

That I May Attain to Whose Resurrection? Philippians 3:11

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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.*¹ Did Paul worry that insufficient striving would send him to the lake of fire? Reformed interpreters equivocate on this *Yes* or *No* question (view 2):

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

Answer 1: Yes, 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].”²

Morna Hooker broadens I from Paul to Christians in general (not the Philippians in particular). 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.”³

Similarly, George Turner thought that Paul feared not attaining to the first resurrection:

The Apocalypse states that there is a 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.⁴

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].”⁵

This is the Arminian view. Reformed writers say *Yes-No*.

¹ Scripture references (other than secondary citations) are from the New King James Version (Nashville: Nelson, 1982), unless otherwise noted.

² Helmut Koester, “The Purpose of the Polemic of a Pauline Fragment (Philippians III),” *NTS* 8 (1962): 323.

³ Morna D. Hooker, “Philippians,” in *New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 11:529. Italics mine.

⁴ George A. Turner, “Philippians,” in *Wesleyan Bible Commentary*, ed. Charles W. Carter (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 473.

⁵ Carolyn Osiek, *Philippians, Philemon*, Abingdon New Testament Commentaries, V. P. Furnish, gen. ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2000), 95.

Answer 2: Paul knows he will not go to the lake of fire, but worked diligently, to escape it

This answer attributes a 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 denial by Paul that he might not participate in believer resurrection would evidence disbelief, not humility. Those who call a supposed Paul denial (of the certainty of his participation in the first resurrection) humility fundamentally misunderstand and disbelieve the message of life.⁶

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

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”).⁷

Marvin Vincent says, “His words here are an expression of humility and self-distrust, not of doubt.”⁸ To characterize unbelief as humility, not as doubt, is an exercise in sophistry.

Gerald Hawthorne agrees, “. . . 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).”⁹

Jac. Muller falls into line. He 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 sounds like a Demipublican or a Republicrat engaging in doublespeak.

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

⁶ Saying that some presently disbelieve the message does not assert that they had never believed it.

⁷ 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.

⁸ Marvin R. Vincent, *The Epistles to the Philippians and to Philemon*, ICC (New York: Scribner, 1897), 106.

⁹ Gerald F. Hawthorne, *Philippians*, WBC, D. A. Hubbard and G. W. Barker, gen. eds. (Waco, TX: Word, 1983), 146.

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 tune also an object of hope.¹⁰

William Hendricksen asserts Paul expects resurrection (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. . . . But he wrote it [“If only I may attain”] 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).¹¹

Those who answer the question (*Did Paul fear going to the lake of fire?*) with *Yes-No* (as well as those replying *Yes*) evidence fundamental confusion.

Answer 3: Paul knows he will not go to the lake of fire; he speaks of something else here

Those who understand that Paul does not suggest any doubt that he will participate in the first resurrection have viewed this passage in three ways. They see the passage speaking of:

- 3A. how Paul would depart this life,
- 3B. Paul hoping for a special reward, the out-resurrection,
- 3C. How Paul lives his life on earth.

Probably, the second is the most common within grace circles. Probably, also, many wonder how the final one even relates to Phil 3:11. We will consider them as 3A, 3B, and 3C.

Answer 3A: Philippians 3:11 speaks of how Paul would depart this life

Peter O’Brien offers a good characterization of this view, which he holds:

. . . 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 Christ (cf. Phil 1:20-26). ‘The resurrection is certain; the intervening events are uncertain.’¹²

¹⁰ Jac. J. Muller, *The Epistles to the Philippians and to Philemon*, NICNT, N. B. Stonehouse, ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 117f.

¹¹ William Hendricksen, *Exposition of Philippians*, NTC (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1962), 170. One cannot trust his understanding of any passage he cites here.

¹² 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.

Essentially, 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. The word *katantaō* (attain) is an insurmountable obstacle.

Answer 3B: Philippians 3:11 speaks of a reward

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.¹³

Another way of expressing this would be that it looks at those found to have 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*. Neighbour sees this as a reward experienced after the resurrection of believers (in which all believers will participate). Although Neighbour correctly observes that Paul is 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.”¹⁴ 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 resurrect saints.

That is an unlikely rendering of the compound word. If, by analogy, one rendered *exodus tōn huiōn Israēl* (departure of the sons of Israel) in Heb 11:22 similarly, it would be “departure

¹³ R. E. Neighbour, *If by any Means*. . . (Elyria, OH: Gems of Gold, 1935; reprint, Miami Springs, FL: Conley and Schoettle, 1985), 57f.

¹⁴ Neighbour, *If by any Means*, 57.

out of the sons of Israel.” However, the passage does not speak of one group of Israelites being distinguished 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 a special pleading.

Those who hold Neighbour’s view 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:¹⁵ The first way omits *ek*: *Anastasis + nekrōn*,¹⁶ 2. *Anastasis + ek + nekrōn*,¹⁷ 3. *exanastasis + nekrōn* (Phil 3:11). If every passage other passage phrased *resurrection from the dead* one way Neighbour *might* have a point. Instead, there is no stock phrase: the NT combines the words in three distinct ways without changing the meaning.

Answer 3C: Philippians 3:11 focuses on how Paul lives his life on earth

Philippians 3:10 mentions Christ’s resurrection before His crucifixion, in reverse order. This unexpected sequence has caused scholars to note that Phil 3:10-11 is chiasmic. The following adapts Gordon Fee’s chiasmic presentation of Phil 3:10-11:¹⁸

¹⁰ so that I may know	Him:
A both the power of	His resurrection
B and participation in	His sufferings
B’ being conformed to	His death
A’ ¹¹ if I might attain [conformity to	His] resurrection from the dead.

The chiasm A, B, B’, A’ explains what “so that I may know **Him**” means. It means A. knowing the power of **His** resurrection, if A’ Paul attains conformity to **His** resurrection. It also means B. participation in **His** sufferings through B’. Paul being conformed to **His** death. Paul desires that both his life and his death would conform to the standard set by Christ. Is this a new thought in Phil 3? No. 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

¹⁵ Many assume that the phrase means “resurrection from death,” but that would use a singular form of *thanatos* (death). Instead, Jesus rose, unlike corpses that remained, awaiting *resurrection from the dead (ones)*.

¹⁶ Mat 22:31; Acts 4:2; 17:32; 23:6; 24:15, 21; 26:23; Rom 1:4; 1 Co 15:12f, 21, 42; Heb 6:2; 11:35.

¹⁷ Luke 20:35 and 1 Pet 1:3.

¹⁸ 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.” Fee, *Philippians*, 329. Fee does not interpret v 11 as this paper does, but his presentation of the chiasm suggested the format used in this paper.

refers to Christ’s resurrection power for Christians as walking in newness of life). May our prayer also be that we be conformed to Christ’s resurrection—to walk in newness of life.

Dwight Pentecost says,

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.”¹⁹

Gene Getz holds this view also:

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.²⁰

Conclusion

Paul’s centerpiece of living life to the fullest and becoming rewardable was Jesus’ cross and resurrection. Christ’s death and resurrection give direction, enablement, and rewardability.

¹⁰ 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 **His**] resurrection from the dead.

Him:

His resurrection

His sufferings

His death

Paul hoped in life to attain to the standard of Christ’s resurrection. Let us seek the same.

¹⁹ J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Joy of Living: A Study of Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973), 141. Brackets in original.

²⁰ Gene Getz, *The Measure of a Christian: Studies in Philippians* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1983), 136..