

# A Shared Prize

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[ 0 : 00 ] The reading is taken from Philippians chapter 3, starting at verse 12 and going to chapter 4, finishing at verse 1.

And that can be found on page 1181, and that's Philippians chapter 3, verse 12. Philippians chapter 3, verse 12.

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 towards the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Let those of us who are mature think this way, and in if anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you.

[ 1 : 05 ] Only let us hold true to what we have attained. Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us.

For 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 the shame with minds set on earthly things.

But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a saviour, 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.

Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved. Thank you.

Welcome, everyone. Lovely to have you with us this morning. Do please keep Philippians open as we continue this series which we've been looking at through the autumn. Let me pray for us as we begin.

[ 2 : 26 ] Heavenly Father, thank you very much for this urgent reminder that the Lord Jesus is returning, and that we await a saviour. And we pray, therefore, Heavenly Father, please would you help us to hear and heed your word this morning, that we might indeed be ready for his return.

And we ask it in his name. Amen. Last November, the Queen opened General Synod, the body that governs the Church of England.

It was a short speech, and amongst other things, she said this. It is hard to believe that it's over 50 years since Prince Philip and I attended the first meeting of General Synod.

None of us can slow the passage of time. And while we often focus on all that has changed in the intervening years, much remains unchanged, including the Gospel of Christ and his teachings.

The list of tasks facing General Synod may sound familiar to many, but one stands out supreme, to bring the people of this country to the knowledge and love of God.

[ 3 : 43 ] It was a very much one thing matters, and only one thing matters speech. And that reflects the truth which lies at the heart of the Apostle Paul's letter to the Church in Philippi, that it's the advance of the message of Jesus, the advance of the Gospel, that matters more than anything else.

Let me remind us of chapter 1, verse 27, which hopefully I hardly need to even read it. Hopefully for many of us, we'll have learnt it by now, if not deliberately, then by osmosis.

But let me read it for us. This is Paul's great vision for the Church in Philippi, indeed for every local church. Chapter 1, verse 27, Only let your manner of life, literally let your citizenship, be worthy of the Gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the Gospel, and not

frightened in anything by your opponents.

Stand firm as citizens of heaven. That is how the central section of this letter begins, and in our passage today, it's also how this central section of the letter ends.

So look on to chapter 3, verse 20, Our citizenship is in heaven. And chapter 4, verse 1, Stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved.

[ 5 : 22 ] In chapter 2, we've seen how to do that, and what it looks like to do that. It is by having the mindset of the Lord Jesus Christ, who, chapter 2, verse 8, Being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

The mindset of the Lord Jesus, the mindset that lays aside personal ambition, far from self-serving, instead puts the salvation of others first.

Chapter 3 shows us how to avoid doing that. Chapter 3 shows us how to avoid doing that.

Because we've said this all the way along, although the Church of Philippi is going well, and this is a letter full of rejoicing in so many ways, nonetheless, the Apostle Paul can see storm clouds on the horizon.

They face increasing opposition, which within a few years will turn to outright persecution. In other words, the pressure is on this Church to keep a low profile, rather than standing firm, side by side, contending for the message of Jesus together.

[ 6 : 44 ] Now, that is exactly the pressure we face today, isn't it? If we are followers of the Lord Jesus. So how do we resist that temptation?

Well, for those here this morning looking in on the Christian faith, and if that describes you this morning, we're delighted you are here. I guess at some stage, you are bound to find yourself asking the question, okay, if I begin to follow Jesus, how on earth will I keep going in this culture in which we live, which seems increasingly secular, and increasingly opposed to the message of Jesus?

Well, whether we're Christian, or just looking on the Christian faith, it is by grasping what it means to be a citizen of heaven, and it is by fleeing the very real temptation to live as a citizen of this world.

And I'll try to reflect that on the outline, on the service sheet. We're going to think firstly about living as a citizen of heaven, and then we're going to think of the alternative temptation to flee.

So then firstly, keep living as a citizen of heaven. Firstly, with a firm grasp on the future. Verse 12 of chapter 3. Not that I've already obtained this, or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.

[ 8 : 10 ] Now, the this that Paul hasn't yet obtained here, it's the resurrection from the dead. It's where we finished last week, chapter 3, verse 10. That I may know him, know Jesus, 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 of the dead.

And the word perfect in verse 12, it doesn't mean perfection in the sense of living a perfect life, which of course only the Lord Jesus himself has lived.

Rather, it means the goal, or the end point, heaven itself. The point being, Paul isn't there yet, nor are we, which is why we need to be very clear-sighted if we are followers of Jesus Christ.

We need to be very clear-sighted, and very focused, on where we are headed. So notice then, that in verses 12 to 14, Paul says the same thing, three times.

Verse 12, I press on. Verse 13, one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind, and straining forward to what lies ahead. And verse 14, I press on towards the goal of the prize of the upward call of God.

[ 9 : 38 ] It is the language of the London Marathon, or perhaps more realistically, the park run. Focused, that is, on the finishing line, pressing earnestly ahead, straining forward.

And yet wonderfully, unlike an athlete, if our trust is in the Lord Jesus, we can be confident that we will make the finishing line. You see, if you've ever done the park run, what is the chance?

Beforehand, now I'm hoping to beat my personal best, or perhaps for some, I'm hoping to win.

Perhaps for others, I'm hoping to finish. Perhaps for others, it's I'm hoping to beat James Widows, or whoever it happens to be that you have in your sights.

But of course, whether we actually achieve those goals, is anyone's guess. You may not get your personal best. You're unlikely to win.

You may indeed not finish. Quite the opposite, if we belong to the Lord Jesus. Have a look at verse 12, because you see, he's made us his own.

[ 10 : 51 ] And verse 14, because of the upward call of Christ. In other words, the Christian is someone called heavenwards by none other than the Lord Jesus himself.

That is the trajectory. That is the direction of travel of our lives. And therefore, for those who belong to Jesus, there is no doubting our place in his heavenly kingdom.

Because it depends not on our own efforts and achievements, but on the Lord Jesus and on his death upon the cross for our sins.

It is something to rejoice in. And yet, we are not there yet. And so, we are to run with our eyes firmly fixed on that finishing line.

What do you say? What does that look like? Well, it's just what we've seen throughout the letter over these last few weeks or so. All our energies going into living a life that is shaped by the cross, serving others for their eternal well-being and salvation.

[ 12 : 09 ] The Lord Jesus himself, of course, being the supreme example of laying our lives down in the service of others for their salvation and well-being.

Willing to serve the gospel like Timothy. Willing to suffer for the gospel like Epaphroditus. Well, I guess it begs the question, how are you running?

Are you complacent? Are you just kind of pottering along? Or are you running hard with your eyes firmly fixed on the finishing line?

Because, make no mistake, you see, this glorious future, and it is a glorious future, that is ours in Christ, should affect our present lives day by day.

It's investing our lives now in what will matter on that future day. Now, of course, the details of what that looks like are going to be different for each one of us depending on the gifts we have, our personality, and the situation we find ourselves in, and the opportunities we have.

[ 13 : 25 ] But I hope we can see that for each and every one of us in this room who is a follower of the Lord Jesus, it's going to affect the way we spend our time, our evenings, our weekends.

It's going to affect the way in which we spend our money. It will affect our choice of job and career. It will affect life at school as we strive side by side with others to make Jesus known.

I take it it will affect where we live or where we're planning to live. Not necessarily the best place that we can afford to live in, but somewhere where we can maximize the opportunities we have to serve the gospel with others.

I take it it will affect our relationships, both the relationships we do pursue as well as those we don't pursue. It will affect our friendships.

It will affect our retirement plans. No longer sort of traveling, no longer just living to kind of travel the world and that kind of thing or living in that dream location, but instead going somewhere where we can strive side by side with others for the sake of the gospel.

[ 14 : 40 ] Living in this world in the light of the world to come. Now, many of us at Grace Church do have this mindset, in which case I hope these verses are a real encouragement for us because it is precisely the mindset which will enable us to stand firm, chapter 4, verse 1, and to do so in the face of opposition.

But realistically, there are going to be others amongst us for whom, if we are honest with ourselves, this is not our mindset. In which case, I take it the questions which we need to ask are obvious to us or they should be.

So, keep living as a citizen of heaven. Firstly, with a firm grasp on the future. Secondly, with a firm grasp on our identity.

Verse 20, but our citizenship is in heaven and from it we await a saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ.

If you and I are to live for the future, we need to have a firm grasp on our identity because our identity is all tied up with the future. We are citizens of heaven if we know Jesus.

[ 16 : 07 ] Just as if you lived in Philippi, you'd have had a very clear sense of your identity. Philippi, remember, it was a Roman colony. To be a citizen of Philippi meant that you had all the privileges of Roman citizenship.

The administration of Philippi reflected Rome in every respect. Philippi was literally a little bit of Rome in Greece. To be a citizen of Philippi was to have enormous status and privilege.

And yet, these Christians in Philippi hold another citizenship, heavenly citizenship, which trumps any earthly citizenship which they may also have.

What's more, verse 20, we await a saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. Saviour and Lord, two titles that were also given to the Roman emperor.

And yet, this saviour and Lord is the Christ. He is God's king. So yes, the Christians in Philippi, they're citizens of Rome, and yet the far greater reality is that they are subjects of the heavenly Lord

and saviour.

[ 17 : 28 ] Their true citizenship, their real identity, exists as citizens of heaven. It is a matter of identity, as well, of course, as being a source of great joy.

I wonder if you read the other day of 53-year-old Andy Maxfield. He lives in Preston, and he is a supporter of Blackburn Rovers. And on the 27th of September, his first grandchild was born, and on exactly the same day, he bought her a season ticket for Blackburn Rovers.

Probably discovered that Chris Idle did exactly the same thing when his first grandchild was born, I don't know, but not, of course, for Blackburn Rovers. As a result, she's the youngest ever to hold such a season ticket, and I read that article, and I thought, well, there is someone, Andy Maxfield, and it's very clear, indeed, where his identity lies.

Well, what about you? Where does your identity lie? By which I mean not simply kind of coming up with the right answer on a Sunday, but where does your identity lie the rest of the time?

Kind of functionally, where does your identity lie? In this world, and the status it affords, or as a citizen of heaven?

[ 18 : 59 ] I guess there may well be some of us here this morning, and frankly, we are really struggling to stand firm as followers of Jesus, in which case, we need to remind ourselves of where our true identity lies.

it is glorious, as well as being liberating. Because to stand with Jesus in Philippi is to go against the cultural grain, just as it is in London, which is why, of course, you and I need to hear verse 21, who will transform our lowly bodies to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.

In this world, believing and suffering go together. But when Jesus returns, there will be a transformation of our lowly, literally of our humbled bodies to be like his glorious body.

It's a deliberate echo of what we saw back in chapter 2, verses 9 to 11, speaking of the Lord Jesus, who humbled himself even to the point of death on the cross.

verse 9. And yet, chapter 2, verse 9, therefore, God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

[ 20 : 34 ] When Jesus returns, at the end of history, his sovereign rule will be seen over all people, over all nations, by everyone, even those who oppose the Christians in Philippi, even the Roman Emperor himself.

Gordon Fee writes this in his excellent commentary on Philippians. He says, this passage reminds us that despite appearances often to the contrary, God is in control. Our salvation is not just for today, but forever.

Christ is coming again, and at his coming, we inherit the final glory that belongs to Christ alone. And it means, too, the final subjugation of all earthly powers to him, especially those responsible for the present affliction of God's people.

What a cause to rejoice in. So, keep living as a citizen of heaven. Secondly, don't live as a citizen of this world.

So, the alternative, keep living as a citizen of heaven. The alternative, we're to avoid, don't live as a citizen of this world. Verses 15 to 19.

[ 21 : 57 ] So far, Paul has been talking about the mindset that in verse 15 he calls maturity, being a grown-up Christian, Christian, and yet there's an alternative. Verses 18 and 19.

And the tragedy is that Paul is describing those who at least once were part of the Christian community in Philippi. It's why in verse 18 he says this with tears in his eyes.

Verse 18, for many of whom I've 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.

They've stopped running the race. Instead, they're pursuing an earthly prize rather than a heavenly prize. And very strikingly, Paul says they have become enemies of the cross.

Now, that is very strong language isn't it? So what does Paul mean? Well, quite simply, they are unwilling to suffer for the gospel. They are unwilling to serve Jesus sacrificially.

[ 23 : 14 ] They are avoiding the cross in their lives. That's been one of the great surprises of the letter, hasn't it? Just look back to chapter 1 verse 29. For it's been granted to you that for the sake

of Christ you should not only believe in him, but also suffer for his sake.

Or chapter 3 verse 10. That I may know him and the power of his resurrection and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death.

death. I wonder what you would regard as some of the key things needed that someone needs to grasp if they are to become a UK citizen.

To apply for British citizenship you have to complete the UK life test. I discovered this week there were 24 online questions, all multiple choice, that you have to answer.

Questions such as where is the cenotaph located? Which UK country has a blue and white flag? And a very easy one for those of us living in this part of London.

[ 24 : 22 ] What palace was a cast iron and glass building and was built for the great exhibition of 1851? Well, so much for being a UK citizen. You may or may not think those things are necessary requirements.

But what is it that we need to grasp as citizens of heaven? We need to grasp that believing and suffering go together. Believing and suffering go together.

And yet those in verses 18 and 19, they've drawn a line at suffering. It's no wonder, is it, that Paul says in verse 18, they are enemies of the cross.

And verse 19, their end is destruction, their God is their belly, and they glory in their shame.

Because what will shame them on the judgment day are the very things that they glory in now.

In summary, their minds are set on earthly things. Now, it may well be that in the face of opposition, they've stopped running towards the heavenly prize, simply because they are now running after earthly prizes.

[ 25 : 35 ] Career, lifestyle, popularity, or perhaps just opting for a comfortable existence. Perhaps when they were younger, they'd have said, yes, I consider everything else rubbish for the sake of knowing Jesus.

But now, in the face of an increasingly hostile culture, other things have become more important to them than knowing Jesus. Well, that's a warning to us, isn't it?

We live, after all, in a particularly comfortable part of London, and it wouldn't be at all surprising if a number of us were already headed down that road.

Well, it may be that they've adopted a more socially acceptable form of Christianity. The kind of thing which we looked at last week in chapter 3, verses 1 to 11.

For the Philippians, you'll remember the temptation was to adopt a kind of Christianity that looked more Jewish because Judaism was one of the officially recognized religions in the Roman Empire, and therefore is a way of avoiding opposition.

[ 26 : 41 ] It is a way, if you like, of remaining within the cultural mainstream. It's sadly what so many churches and denominations are doing in the UK, no longer proclaiming the uniqueness of Jesus Christ, that salvation is found in him alone, because that's unpopular, and it's offensive to some.

Or perhaps following society as attitudes towards marriage and relationships change. And make no mistake, as those who hold to the teaching of the Bible are increasingly sidelined in our culture, as it becomes increasingly costly to stay together side by side for the faith of the gospel, you and I will be tempted to join them.

And therefore, you see, each one of us needs to heed this warning. Don't live as a citizen of this world. Hope we can begin to see that it's our attitude to hardship and suffering, to the hardship and suffering that comes inevitably from following the Lord Jesus.

It's our attitude gratitude to that that really reveals whether for us heaven is home or this world is home instead. I thought it'd be helpful to try and finish by just focusing the issue for us.

Perhaps focusing the issue on this week ahead for us. So I want to ask the question, in what areas of life do you face loss because you follow Jesus if you're here this morning as a Christian?

[ 28 : 23 ] I guess it could be a loss of status or rank or it could be a loss of position or privilege or prospects or reputation.

it could be a loss of honour. It could be a loss of face. In other words, it's where we face the temptation to avoid the suffering that will inevitably come to us if we follow Jesus Christ.

Where we're tempted to duck when what the Bible says is controversial. Where we're tempted to adopt a kind of form of Christianity that is culturally acceptable and doesn't rock the boat, although of course that isn't genuine Christianity at all.

And where we are reluctant to stand with others side by side for the sake of the gospel. Whether it's at school or whether it's at work or with a group of friends or whether indeed it's here together as Grace Church Dulwich.

I wonder if that's given you time enough to identify what the issue is in your life. Where are the areas where you face loss?

[ 29 : 46 ] So here's then the question. Are you willing to lose all those things? Are you willing to lose them? Privilege, reputation, status, face, rank, position, prospects, honour.

Are you willing to lose them? Because you are confident that heaven is home. That Jesus is Lord and Saviour.

That he will return. And will you run the race pressing on towards that future day? Because of course the reality is that all of us, each one of us, all of us, are pressing on towards something in our lives.

I wonder what it is for you. Is it the heavenly prize? Or is it an earthly prize instead?

Let's pray together. Our citizenship is in heaven and from it we await a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ.

[ 31 : 01 ] Heavenly Father, we praise you that Jesus is Lord and that he will be seen to be Lord on that great day when he returns. And we praise you too that he is Saviour for his humbling of himself even to death on a cross.

And we pray, Heavenly Father, for your mercy on us where the world is so very attractive. Please would you help us to live as citizens of heaven focused on the future persuaded and convinced of our identity.

And please help us to spur one another on to live like that. And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.