

Philippians 3:1-11

Every good parent desires the best for his or her child. Further, a praiseworthy mentor is one who guides, listens, protects, and counsels. So it is with Paul as he addresses his friends, the Philippians in Philippians 3:1-11. His main emphasis in this passage is to provide strong commentary to the believer in Jesus Christ regarding the real goal of life.¹ This passionate plea to his endeared friends is certainly that of a mentor who desires to see the pursuits of his disciples refined, protected, and attained. One remarkable aspect of the entire book of Philippians is that in the midst of his imprisonment in Rome² or Caesarea,³ Paul would be so mindful of this beloved congregation of believers; yet, in the midst of his suffering, that is exactly where he focused his thoughts.

In the passage under consideration, it is very clear through his usage of such rhetorical literary devices as repetition and sarcasm that Paul is seeking for the issues he is addressing to find residence in the hearts of his readers. First, he takes the time to warn his friends about the Jewish radicals. Next, Paul illustrates the concept of pride in and of the flesh and the achievements thereof. Certainly, he was capable of addressing these issues of false circumcision (or mutilation, as he called it) and confidence in the flesh because of his own life experience. In fact, by means of another literary device, Paul uses comparison to show the magnitude of his achievements and positions; yet, suddenly he calls all of those attainments “rubbish” or “dung.” Finally, Paul instructs the Philippians regarding the satisfaction and hope that believers should seek through intimately knowing Christ. In essence (and

¹ *The New American Standard Bible*, La Habra: Lockman Foundation, 1977.

² *Books of the Bible: Philippians*, (Galaxie Software Store) located online at <http://www.galaxie.com/btdemo/level1/program/start/books/newtest/pauline/philippi.htm>

³ Gerald F. Hawthorne. *Word Biblical Commentary 43: Philippians*. (Waco. Word Books, 1983) xxxvii.

reiteration,) he is dedicatedly pointing his beloved audience to the true purpose of the life of a believer.

As long as there has been a concept of God within the mind of sin-plagued man, there has been an opposing counterfeit for that perception of God. In like manner, there has been a counterfeit for the things of God. These imitations have most certainly been directed toward the detriment of God's people. It is in the midst of this 'thank you letter' to the Philippians⁴ that Paul so addresses some of these issues. He does this initially by bringing an awareness of those whom he refers to as the "false circumcision." These were radical Hebrews who were attempting to lure believers away from their commitment to Christ by presenting them with an objective, legalistic system. This system was that by which they could obtain a standard of pseudo-righteousness by following a set of rituals or by performing a series of tangible objectives. Paul's obvious desire for his friends, however, was that they would be highly aware of these deceitful workers and that they would cling to their commitment to Christ with a renewed hope and vision.

Philippians 3:8-11- ἀλλὰ μενοῦνγε καὶ ἠγοῦμαι πάντα ζημίαν εἶναι διὰ τὸ ὑπερέχον τῆς γνώσεως Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ τοῦ κυρίου μου δι ὃν τὰ πάντα ἐζημιώθη καὶ ἠγοῦμαι σκύβαλα ἵνα Χριστὸν κερδήσω καὶ εὐρεθῶ ἐν αὐτῷ μὴ ἔχων ἐμὴν δικαιοσύνην τὴν ἐκ νόμου ἀλλὰ τὴν διὰ πίστεως Χριστοῦ τὴν ἐκ θεοῦ δικαιοσύνην ἐπὶ τῇ πίστει τοῦ γινῶναι αὐτὸν καὶ τὴν δύναμιν τῆς ἀναστάσεως αὐτοῦ καὶ κοινωνίαν παθημάτων αὐτοῦ συμμορφιζόμενος τῷ θανάτῳ αὐτοῦ εἴ πως καταστήσω εἰς τὴν ἐξανάστασιν τὴν ἐκ νεκρῶν

In contrast, Paul also gives clear indication of his perception of a true worshipper. A person fitting this description would be one who would "worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh" (Philippians 3:3a NASB). Paul desired to model this image for his beloved audience and further sought to confirm its importance through the use of imagery and contrasts. Again, his clear intention is to

⁴ *The Open Bible Expanded Edition* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Inc. 1985), 1168.

distinguish the difference between the ‘pitiful-ness’ of that which is false with the praise of that which is true.

While this same system of Jews may not be present within Twenty-First Century America, a pertinent application for the contemporary reader can certainly be derived and applied. This would include a warning against those who would lead one into error, whether through legalism or other false doctrine, and also an admonition to the modern Christian to seek to possess the heart of a true worshipper: one who “worship[s] in the Spirit of God” (Philippians 3:3a NASB).

In his contrasts, Paul proceeds to warn his audience regarding having a sense of confidence in the flesh. Certainly, by human standards in general and by Jewish standards in particular, Paul was well-equipped to glory in his humanity. His rearing as a “Hebrew of Hebrews” (Philippians 3:5b NIV) is observed in fullness by his becoming a rabbi at the age of thirty.⁵ Even his upbringing in the city of Tarsus had equipped him with an access to knowledge and culture that was unequalled by many of those around him⁶; yet, in the midst of all of Paul’s reasons to glory, he chose to count those once important objectives as loss and instead, to glory in Christ.

The obvious consequential message is that Christians of modernity should beware of the magnetism of pride as it is capable of causing an individual to glory in self and totally miss the glory of Christ. This pride also has the capability of creating a false sense of self. It further, may cause one to revert to the act of becoming as one of the false circumcision about

⁵ James Orr, ed., *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia Electronic Edition*, QuickVerse VII (Cedar Rapids, Iowa: Parsons Technology, Inc., 1998), P | Paul the Apostle | III Chronology of Paul’s Career | 2. Crucial Points | (1) The Death of Stephen.

⁶ James Orr, ed., *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia Electronic Edition*, QuickVerse VII (Cedar Rapids, Iowa: Parsons Technology, Inc., 1998), P | Paul the Apostle | IV His Equipment | 1. The City of Tarsus.

whom Paul had previously given warning. Stated another way, the believer should count his intelligence, social status, and every other humanly attained aspect, regardless of how well achieved and acknowledged, as loss and instead, should glory on Christ.

As Paul concludes this brief section of Philippians 3:1-11, he comes to his important theme that there is most certainly the greatest value in knowing Christ Jesus and that in such ‘knowledge’ is found hope and direction for one’s life. As an individual gets to ‘know’ Christ, s/he is engaged in a relationship that is both intimate and growing. In fact, the Greek word for “know” here is *γνώσις*⁷ and is used very similarly to its Hebrew counterpart *יָדַע*⁸ as it is used in Genesis 4:1, (“And Adam knew Eve his wife...” KJV). Here there is an implication of actual intimate contact between the two persons. This IS the thought used by Paul as he conveys the concept that believers should “know Christ”; there must be an intimate relationship between the Christian and Christ and this relationship is the true “meaning of life.” This also is a mark of one who “worships in the Spirit of God” (Philippians 3:3a NASB).

There are several issues that seem somewhat confusing when making a ‘surface read’ of the entirety of the book of Philippians in general and the selected passage in particular. First, it seems unusual that Paul would exhort a people to “rejoice” when observed with the understanding that his audience was a much-persecuted people living in a very oppressive time and situation. Secondly, the fact that Paul could even commend joy to the people is peculiar because Paul was writing from a place of imprisonment. Certainly, imprisonment

⁷ Jeff Ginn and Jeanette Kreutner, ed., *Thayer’s Greek Definitions Electronic Edition STEP Files*, (Cedar Rapids: Parsons Technology, Inc., 1999).

⁸ Ginn, Jeff, and Jeanette Kreutner, ed., *Brown-Driver-Briggs’ Hebrew Definitions Electronic Edition STEP Files*, (Cedar Rapids: Parsons Technology, Inc., 1999).

would not appear conducive to either the thought or the exercise of joy. Thirdly, Paul was focused on the protection of his friends from these radical Jews. This seems unusual, again, because of Paul's imprisonment. It is so clear, however, that Paul had a deep affection for the Philippians and that he was not simply seeking to instruct them on a certain topic. Instead, he was acting in the role of a mentor, a friend, and perhaps, a pastor; he was specifically concerned for the well-being of this dearly-loved people.

As further application for this passage is sought for modernity, it is important that one seeks to keep his/her focus on Christ with remembrance that the goal is to count all natural successes as rubbish so that Christ may be gained. This is not to negate educational pursuits, prestigious efforts, or attainment desires; instead, the emphasized goal is that believers may be found in Christ. This should be deemed as the act of not having a false sense of pride and self-aggrandizement. Further, it should be construed also as not having a false righteousness derived from the Law, like the Judaizers. Instead, the believer should take rest and satisfaction only in that which comes through faith in Christ Jesus. It is to this ultimate goal that Paul was admonishing his Philippian friends. It is to this same ultimate goal that believers of the Twenty-First Century are to be challenged and encouraged. With this thought in mind, it might be supposed that if Paul were to pen this same passage in contemporary English, it might perhaps be written as follows:

And finally, my dear friends, be sure that you are full of joy from the Lord. You see, even though I have written this in the past and am writing you again in a very repetitious manner; it is no trouble for me. You must realize, however, that it is a message of precaution for you.

Be on the alert for those dogs. Be cautious of evil workers. Yes, even beware of those phony believers. You see, we are the true believers; we worship in the Spirit of God and put our glory in Christ Jesus. In fact, we put no confidence in the flesh. Now I want to remind you, I actually have good cause to have earthly confidence. In fact, if anyone has a reason to put confidence in the flesh, I have more than you all do. I have all of the right

pedigree: circumcised on the eighth day, a descendent of the nation of Israel; in particular of the tribe of Benjamin. In fact, I am a Hebrew of Hebrews. Moreover, concerning obedience to the Law, I was a Pharisee and followed the Law to perfection. Regarding my enthusiasm, I was a zealous persecutor of the church, and regarding the righteousness that is in the Law, I was found blameless.

Nevertheless, for all of those things that made me look impressive, I now count them as loss for the sake of Christ. Even more than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of intimately knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. In fact, for Him I have suffered the loss of all things, but that's okay. I count them as mere garbage so that I may gain Christ and that I may be found in Him. You see, I do not want to have a righteousness of my own which is earned through obedience to the Law. Instead, I want that which is given through faith in Christ; the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. I want to know Him and to experience both the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings. I want to be to His death so that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead. I want to fully know Him!

As this writing is observed in contemporary paraphrase, it hopefully becomes obvious that Paul had a desire for his friends to fully experience Christ. As the contemporary reader pursues this passage in similar manner, it rests within that reader to receive this word and to act upon it.

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