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Week 8 Scripture Guide Philippians 3:1-11

Biblical Context

Paul transitions from praising Epaphroditus in chapter 2 to encouraging the rest of the church in chapter 3. He asks the brothers and sisters (adelphos) to “rejoice in the Lord!” (Phil 3:1), continuing the Philippians trend of rejoicing and thanksgiving. Seemingly self aware of how many times he has written this, Paul acknowledges that “To write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you.” (3:1). By alternating between guidance and encouragement, Paul writes a letter intended to train the Philippians while also setting their sights on joy, what keeps them safe (3:1).¹

What follows next is an aversion to a Jewish sect that was pushing forward the idea that the new Gentile believers need to follow all Jewish customs and practices to be followers of Jesus (See Acts 15). Circumcision was the primary way that the Jewish people were set aside from the rest of the world, which was started by Abraham (Gen 17:10-14) and put into the Levitical Law by Moses (Lev. 12:3).² Paul puts forth a scathing rebuke of the Jews arguing for this, calling them “dogs³” and “mutilators of the flesh.” Instead, it is the followers of Jesus who are the “circumcision,” the people set apart by God to serve him. Paul seems to take inspiration from Deuteronomy 10:16, where Moses implores the Jewish people to “circumcise their hearts.”⁴ Circumcision was meant to be an outward symbol of God’s chosen people, but this would lead to a change of action for the followers of Yahweh. Now Jew and Gentile alike can serve God through the Spirit with no physical characteristic between them.

The Jew also has no reason to stand over the Gentile on account of their pedigree, as Paul describes next. Paul lists off his superlatives in a row for a fuller picture. He was “circumcised on the eighth day,⁵ of the people of Israel,⁶ of the tribe of Benjamin,⁷ a Hebrew of Hebrews, in regard to the law, a Pharisee.” Paul has an extensive pedigree of obeying the law, to the point of becoming so knowledgeable of the Torah that he was able to become a Pharisee. The Pharisees were known to be strict and rigid followers of the law that Paul has no hesitation when he says that “as for righteousness based on the law, faultless (3:6). Whether this should be taken literally or not is beyond the point that Paul is making. He is illustrating to the people of Philippi just how seriously he has observed the Law.

¹ This word is the Greek word *asphales*, used a few times in the New Testament to describe something that is certain, true. It comes from the negative particle of the word *sphallo*, meaning “to fail.” The word therefore, indicates something that prevents any failure at all.

² For a story of how serious circumcision was meant to be taken by followers of Yahweh, see Exodus 4:24-26, where Yahweh almost kills Moses and only relents when Moses’ son is circumcised by his wife. This story would indicate that Yahweh would refuse to use a lineage that was not circumcised.

³ Paul using the word “dog” should be taken as a play on words, to compare the Jews pushing circumcision to a dog tearing apart a corpse.

⁴ For a better understanding of what this means, it would be beneficial to read the entirety of Deut 10.

⁵ See Leviticus 12:3.

⁶ By this, Paul means that he was not an Israelite that was scattered by an army, but an Israelite born and raised in mainland Israel. The mainland Israelites could have looked down on the Jews that were scattered, elected to remain in foreign lands, and intermarried.

⁷ The first human king of Israel was also named Saul, of the tribe of Benjamin. Wanting to name your son after this man seems very strange in modernity.

All of this is building to verse 6, when Paul explains how he considers it all to be “loss for the sake of Christ” and in verse 7 with “the surpassing worth of knowing Christ.” In order to preach the gospel of Christ to the Gentiles, Paul must throw away the things that he has desperately curated. Indeed, he even considers them to be garbage, the Greek word here being skubalon (σκύβαλα), a vulgar term meaning excrement.⁸ Phillippi was possibly a very wealthy city, with nations occupying it to obtain the gold mines.⁹ This was possibly a call for the Phillippians to continue to relinquish the wealth they have obtained or also holding the Philippians in solidarity with himself. As Paul had given up his Jewish identity to follow Jesus, so did the Phillipians relinquish their wealth to help him in his time of need.

The righteousness that Paul now claims is not his own, but is through faith in Christ. The law was never the giver of righteousness, as Paul claims in another of his letters - Romans 4:1-3 referencing Genesis 15:6, “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.” Abraham was declared righteous before the Levitical system was ordained. The circumcision in itself was not righteousness, it was merely the seal of “righteousness.”¹⁰ The intent behind this is evident, Paul is advising the Gentiles to carry on the faith that has been allotted to them through Jesus' sacrifice and resurrection. Having the Gentiles convert to Judaism and adopt all Jewish practices makes Jesus' life worthless (See Galatians 2:21). The Christian is not made righteous by the righteousness of the Law, but the righteousness that comes “through Christ's faithfulness.”¹¹

More than “consider loss for the sake of Christ,” Paul wants to know Christ intimately. He wants to emulate the very way that he lived and died, participating in his sufferings to the grave and to also obtain the power of the resurrection. It is easy to want to emulate Christ in his resurrection, not just in this literal resurrection, but the authority by which he lived without succumbing to sin. The wisdom He displayed to his disciples, the love that he had for the people that did not deserve it, the joy that he had in his daily life living in God's world. Yet Paul stresses that to emulate Christ, the Christians must participate in his sufferings. Even to the point of doing good with such fervour that it leads us to the grave. Yet with this eventual goal in mind we can rest that, like Christ, God will not leave us in the grave. There is a resurrection.

Connection and Application

Modern day American Christians, should heed Paul's warning against puffing oneself up. He offers only scathing rebukes of the Hellenistic and Jewish tendency to put confidence in our actions and attempts at creating our success and holiness. The believer's achievements and abilities should be considered to be loss compared to the life of Christ. The marking of being a “Christian” will look like suffering alongside Christ, as well as being brought into a new character with Christ's resurrection.

⁸ “Philippians 3.” *NET Bible*, Bible.org, <https://netbible.org/bible/Philippians+3#>. Accessed 11 May 2021. This term would carry some shock value like modern day curse words.

⁹ The Writers of Encyclopedia Britannica. “Encyclopedia Britannica.” *Philippi, Greece*, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Philippi-Greece>. Accessed 12 5 2021.

¹⁰ See Romans 4:11.

¹¹ The grammar of this text suggests that justification comes from Christ's faithfulness, even though other Pauline letters describe justification through faith in Jesus. It should be read as a solid foundation for the Christian faith, that Christ was wholly faithful to the law. “Philippians 3.” *NET Bible*, Bible.org, <https://netbible.org/bible/Philippians+3#>. Accessed 11 May 2021.