

## Paul's Past

We are back in the New Testament Book of Philippians; today we are starting chapter 3.

This Book of Philippians was first a *letter* to the church in Philippi from the Apostle

Paul. Pastor Paul founded the church in Philippi, bringing the Gospel to the Gentiles (non-Jews) in Greece.

We are calling the series **Joyride**... because **joy** is a predominate, unifying theme; we'll see that theme again today in our passage.

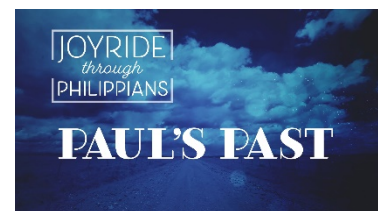
I have in mind to break chapter 3 into three messages:

- Paul's Past (today)
- Paul's Present, and
- Paul's Future

While I suppose we ought to be interested in Paul's story for the sake of Paul's **story** (certainly an important person)... I hope we will see how Paul's story intersects and applies to our stories.

Our stories are important too, and powerful. Seeing Paul's story like this should remind us of the importance of our own stories. There is power in our stories, especially our stories of faith (sometime we call that our testimonies).

It is easy for us to forget that we don't necessarily need to argue every theological point and answer every difficult question to spread the good news of the Gospel. I'm all in favor of good theology and such... but, more often than not, the best words we have to share are **our** words. Sure... let's expand our Bible knowledge and think through theologies, but let's not underestimate the **power** of our stories of faith. Let's tell our stories of God's closeness, perhaps especially during difficult times. Tell our stories of how Jesus rescues us. Tell how God provides and guides and cares.



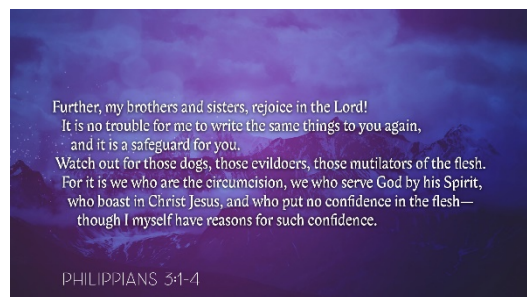
Here in chapter 3 we do have *the good stuff* upon which we can build our theologies and such... but we also, perhaps more importantly, have **Paul's story**... a testimony of one miraculously *turned around* and saved. A story of a guy who is perhaps in some ways like us.

We have Paul's story that includes a reflection on his **past**.

Chapter 3 starts with a shout that reminds us of our *theme* for Philippians:

Further, my brothers and sisters, **rejoice** in the Lord!<sup>1</sup>

There, again, is that command for **joy**. No matter the circumstance, the victory enjoyed, the defeat suffered, whatever we are coming out of, or heading into... rejoice!



It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you.<sup>2</sup>

Pastor Paul acknowledges that we have to rehearse the Gospel, over and over again, letting it sink in and overtake every aspect of life. We need to be reminded to rejoice. We need to rehearse and recite and remember the Gospel. We read and reread God's word. We remind each other of our stories. We repeat the good things, *and* the **warnings**... and here is a warning:

<sup>2</sup> Watch out for those dogs, those evildoers, those mutilators of the flesh.<sup>3</sup>

This is an **insult** of the highest order.

In our culture, there are many who cherish their dogs. We invite them into our families, and often put up with bad behavior from our dogs that we would never tolerate from our kids.



<sup>1</sup> *The New International Version*. (2011). (Php 3:1). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

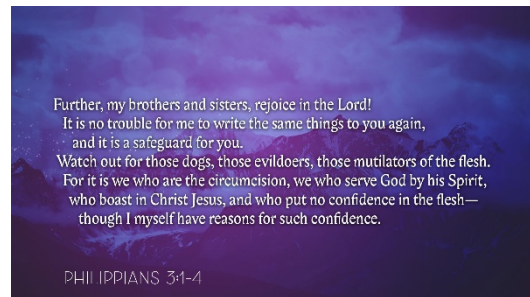
<sup>2</sup> *The New International Version*. (2011). (Php 3:1). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

<sup>3</sup> *The New International Version*. (2011). (Php 3:2). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

If I called you a *dog*, you might think of that as a compliment because at your house dogs are treated pretty well.

But that was not the case in Paul's culture. In his Jewish culture, dogs were **unclean**. And in Roman and Greek culture, dogs were generally regarded as a nuisance. Calling someone a dog in that culture might be more like calling someone a rat or a snake in ours.

The **dogs**, and evildoers to whom Paul was referring were those who insisted on *adding* to the Gospel of Grace. They were those Jewish Christians who were devoted to imposing Jewish law and custom on **all** Christians.



We are going to see a lot of talk here about *circumcision*, a mark that distinguished the Jews... but circumcision should be understood as more than a mere procedure. When Paul refers to circumcision, he certainly means *circumcision*... just not **merely** circumcision, but all of the rituals and culture associated with Jewish faith.

<sup>2</sup> Watch out for those dogs, those evildoers, those mutilators of the flesh. <sup>3</sup> For it is we who are the circumcision, we who serve God by his Spirit, who boast in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh<sup>4</sup>

Jesus fulfills the Jewish law. Every law and custom before Jesus can be understood as **pointing to** Jesus... and once Jesus invaded human history, fulfilling the Law and customs, everything changed. (Just as when Jesus invades each of our lives when we believe, everything changes.)

Circumcision, for example, which was a ritual and mark that set God's people apart, reminding them that they were uniquely chosen by God to fulfill His purposes, is fulfilled in Jesus. What was a mere mark and ritual is now more powerfully fulfilled by God's Spirit. By the Spirit, in Jesus, we are God's people by faith. Our confidence is in God, through faith in Christ Jesus; our confidence is not in the flesh... not in anything we can accomplish, no mark or ritual, only faith in Jesus.

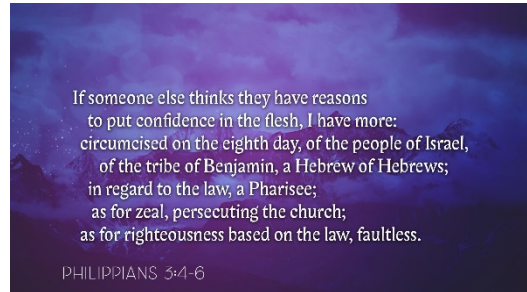
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<sup>4</sup> The New International Version. (2011). (Php 3:2-3). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

To demonstrate this lack of confidence in the flesh (in human endeavor), Paul hold himself up as an example... an example of one who, if confidence in the flesh could matter, he would have reason for confidence.

though I myself have reasons for such confidence.

If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: <sup>5</sup> circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; <sup>6</sup> as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.<sup>5</sup>



He was a *Hebrew of Hebrews*; Paul came with all that heritage could bring... the stuff that came in his **genetic** makeup, as well as the family and culture into which he was born. From the standpoint of faith, Paul had *Hebrew privilege*.

In our culture, **where** we are born doesn't *have to be* an insurmountable barrier, but being born into specific circumstances can certainly help. Factors like race, gender, finances, relationships and such don't necessarily determine anyone's future... but they certainly can be factors that have an impact. (Sometimes we think **we** hit a homerun in life, forgetting we were born on third base.) Yes, there can be *white privilege* or *male privilege* or *tall-guy privilege* in certain circumstances. Paul had *Hebrew privilege*.

But it wasn't merely genes and the culture into which he was born; Paul **worked** at it too. He studied and applied himself to the strict rules of the Pharisees. He was faultless, orthodox, when it came to the law.

And he had **zeal**. This one is particularly ironic, isn't it?

<sup>6</sup> as for zeal, persecuting the church<sup>6</sup>

He **fought** for his faith, **purifying it** by persecuting that wrongheaded, start-up faction, the Christian church. It illustrates how Paul was so misguided with his confidence in his flesh. His past, his former confidence in the flesh, was in direct opposition to the Gospel, the faith that saved him, the faith for which would die.

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<sup>5</sup> *The New International Version*. (2011). (Php 3:4–6). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

<sup>6</sup> *The New International Version*. (2011). (Php 3:6). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.



<sup>7</sup> But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. <sup>8</sup> What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage<sup>7</sup>

If you have other translations open, you might see that word *garbage* translated as *rubbish*, or even *dung*. All of those are reasonably good translations, but *dung* might be the best... utterly useless and disgusting. We're not talking about the sort of stuff we might put in the recycling bin, the sort of stuff that we wouldn't mind keeping around in the room until it was convenient to relocate to another bin; we are talking about the gross stuff, the stinky stuff, the stuff we want to flush away, getting it as far away from us as possible. We are talking about the stuff that we need to get out of the house, because it is not only unpleasant, it is hazardous to our health. If we don't consider it garbage, refuse, rubbish and dung, getting rid of it... it will make us sick.

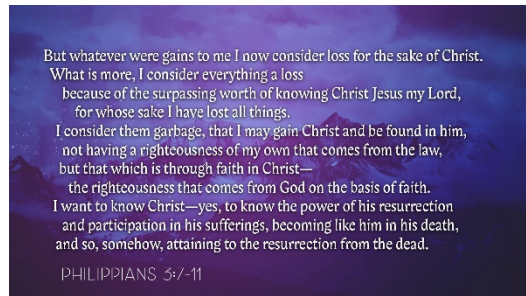
I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ <sup>9</sup> and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.<sup>8</sup>

The righteousness that comes from **us** is often satisfying, at least for a season, but it is ***puny*** compared to the righteousness that comes from God. Whatever righteousness we build, even if we find it impressive from our limited perspective, is only an *anthill* compared to the mountain of righteousness that comes from God, which is ours by faith.

And, of course, our righteousness can be (and often is) so ***unsatisfying***, usually unimpressive when we are honest with ourselves.

This is the Good News! God calls us to set aside our righteousness as the garbage that it is and receive His righteousness.

Considering the choice, it should be so very simple. We should say with Paul: “I want to know Christ!”



<sup>7</sup> The New International Version. (2011). (Php 3:7–8). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

<sup>8</sup> The New International Version. (2011). (Php 3:8–9). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

<sup>10</sup> I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, <sup>11</sup> and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead. <sup>9</sup>

I want to know Christ. I want to know the power of his resurrection. This is the power that is ours through faith... power that brings the dead to life, power that reverses a death sentence, power that reverses any power to kill and destroy.

I want to know Christ... **with** participation in his sufferings. God suffered in Jesus. His suffering gives meaning to our suffering. His suffering gives purpose to our suffering, adds promise to our suffering. His death gives us life.

I want to know Christ, and be known by Christ. I want to be identified as Christ's.

So... what is our story? What is our past?

What do we bring?

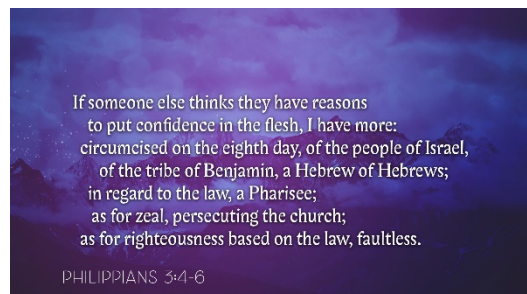
Do we bring our **righteousness**?

Paul's list of attributes establishing his righteousness may seem pretty far removed from anything in our experience... so it might be easy to not make any application to ourselves.

But don't we do the same sort of thing pretty routinely?

Being a Hebrew of Hebrews, a Pharisee, a zealous persecutor of the Church... these were all parts of Paul's past, his story of the righteousness he pursued... confidence in the flesh upon which he based his righteousness.

Our culture blesses righteous acts for righteous causes. We do it with the political positions we take. We do it with health and food choices. We do it with environmental causes; we know that the most righteous among us drive a Prius, recycle **and** compost.



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<sup>9</sup> The New International Version. (2011). (Php 3:10–11). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Our *Christian culture* puts confidence in the flesh too; we so often take things that start as beautiful and reasonable acts of **worship** and turn them into *contests* and *measuring sticks* by which we measure righteousness.

- **Prayer** is a wonderful and vital part of the Christian life... until we measure our righteousness by the time spent in prayer and our attendance at prayer meetings.
- **Fasting** is a powerful spiritual discipline... until we begin to wear it as a badge of piety.
- Choices for **holiness**, deciding what we do and don't do, can be meaningful disciplines in our life... until we turn that into a weapon by which we elevate ourselves as holy, and condemn others.
- Raising our voices in **worship** is beautiful... until make it into a performance for *our* glory instead of an offering for **His** glory.

Need I go on?

When we bring our supposed righteousness to impress God, others, or even ourselves, that is when we find ourselves in the place when we need to **repent of our righteousness** for the misplaced confidence in the flesh that it is.

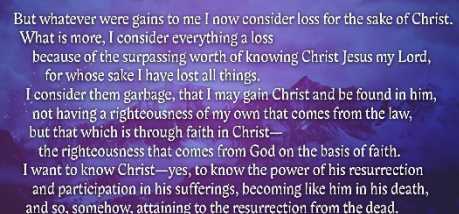
Do we bring our **unrighteousness**?

While Paul put “persecuting the church” in his list of evidence of his *righteousness*, it was clearly *unrighteousness* too.

Paul's story is a miracle story. This one, powerful, unrighteousness (persecuting the Church), *could* have, perhaps *should* have, kept him from Jesus, and especially doing the work of Jesus.

Yet, just as Paul counted his righteousness as garbage, so too was his unrighteousness. **Everything** was a loss, all things, so that Paul (and we) gain Christ.

Our righteousness is stinky garbage, and so is our unrighteousness... so let's set it far aside, gaining Christ, being found in Him, attaining His righteousness through faith.



But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ.  
What is more, I consider everything a loss  
because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord,  
for whose sake I have lost all things.  
I consider them garbage, 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 is through faith in Christ—  
the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.  
I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection  
and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death,  
and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.

PHILIPPIANS 3:7-11

I want to know Christ!

Whatever it is... good or bad, fervent or lazy, the stuff we were born with or the stuff we *strived for* to earn... all of that is considered loss, set aside, so we can know what truly saves, so that we can know Christ Jesus.



Today is a day to know Christ, to believe, to receive by faith what Jesus provides.

Let's set aside the garbage, both the garbage of our unrighteousness and the garbage of our righteousness. Let's put our confidence in Christ.

Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved<sup>10</sup>

Know Christ today.

We sing these songs as a confession of belief. The tunes are nice and all... but what is most important, and powerful in our lives, is the out-loud confession of faith.

If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.<sup>11</sup>

Know Christ... and know that knowing Christ is the best, greatest thing!

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<sup>10</sup> *The New International Version*. (2011). (Ac 16:31). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

<sup>11</sup> *The New International Version*. (2011). (Ro 10:9). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.