

Philippians Study 4: Chapter 3

Introduction

The letter heads back to the affairs of the Philippians. Whilst Paul starts with “Finally”, it is not the closing of the letter, and Paul uses it as a figure of speech that we would be quite accustomed to as would the Greek speaking citizens of Philippi.

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Homework and preparation for next week:

Read the notes as a refresher of the study,

Read chapter 4 in preparation for next week.

- *How do the things Paul did for the gospel compare to our lives?*
- *If we were Paul, how would we react to leaving behind such a strong career path for the cause of Christ?*
- *What things in your life have you given up for Christ?*

Notes for study 4: Chapter 3

Introduction

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Body of the Study

What is going on in Philippi?

In continuing the theme of the *friendship letter*, Paul now reverts again to the affairs of the Philippians. He uses the conjunction *finally my brethren*, although this is not the end of the letter – and he uses it again in 4:8.

One of the characteristics of the friendship letter is that of common enemies. The common enemies that Paul has in mind are the Jews – “the circumcision”. Unlike some of the New Testament letters, Paul does not “deal with” the circumcision issue in Philippians (unlike Galatians, Romans, and Corinthians), although he does touch on it here. Circumcision – specifically whether or not you have to become a Jew in order to become a christian – is **THE** issue of the time, and it is touched on by almost every letter of the NT.

But what Paul does say, is that those who were trying to bind circumcision on christians were common enemies both of the Philippians and of him. Apparently there was no need for Paul to have to teach the Philippians on this issue, or set them straight as he had had to do in other places. This probably has a lot to do with the relationship that Paul has with them, and he may have already sorted the matter out on a previous visit. If that were the case, then the Philippians are nowhere near as fickle as the Galatians. [Paul had sorted the matter out on previous visits to them, but as soon as Paul left they flipped towards the Judaisers and away from Paul].

Paul is asking the Philippians to *rejoice*. But not just rejoice – rejoice in the Lord! The thought flows from the earlier part of chapter 2, where he has been encouraging them to get along, and do so without murmuring and disputing (2:14). Paul says that he says this *...without hesitation...* (is not tedious 1:1 NKJV). Paul’s comment *...for you it is safe...* means that it would prevent them from being entrapped in the practice of wrong things.

Who are the people that Paul is describing?

He clearly has the Judaisers in mind, but he describes them in three ways:

- Dogs,
- Evil workers,
- Mutilators

The NIV is clearer to show that it is the same group that he is describing with three different descriptions:

“... *Watch out for those dogs, those men who do evil, those mutilators of the flesh...*” (3:2 NIV)

As *dogs* they were wild vicious homeless animals that roamed the streets and attacked passers by (NIVBC). The term is used in a derogatory sense, as elsewhere in the scripture. They are described as *evil workers* – certainly they were working, but their

motivations were not the motivation of God (despite what they were saying). They were insisting in the *act* of circumcision, without a proper motivation for it – and all it was, was an act of mutilation. It didn't accomplish anything. [The comments here should be read in the context of my Galatians and Romans studies, and also my study of the book of Acts study 22].

In contrast to the Judaisers – who are characterised by the act of circumcision that they insist should be administered to all (male) christians, the true Jews (Paul describes as the true circumcision) are we who are true christians. The characteristics are that we:

- Worship God in the Spirit,
- Rejoice in Christ Jesus,
- Have no confidence in the flesh.

On the other hand, the Judaisers were requiring the adoption of a physical relationship to attest to our relationship with God. They were insisting on *the keeping of the law* (of Moses) as the way to a relationship with God. But keeping the law (as a system of law) is not the way that we have a relationship with God (even keeping the law of Christ). Our relationship with God comes by faith, and our worship must be in spirit and in truth (Jn 4:23). The Judaisers had absolute confidence in their descendency from Abraham – they were basing their relationship with God on a physical relationship – that of Abraham, and that of the *seal* of circumcision. But as christians, our confidence is in Christ – demonstrated by our faith (and our obedience to that faith), not on the physical things.

How does Paul describe his “qualifications”?

Even though the Judaisers might have some things to boast about – yet Paul has much more. He had a perfect background in the Jewish religion – far more than almost anyone else could claim. [For further details, see my study series on the Life of Paul, study 2]. He summarises his (Jewish) qualifications:

- Circumcised the 8th day
- Of the stock of Israel
- Of the tribe of Benjamin
- A Jew's Jew
- A Pharisee
- Zealous to the point of persecuting blasphemers
- Blameless in doing what the Law says as much as is possible

He was of pure Jewish stock, and every Jew would regard Paul as a strict keeper of the Law. He had gone way beyond any other Jew in his observance of the Law, and his zealotry for doing everything that he could to see that it was kept.

How do his “qualifications” compare to salvation in Christ?

There is no comparison. Even although he left behind all of his Jewish standing when he became a christian, that was nothing by way of comparison. “...*All of the things that I had gained, I gladly counted as loss for Christ...*” (3:7)

This doesn't mean that Paul has any kind of defeatist attitude by *counting loss* – in fact exactly the opposite is true. Paul goes to the greatest length possible in order that he might continue and grow as a christian.

Note how Paul describes his dedication to the cause of Christ:

- Everything is a loss compared to (being a christian)
- I strive for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ
- I have let go of everything else
- It is all rubbish compared to Christ
- I want to be found in Him
- I don't want my own righteousness (that comes from the Law)
- I want the righteousness that comes from faith in Christ
- This righteousness comes from God by faith (by implication, compared to the righteousness that the Jews were trying to impose by the physical keeping of the Law – expressed through circumcision)
- The end is that I might know Jesus
 - And know the power of His resurrection
 - Share with His sufferings
 - Be conformed to His death
- I want to attain the resurrection form the dead (and be raised with Christ).

The comparison is strong and deep. It comes from a relationship with Christ. It doesn't come by keeping the law – any system of law. It comes by faith in Christ, and obedience to that faith. Paul's obedience to that faith was just the same type of obedience that Abraham displayed. Abraham might well have stayed in Haran and kept the things that he had there – but when God called him, *he went out not knowing where it was that he was going*. He left behind the things that he had, and counted the things that God had called him to, as the things that mattered.

Can we lose our salvation?

Paul says that he has not already attained it yet – he still has some way to go. It is important to keep our eye on the ball. Paul believed that even though he had given up all of his Jewish background for the sake of Christ, yet it was still possible that he could miss out on the reward.

“...but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. ¹³ Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus....” (3:13-14 NIV)

There are times that the things in our lives can get in the way of our relationship with Christ. Paul wasn't prepared to let anything get in the way. Even the sins of the past may hinder and come back to haunt him, but he says *forget what is behind and press onward!*

What is the sign of maturity?

When we have things in perspective, we can really understand what our priorities are. We will not let anything hinder us. Our maturity comes if we have a right understanding of our relationship with God (as Paul has outlined), and have our lives under control so that we can be focused on our lives and being the people that God wants us to be. That doesn't mean that we don't sin. Paul still regarded himself as *the chief of sinners*, and he still had a war going on within between what he knew he ought to do and the things that he actually did (Rom 7:15-25). The sign of maturity is not being *free from sin* (in the sense of not committing sin), but in recognising our state, our total dependence on God, and our determination to forget the past things and move relentlessly towards the reward in heaven.

Again, Paul calls on the Philippians to *be of the same mind*. He is manoeuvring them to unity.

Why does Paul use himself as the example?

Jesus is the example that we are called to follow. But Paul says that we should follow him. Whilst this might seem egotistical, it needs to be taken in the same context to what he said in to the Corinthians “...*be followers of me as I also am of Christ...*” (1 Cor 11:1).

Paul had set a wonderful example amongst the Philippians. They had seen in him (and the others that were with him – Silas, Luke, and Timothy) the example that Christ calls us to live. We are to follow after these good examples, and live our lives in such a manner.

On another level, sometimes we see the high and excellent examples of Christ – who lived a perfect life – and before we even start we *know* that we can't get there. At times like this, many people just give up. But whilst the life of Christ was perfect, the life of Paul wasn't. Paul battled with the same things that we face – and has the same failings – yet God regards him as one that we should follow after. This is not to say that we don't follow Christ. We recognise the failings of Paul and the perfection of Jesus, and we should try for His perfect example. But it is comforting to have the example of Paul (and others) who are there when we fail. And of course, to have the great mediator Jesus who has been where we are yet without sin, and makes intercession to God on our behalf!

In contrast, there are some that do not walk by the example that Paul has given us. They walk disorderly. This might include the Judaisers – but is more likely wider than just that group. These are the enemies of Christ. Paul calls us to unity. The enemies are calling the brethren to division. That is not the way God intends it to be. Such is the distress that Paul tells them *even weeping*. His distress is obvious, and the answer is obvious. In contrast to the spiritual things, these people are fixed on earthly things (which probably suggests that it is the Judaisers that he has in mind, rather than just dissentious people in the congregation).

What is our reward?

Paul reminds the Roman citizens of the colony of Philippi that our true citizenship is in heaven. They would immediately understand the connection. It is who we are – citizens of heaven, not the citizens of our temporary residence on earth.

Jesus is coming back. We are eagerly awaiting for His return. [Incidentally, this shows that Paul thought that the return of Jesus could have occurred within his lifetime. It can occur at any time, and we are all looking forward to the time when He returns.] When he comes, there will be a transformation of our bodies to His glorious body.

Paul uses some metaphors here – that of transformation. There will be some form of physical transformation as our mortal bodies are changed to immortal bodies at His return. At the same time, we have been transformed by Christ (by the renewing of our minds Rom 12:1) to become His people. And as His people, we are the church – the body of Christ (Eph 1:23) His glorious body.