

Philippians 3: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Philippians chapter 3 I have more. Circumcised on the eighth day of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews, as to the law a Pharisee, as to zeal a persecutor of the church, as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ, and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith, that I may know him 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 from the dead.

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 toward 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 if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. 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.

[2 : 1 6] Their end is destruction, their guard is their belly, and they glory in their 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.

In most translations, Philippians 3 begins in a surprising manner. We are at the midpoint of the letter, but the first word of the chapter is finally. While some have speculated that we have two separate letters of Paul that have been merged together, there are far less extreme explanations, such as the possibility that the Greek term used here might better be translated, and so, serving to reiterate the exhortation of chapter 2 verse 18.

The opening statement probably concludes the preceding section, before Paul switches to another point. Beyond the surprising opening, some scholars have argued that the shift in Paul's argument at this point is a further indication that we are dealing with combined letters, rather than a single one.

However, the shift is by no means as abrupt as some argue, and indeed there are some robust thematic ties between chapters 2 and 3, a point that people like N.T. Wright have made in considerable detail.

Christ's voluntary emptying himself of his prerogatives parallels with Paul's own emptying himself of his Jewish prerogatives in this chapter. It might well also set the stage for the concluding statement of this chapter, as we will see.

[3 : 51] While Paul seems to have either written to or taught the Philippians on some of these matters already, teaching them the same lesson again is not onerous for Paul, while guarding the Philippians against potential dangers will be of great value to them.

He warns the Philippians against some group of Jews in a way that is little short of startling. He refers to these people as dogs, evildoers, and as those who mutilate the flesh.

Each of these terms would be more commonly expected to be a reference to Gentiles, outsiders to the covenant people of God. Dogs were unclean scavengers. Evildoers were those who broke the law, non-observant Jews and pagan Gentiles.

Perhaps most shocking, the word for mutilation plays off the word for circumcision. In the Old Testament, circumcision was the sign of the covenant and membership of the people of God. However, mutilation of the flesh was a practice of paganism, strictly forbidden to Jews.

Males whose genitals were mutilated were also excluded from the assembly of Israel. However, here people who would usually associate themselves with circumcision are described not as the circumcision, but as the mutilation.

[5 : 02] Paul's statement here would have a clear shock effect. His shocking challenge to his Jewish opponents continues in verse 3. Not only does he refer to them as the mutilation, he also claims the title of the circumcision from them.

We, Jews and Gentile Christians, who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh, are the true circumcision. Presumably, Paul is alluding here to the reality of the new covenant, promised back in Deuteronomy chapter 30 verse 6.

And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live. The true eschatological people of God are marked out, not by circumcision and observance of the ceremonies of the Jewish Torah, but by the Spirit of God and true worship.

Paul points out, against those seeking to place confidence in the flesh, that if they want to play that game, he could easily beat them at it. He makes a similar argument in 2 Corinthians chapter 11 verses 21 to 22.

In a popular reading of these verses of Philippians, Paul was once the stereotypical Pelagian.

[6 : 26] He believed that he could earn God's favour through his ethical exertion. After his encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus, Paul came to the awareness that his own righteousness, his moral effort, was insufficient, and that instead of trusting in his own good works, he should trust in the perfect divine righteousness of Christ instead.

This reading is a compelling one in many respects. On the surface of things it seems to make sense of the passage, and more importantly it articulates a deeply Christian logic, a truth that has proved liberating for countless persons over the centuries, declaring the fact of God's free acceptance of us in his Son.

On closer examination, however, cracks start to appear. One of the first things that might trouble the reader holding this interpretation is that, of the things that Paul formerly counted gain, most of them do not actually have to do with his own works.

Rather, a number of them describe advantages that Paul enjoyed purely by virtue of his birth or ancestry. Whatever we might say about his later Torah observance and zeal, being circumcised on the eighth day, being an Israelite, being a member of the tribe of Benjamin, and having impeccable Hebrew pedigree, were largely accidents of Paul's birth, unrelated to anything that he himself had done.

Instead of serving as signs of moral attainment, these biographical details were indicators of covenant status, signs that Paul was situated, or so he once thought, on the inside track of God's purposes and blessings.

[7 : 56] We need not, of course, just switch from a reading focusing entirely upon performance to one that speaks only of status. Both of these things are present. However, matters come into clearer focus when we understand the sort of identity that Paul once boasted in, not least because similar sorts of identities continue to exert a powerful force in our own world.

If the identity that Paul is describing here is not that of the classic legalist, what is it? I believe we could think of an analogous sort of identity in the Patriot.

Paul wasn't that unlike the Patriot who takes pride in the fact that he is, say, a true Englishman, as opposed to all those unwelcome immigrants. His family has been present on English soil way back before 1066.

His forefathers have fought for their country in various wars. From as early as he can remember, he has been steeped in English culture. He flies the cross of St. George from the top of his house.

He has a painting of the Queen over his fireplace. He attends church in his local Church of England parish. He proudly buys British, and he follows the fortunes of the English cricket team.

[9 : 06] He might have been a Russian, a French, a Turk, or a Prussian, or perhaps Italian, but in spite of all temptations to belong to other nations, he remains an Englishman. The performance of such a Patriot isn't undertaken to earn English status, but to demonstrate and broadcast his claims to it, to mark him out from those who aren't Englishmen, or who are lesser Englishmen, and more fully to ground and celebrate his sense of identity in it.

The roots of Paul's former identity lay in the Torah, the law that was given at Sinai, Israel's covenant charter, its Magna Carta as it were. As Paul committed himself to the Torah and its way of life, he was showing himself to be a true Israelite.

The flesh which he speaks of probably refers to something broader than sinful human nature alone. It also encompasses the familial and social networks to which people belong.

Paul's attitude towards this status is striking. He now regards it as dung and as loss for the sake of Christ. For the sake of Christ, Paul suffers the loss of all things, surrendering them so that he might be found in Christ.

Rather than the status that he once so highly valued, Paul now wishes to pursue the status of being in Christ, a status that entails being conformed to Christ's death in order to share in his resurrection.

[10 : 25] When we step back and look at the picture that emerges, analogies between Paul's account of his own story and that of Christ's humility in taking the form of a servant in chapter 2 become quite obvious.

Both Paul and Christ enjoyed a privileged status and both regarded that status as something that they would not take advantage of, giving up privilege for the sake of service in the way of the cross.

Being conformed to Christ entails sharing the shape of his story, refusing to aggrandize ourselves in our privileged statuses and our power and following the path of service instead.

At this point, an analogy between the identity that Paul describes and our various privileged forms of status might become apparent to us. Although Paul the legalist trying to earn his own salvation might not strike so close to home to some of us, Paul the privileged person, who is called to adopt an entirely new posture towards his privilege, might prove to be uncomfortably so.

Privilege, although a term that is often misused, is a powerful reality in our social, civic and political life. Whether the privileges in question arise from our race, our gender, our nationality, our ethnicity, our language, our socioeconomic status, our class, our education, our age, our physical ability, or some other factor or combination of factors, we need to become aware of the advantages that we enjoy over others, often merely by virtue of the accident of birth.

[11 : 54] These are all ways in which we can habitually take confidence in the flesh. They can be ways in which, like Paul prior to his conversion, we assess our worth. In the face of God's grace given to us in Jesus Christ, and in the light of the example that Christ gives to us in his self-humiliation, we must think of those things, from which we formally derived a sense of self-worth, very differently.

Paul, as if tallying up the value of his assets, suddenly assigns all of his former riches of status he once so prized, all that was once assessed as gain, to the loss column.

On account of this assessment, he is willing to suffer the loss of all of his losses, in order that he might gain Christ, who is the only true gain. Christ was found in human form, now Paul seeks to be found in Christ.

Just as Christ took the form of a servant and emptied himself of his prerogatives, so Paul must do the same. Formerly, he had depended upon a righteousness of his own that came from the law.

While the law was a gift of God, it seemingly marked out Torah-observant Israelites in a way that led many to believe that their standing with God was founded upon their own worthiness in some sense, not so much as something that they had earned, but as something that was fittingly given to them over others.

[13 : 13] However, the true source of standing with God is not Torah reception and observance, but the free gift of God that comes through the faith of Christ. The faith of Christ here is a faith that is entirely ordered around Christ.

It is a faith that receives the free gift of Christ. It is a faith that looks to Christ. It is a faith that bears the impress of Christ's own faithfulness and follows in the path that he himself set.

Paul speaks of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus in verse 8, and in verse 10 unpacks the meaning and significance of this, relating it to the reception of the righteousness of God.

To know Christ and the power of his resurrection is to know God's righteousness. The resurrection was the vindication or the justification of Christ. It was God's publicly enacted sentence in Christ's favour that actively declared that Christ was in right standing with God.

Christ was, as Romans 4.25 teaches, raised for our justification. We currently share in his vindication by the Spirit in anticipation of our own justification on the last day.

[14 : 18] However, sharing in Christ's resurrection vindication requires our sharing in his sufferings and being conformed to him in his death. We must be emptied of ourselves and our prerogatives if we are to receive the one who emptied himself for us.

We might here think of Galatians chapter 2 verse 20. I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.

We might also think of Paul's teaching in Romans chapter 6 where he speaks of our being united with Christ in a death like his in baptism so that we will be assured of our being united with him in a resurrection like his.

Baptism declares and portrays what is true of the Christian that through union with Christ by faith and passing into participation in the reality of his death we are assured of enjoying the vindication in his resurrection being declared righteous in the present in anticipation of the verdict that will be declared over us and our works at the last day.

Paul recognises that he is still on the way he has not arrived yet. Complacency is dangerous. In union with Christ we have a reality-filled assurance and anticipation of the final verdict in our favour.

[15 : 36] That verdict, however, has yet to be declared so we should not be presumptuous but should faithfully press on. We aren't ultimately the ones winning this for ourselves. Christ's laying claim on us precedes anything that we do.

Our pressing on in faith is merely a response to his grace to us. Paul compares this to a race that must be run. The runner must not look back but must fix his eyes firmly upon the prize and put every muscle into the struggle to obtain it.

Paul has been concerned throughout the letter to ground the Philippians in an appropriate way of thinking. He speaks of the mindset that he has just described in himself as characteristic of the mature.

Those who do not yet think this way should grow into such an understanding as they mature in their faith. It is important that, even though we haven't attained our final goal yet, we hold on to what we have attained and don't lose ground once gained.

As he often does, Paul presents himself as an example for the people to whom he is writing to follow. Paul imitates Christ and others should imitate him as a worked example of what this looks like.

[16 : 43] Imitation is a key element of Paul's ethics. Christ doesn't just give us laws or instructions but a pattern in himself to follow and patterns to follow in his ministers too.

His ministers must set this pattern for the people that they minister to. Their behaviour gives people a clear sense of what faithfulness looks like in practice. So often it is in the lives of faithful saints that the truth of the gospel most powerfully impresses itself upon us.

We have also seen in this chapter that Paul presents his pattern of behaviour as both like Christ's, as described in the preceding chapter, and also as an entrance into Christ's life.

Choosing patterns to follow is really important because few are faithful in a way worthy of our emulation and there are a very great many whose way of life is entirely contrary to Christ.

Paul says that we must keep our eyes upon those who live according to the right pattern while recognising those who walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Walking as an enemy of the cross of Christ is living in a manner that is entirely opposed to the pattern of life that Christ left for us in his emptying of himself and his going to the cross.

[17 : 52] Christians must follow the way of the cross, taking up their own crosses, whatever these crosses might be, and walking in Christ's steps. Those who reject the way of the cross have their final end in destruction.

By contrast, as the faithful people of God, we should follow the cross-shaped pattern that Christ left for us and have our citizenship in heaven. We expect Christ's revelation from heaven to vindicate us, transforming our bodies to be like his glorious resurrection body so that we will share in his status and glory.

These closing verses might have especially resonated with the Philippians and, as N.T. Wright has suggested, may have presented them with an indication of the form that their self-emptying might have to take.

Philippi was a Roman colony, which meant that its citizens had the great privilege of having citizenship in the city of Rome too. This is a status that many of them would have greatly prized, much as Paul had once prized his identity as a Torah-observant Jew.

Like Paul, however, the status they once so valued must be reassessed in the light of something that greatly exceeds it in worth. Philippians, you think your Roman citizenship is of immense value and sets you above others?

[19 : 09] Well, your real citizenship is in heaven, where we look not to Caesar but to Christ as our Lord and Saviour. Thinking in such a way and acting in terms of it might require the Philippians to empty themselves of some of the privileges that they once so valued as Roman citizens, counting them as loss in order to gain citizenship of a far greater city.

A question to consider. What might be some of the things that, like Paul's identity as a Torah-observant Jew or the Philippians' identity as Roman citizens, we might be called to empty ourselves of in order to gain Christ?

What might this emptying of ourselves or counting as loss look like in practice?