ways without changing the meaning.

¹⁸ Ibid., 57.

¹⁹ Many assume that the phrase means “resurrection from death,” but that would use a singular form of *thanatos* (death). Instead, Jesus rose, unlike the many corpses that remained, awaiting their resurrection: *resurrection from the dead (ones)*.

²⁰ Matthew 22:31; Acts 4:2; 17:32; 23:6; 24:15, 21; 26:23; Rom 1:4; 1 Cor 15:12f, 21, 42; Heb 6:2; 11:35.

²¹ Luke 20:35 and 1 Pet 1:3.

In the final analysis, though, this paper argues for a view that (like Neighbour’s) focuses on rewardability. Neighbour properly perceives that Paul sought the highest of rewards here. Let us consider the third view.

VI. PAUL WAS SURE OF HIS ETERNAL DESTINY, BUT UNSURE OF HIS CONFORMITY TO CHRIST’S RESURRECTION IN THIS LIFE

Philippians 3:10 mentions Christ’s resurrection before His crucifixion, which reverses chronological order. This unexpected sequence has caused scholars to note the chiasmic structure of Phil 3:10-11.²²

The following adapts Gordon Fee’s chiasmic presentation of Phil 3:10-11, while emphasizing His/Him:²³

so that I may know A both the power of B and participation in B’ being conformed to A’ if I might attain [conformity to	Him: His resurrection His sufferings His death His] resurrection from the dead.
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The chiasm A, B, B’, A’ explains what “so that I may know **Him**” means. It means knowing the power of His resurrection (A), if Paul attains conformity to **His** resurrection (A’). It also means participation in **His** sufferings (B) through Paul being conformed to **His** death (B’). Under this approach, Paul desires

²² Cf. Loh and Nida, *Translators Handbook*, 103f; Gordon D. Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, NICNTT, ed. Gordon D. Fee (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 329; and John Banker, *A Semantic and Structural Analysis of Philippians* (Dallas, TX: Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1996), 135. Although Osiek, *Philippians, Philemon*, 94, uses the term *inclusion*, rather than *chiasm*, she recognizes a chiasm: “...verses 10-11 form an inclusion in which the two outer terms are ‘the resurrection’ and the inner ones are ‘suffering’ and ‘death,’ so that when the two verses are taken together as the conclusion of the very long sentence that began at the beginning of verse 8, the order in this concluding part of the sentence is really resurrection-suffering-death-resurrection.”

²³ Fee, *Philippians*, 329. Fee does not interpret v 11 as this paper does, but his presentation of the chiasm suggests the format used in this article.

that both his life and his death would conform to the standard set by Christ.

This is not a new thought in Philippians. Consider Phil 1:19-20 where Paul desires not to be ashamed in anything, but to magnify Christ in his body whether by life or by death.

For I know that this will turn out for my deliverance through your prayer and the supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, according to my earnest expectation and hope that in nothing I shall be ashamed, but with all boldness, as always, so now also Christ will be magnified in my body, whether by life or by death.

Philippians 3:10-11 restates 1:19-20. Paul wishes to know Him, that is, to be conformed in life to Christ's resurrection and to be conformed to Christ's death. Paul's greatest hope is that his life might possibly attain the highest level of conformity to Christ's resurrection. (Romans 6:3 refers to Christ's resurrection power for Christians to walk in newness of life in the here and now.) May our prayer also be that we be conformed to Christ's resurrection—to walk in newness of life.

Some earlier writers have also presented the view that Paul hoped to attain to conformity to Christ's resurrection in his life. Dwight Pentecost says,

Now he wants to attain unto the resurrection of the dead. Paul is not doubting here the fact of the resurrection of the body. The resurrection of the body does not depend on one's service here or one's sanctification while in the body. The resurrection is the final victory and triumph over Satan because of the cross of Christ. Paul has quite a different thought in view when he says, "I want to attain unto the resurrection." We may read it in this way, "I want to realize in my daily walk what it is to have been resurrected with Christ."

Paul taught this same truth in Romans 6:4, 5: "We are [have been] buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we should also walk in newness of life. For if we have been planted together in the likeness of his

death [and we most certainly have], we shall also be in the likeness of his resurrection.”²⁴

Gene Getz also holds this view:

The apostle concluded this paragraph by saying: “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead” (Phil 3:10, 11).

These words of Paul have been interpreted in various ways. But one thing is sure: he was not talking about uncertainty regarding his salvation. If he were, he was contradicting everything he ever wrote about his eternal hope and expectation—even in the opening paragraphs of this very Epistle to the Philippians...

The most logical explanation seems to be that Paul was talking about his new life’s goals; that is, to become like Christ in every aspect, even before he died, including Christ’s resurrection life. This[,] Paul acknowledged in the next paragraph was an impossible goal, for only through Christ’s return will Christians be totally transformed into Christ’s likeness (3:20-21). But...Paul did not allow this reality to deter him from the continuous process of coming to know Christ more deeply and profoundly in all aspects of his earthly life—His suffering, His death, and even His resurrection.²⁵

VII. CONCLUSION

For Paul, the centerpiece of living life to the fullest and becoming rewardable was Jesus’ cross and resurrection. Christ’s death and resurrection give direction and enablement to one’s life, which (in turn) brings about rewardability.

²⁴ J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Joy of Living: A Study of Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973), 141. Brackets in original.

²⁵ Gene Getz, *The Measure of a Christian: Studies in Philippians* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1983), 136.

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Verse 11 is simple, if we remember that Paul hoped somehow in life to attain *to the standard of Christ's resurrection*. Paul's own resurrection was already guaranteed, not requiring any striving on his part. May we, knowing that our resurrection is guaranteed, aim to attain to the standard of Christ's resurrection in living our lives.

