

## **Paul's Epistle to the Philippians**

### **Chapter Three**

#### **A Stern Warning**

##### *True Circumcision 3:1-11*

The shift just after Philippians 3:1 seems rather abrupt; a move from the practical word about Epaphroditus to a surprisingly stark and sober warning. 3:1 looks like the end not only of the preceding paragraph, but almost like the end of the main letter itself. Scholars who think that Philippians is a composite of two original letters find some of their evidence here.

The theme of rejoicing has already been evident and will mark the conclusion of our epistle as well. But now having been told to rejoice, the Philippians are told to look out.

We cannot be sure who the dogs are who mutilate the flesh (3:2), but the mutilation of the flesh is almost certainly a reference to circumcision. It seems most plausible that Paul has in mind here opponents rather like the opponents he decries in the Letter to the Galatians, Jews or “Judaizers” who insist that the new covenant in Jesus requires some attention to the old covenant in Moses, especially to the rite of circumcision.

When Paul says that those of us who boast in Christ are the true circumcision he certainly intends to include the Gentiles in the Philippian churches. True circumcision is not a matter of the flesh but of the spirit, indeed of God's own Spirit.

Paul moves from a very narrow understanding of confidence in the flesh—confidence in the validity of circumcision to a much richer understanding of “flesh” as the realm of human achievement and misplaced self-confidence. Both here and in Galatians it seems as though Paul understands the distinction between this (passing) age and the (glorious) age to come, as the distinction between the age of the flesh and the age of the Spirit. Those who boast in Christ are

empowered to live by the Spirit even in this time that is passing away; they have a foretaste of the kingdom.

Because “flesh” is no longer simply circumcision but the whole realm of human achievement and self-confidence, Paul is now enabled to tell us how he would have every right to boast in the flesh—were he to take advantage of that privilege. It is a frequent rhetorical device of Paul to tell us that he doesn’t intend to mention some achievement or accomplishment and thereby, of course, mentions it anyway. He has no confidence in the flesh, but if he did, what a story he could tell! He starts with the particular sign of fleshly life, circumcision and then extends the range to the host of ways in which he was an exemplary member of his community. He was so zealous that he persecuted the church; he was so righteous that he was blameless.

Many readers have noticed that this self-description by Paul of his life prior to his call as an apostle does not fit very well into a popular image of Paul. In that image, Paul was trying desperately to obey the law in all its particulars. He found that total obedience impossible and was plagued by guilt until (perhaps reading Genesis 15) he discovered that he was justified by faith, not by keeping the law. This reading is influenced in fact by the belief that Romans 7:24 “Wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from this body of death?” is an autobiographical statement about Paul’s own earlier frustration when he tried perfectly to keep the law. This reading of Paul’s life also comes rather close to the way in which Luther understood Paul and exceedingly close to the way in which Luther understood Luther.

There is a growing consensus that in this passage Paul is not being autobiographical but is talking about the condition of humankind apart from the grace of Christ and what our text in Philippians suggests rather is that Paul was a confident and even boastful law-keeper, rejoicing in his successes and not obsessed with his failures.

This brings us to what Paul does want to affirm, not that his life as a loyal Jew was guilt-ridden or awful, but that it was called into question by the immeasurably greater gift of grace in Jesus Christ.

In the verses that follow (vv. 7-11) there is some dispute whether righteousness comes through the faith of the believer or through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ. The Greek phrase *pistis Christou* might mean either one. What is clear is that however we decide that issue, the righteousness we receive from God is first of all God's gift in Jesus Christ and only secondarily a matter of the believer's faith. But the fact that the believer's faith is subsidiary to Christ's gracious death and resurrection does not mean that that faith doesn't count. (See Paul on Abraham as a kind of proto-Christian in Gal 3 and Romans 4. There it is clearly the faith of the believer that is reckoned as righteousness.)

Paul's prayer for redemption is that he might be conformed to the image of Christ, participate in Christ's drama. He has already told us that he is undergoing suffering. Now we see that that suffering participates in Christ's suffering. As Christ died and rose again, Paul's hope is that he might finally participate in Christ's resurrection. The language here is somewhat different than the confident final resurrection hope of 1 Thessalonians 4 or 1 Corinthians 15. The "somehow" makes Paul sound doubtful of his own destiny as he seldom is. The claim that he already lives part of Christ's resurrection life reminds us that for him, the new age, the age of the Spirit, the age of the Risen Christ, has already begun.

### *Life in Hope 3:12-21*

For Christians who believe that once saved we are always saved and for Christians who want to claim that the righteousness of Christ is imputed to believers on the cross and in our

baptism, it may seem a little puzzling that Paul here seems to speak about growing in Christ. Here Paul seems to sound less like Martin Luther and more like John Wesley with his belief in continuing growth in holiness for the faithful. This probably suggests that we need Luther and Wesley and a host of others in our interpretive conversation.

In vs. 15 Paul returns to the exhortation of 2:2, asking the Philippians to “be of one mind.” Whether we can read back into chapter two the evident disputes and troubles of 3:17-21 is not altogether clear. What seems clearer is that these verses at the end of chapter 3 take us back to the dogs and evil workers, the party that lives by the flesh. When Paul says that their glory is their shame it seems likely that he is referring to circumcision and the boasting that goes with that. Yet now fleshiness also includes some kind of attention to the belly. In Galatians Paul seems concerned with issues of keeping a kosher table, but at least on first reading it seems odd to equate scrupulosity about diet with making a god of our bellies. It may well be that Paul has in view here more than one kind of fleshiness. On the one hand, we can be fleshly by our over attention to the rules; on the other hand, we can be fleshly by ignoring the rules in gluttony and other forms of licentiousness. The exact referent for Paul’s warnings remains somewhat unclear.

What is clear is that Paul contrasts the children of the flesh, who are citizens of this age and this world and bound for destruction, with the children of the Spirit who are citizens of the heavenly realm (sojourners for now) and bound for glory.

The brief but powerful reference to the returning savior who will come down from that heavenly realm to make the world subject to him recalls the much fuller description in 1 Corinthians 15:20-28. Both passages remind us that Paul’s deep hope was bound to his strong expectation. The Age of the Spirit will overcome the age of the flesh and occupy its kingdoms. Christ will reign over all. The strong affirmation of the hymn in chapter two now moves toward

the strong hope of the promise in chapter three; God has given Jesus the name which is above every name. All things will be subject to him; and every tongue proclaim that Jesus Christ is Lord.

*Questions:*

1. How do you or your church understand the relationship between redemption in Jesus Christ and continued progress in obedience, or holiness, or sanctification? Are we supposed to get better as Christians as we go along?
2. For Paul the “fleshly” life seems to have included confidence in circumcision and some kind of dietary mistake—maybe gluttony. Where are places in our own lives when we seem to have put our trust in passing (and even self-centered) values?
3. Is the suggestion that our stories participate in Christ’s story—his death and resurrection—still a persuasive way of thinking about the Christian life? What other understandings of our relationship to Christ might seem persuasive to you?

Further Reading:

Todd A. Nanos, “Paul’s Reversal of Jews Calling Gentiles ‘Dogs’ (Philippians 3:2): 1600 Years of an Ideological Tale Wagging an Exegetical Dog?” *Biblical Interpretation* 17 (2009) 448-82.

Scott Ryan, “The Reversal of Rhetoric in Philippians 3:1-11,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 39 (2012) 67-77.