
THE VALUE OF SPIRITUAL ATTAINMENT

Philippians 3:1-11
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An English lady, a strong partisan of the Church of England, was suddenly stricken with a bitter illness, and death was certain. Her minister was visiting, and she remarked. It is kind of you to come to me, but it is in vain. It is too late to do anything for me now. Mine has been a Christless Christianity, and I must abide by the consequences. I have been a good church woman and have passed as a good Christian. I have been diligent in my attendance at church. I have given generously. I have admired Christianity and have tried to bring its precepts into my life. But I have never cared to know of a living Saviour or to make a personal acquaintance of the faith, or to know that my sins were all forgiven. It is too late to seek it now. I have the form of godliness without its power. I am now lost, lost forever!

That unfortunate woman is one of many who have allowed their souls to become famished through “religious ruts”. These religious ruts are acts, attitudes, and consequences of a formalism, instead of true faith. In such ruts one’s faith is dictated by tradition and past training. Religious ruts are the opposite of the tender and seeking heart sought by God (**Ezekiel 11:19, 20**).

There cannot be a greater tragedy than a soul ruined by religious ruts. Saul of Tarsus is another illustration of this tragedy. His life through early adulthood was directed by religious ruts. His actions, attitudes, and speech all conformed to a formal traditionalism that did not allow any life in faith and practice. This ruin which befell Saul is a common tragedy today. Examine Saul’s life, and see if religious ruts are destroying your faith.

A Reminder to Rejoice - Philippians 3:1

Finally, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord! To write this again is not a bother for me, and it is a safeguard for you.

The word “**finally**” has caused some to roll their eyes and say, “Paul is just like preachers today; he tells us he is just about finished when he has a whole lot left to say.” While “*finally*” does often introduce the final words of an author, there are other times in the Bible when it simply means something like “*furthermore*,” or

“from here on.” The term here in our text does indicate a change in subject, a very crucial one.

In the verses preceding **Philippians 3:1**, Paul has just been speaking about Christian unity and the necessity of humility. Christ is the ultimate manifestation of humility, as we have seen in **2:5-11**. Timothy, Epaphroditus, and Paul are men who exemplify humility (**2:19-30**). Humility gives preference to the needs of others and manifests itself in servanthood. Humility also enables Christians to rejoice in their circumstances.

Philippians 3:1 is a transition verse, moving us from Paul’s appeal for humility to his admonition regarding arrogance and pride (3:2ff.). He moves from an exhortation to conduct ourselves in a manner that is consistent with the gospel (**2:12-18**) to a warning about a very dangerous heresy, which denies the gospel (**3:2ff.**). Verse 1 is not misplaced at all; it is a transition verse, setting the stage for what Paul has to say in 3:2ff.

A Strong Word of Warning - (3:2-3)

2 Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of those who mutilate the flesh! 3 For we are the circumcision, the ones who worship by the Spirit of God, exult in Christ Jesus, and do not rely on human credentials.

The once gentle, fatherly Paul now displays a fierce side, one that is well deserved. Paul is warning the Philippian saints concerning the Judaisers. They have persistently opposed him, dogging his steps from city to city. They have incited riots to disrupt his ministry, and they are the real reason he is sitting in his prison cell as he writes – **Acts 17:4-13**. Philippi seems to have had only a few Jews when Paul arrived there, so that no synagogue is mentioned, and Paul can only find a few Jewish women gathered by the river (**Acts 16:13**). Paul seems to know that sooner or later the teaching of the Judaisers will find its way to Philippi, and so he sounds this early word of warning so that the church will know to beware.

First, Paul refers to the Judaisers as “**dogs**.” This was a very derogatory term, routinely used by the Jews in referring to the Gentiles. Paul turns the tables on the Jewish Judaisers by calling them “**dogs**.” The Judaisers are next called “**evil workers**.” Can you imagine what it would feel like to be called an “**evil worker**” when you prided yourself for doing “*good works*”? It would be something like calling a surgeon a butcher.

The third label which Paul gives the Judaisers is “**those who mutilate the flesh**.” This is a most fascinating play on words in the original text. The word translated “**circumcision**” in verse 3 contains the Greek root meaning “*to cut*.” The term rendered “**mutilate**” contains the same root. There is a saying that *if the purpose of a thing is not known, abuse is inevitable*.

Paul is not finished with the Judaisers yet. In verse 2, Paul described the unbelieving Jews in Gentile-like terms. Now, in verse 3, Paul describes true believers in Jewish terms. He boldly claims, **“we are the circumcision.”** In other words, those who believe in Jesus Christ as their Messiah, who have trusted in His death, burial, and resurrection for the forgiveness of their sins and the gift of eternal life, are the true circumcision, the true Jews. This theme is quite common with Paul (see **Romans 4:10-12; Galatians 3:27-29; 6:15-16**).

All Christians, Jew or Gentile, are not only the “true Israel of God,” according to Paul, they are also **“those who worship by the Spirit of God.”** The Judaisers thought that they had a corner on the market when it came to worship. They scoffed at any worship other than their own. What makes Christians true worshippers is that the Holy Spirit of God indwells them (see verse 3).

Next, Paul speaks of Christians as those who do not place their confidence in the flesh. I take this to mean that Christians do not rely on their ancestry (as the Jews tended to do; see **Matthew 3:9**), or upon their good works, such as law-keeping (*like the lady in our introduction*). They understand that they are saved by the grace of God, through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ, received by faith. Virtually everything in which the Judaisers found confidence was fleshly, and not spiritual. Thus, it is not outward, physical, circumcision that saves, but inward, spiritual, circumcision; *In Him you also were circumcised—not, however, with a circumcision performed by human hands, but by the removal of the fleshy body, that is, through the circumcision done by Christ (Colossians 2:11).*

A Testimony From Paul’s Experience (3:4-11)

4 —though mine too are significant. If someone thinks he has good reasons to put confidence in human credentials, I have more: 5 I was circumcised on the eighth day, from the people of Israel and the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews. I lived according to the law as a Pharisee. 6 In my zeal for God I persecuted the church. According to the righteousness stipulated in the law I was blameless. 7 But these assets I have come to regard as liabilities because of Christ. 8 More than that, I now regard all things as liabilities compared to the far greater value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things—indeed, I regard them as dung!—that I might gain Christ, 9 and be found in him, not because of having my own righteousness derived from the law, but because of having the righteousness that comes by way of Christ’s faithfulness—a righteousness from God that is based on Christ’s faithfulness. 10 My aim is to know him, to experience the power of his resurrection, to share in his sufferings, and to be like him in his death, 11 and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead. (NET).

Paul’s words in verses 2-4 convey a lesson that he himself learned in a most dramatic and emphatic way. We see his testimony of his conversion experience

repeated three times in the Book of Acts (see chapters 9, 22, 26). We also read of the strong reaction of the unbelieving Jews to Paul's conversion and his subsequent preaching of the gospel. They continually opposed him and even sought to kill him (**Acts 23:12ff.**). Paul speaks passionately because he now knows how worthless "**the flesh**" is when it comes to salvation. Here, Paul does not share his testimony with us once again, but rather he summarizes what his conversion experience taught him.

Do the Judaisers think they have grounds for boasting? When measured by the standards the Judaisers themselves had adopted, Paul comes out ahead of them (verse 4). He was "**circumcised on the eighth day**" (verse 5). His was not proselyte circumcision; he was circumcised at the first possible opportunity. Paul's words tell us that he was no mere Hebrew; he was a "native Hebrew"—he was born that way, and then circumcised soon after his birth, just as the law prescribed. He was a descendant of the tribe of Benjamin, from whom King Saul had descended. We can say *he was a son of the soil*.

Paul claims, "*I was a Jew's Jew*"—a Hebrew of the Hebrews. Trusting in the flesh, the Judaisers took pride in their efforts at law-keeping. Paul insists that he was a member of the strictest sect of the Jews when it came to law-keeping; he was a Pharisee. Would the Judaisers take pride in their religious zeal? Did they seek to persecute Christians? "*Been there, done that,*" Paul claims, "*and better than you.*" So far as striving in the strength of the flesh was measured and esteemed by Judaism, Paul was "at the top of his class." Paul was "blameless" in his observance of the law, as Judaism judged it.

It is very important to note the fact that the things Paul formerly considered "*assets*" he now regards as "*liabilities*" **because of Christ** (verse 7). Paul was converted when he ceased to trust in his Jewishness and came to trust in Jesus alone as the Christ, the promised Saviour. Paul's conversion convinced him that every "*fleshly*" thing in which he had put his confidence for salvation was worthless. His conversion literally turned his values upside-down. This he explains in verses 7 and 8. All of the fleshly things in which he formerly placed his confidence he had looked upon as his "*assets*." He now sees that they were really liabilities, so far as salvation is concerned. The things Paul now calls liabilities are not liabilities in and of themselves. In **Romans 9:4-5**, Paul speaks of the privileges of the Jews. These Jewish privileges are an asset, as long as they are not viewed as an "*inside track*" to salvation. Being Jewish does not save anyone. If one is trusting in his Jewishness for salvation instead of Jesus, then this "*asset*" of being Jewish has become a "*liability*" so far as salvation is concerned.

The same principle applies outside of Judaism. Being wealthy is a privilege, an asset. I do not know of many who would prefer poverty to wealth. But if I trust in "**the uncertainty of riches**" (**1 Timothy 6:17**) or if my riches are more important to me than God (as with the rich young ruler—see **Luke 19:18-30**), then

my wealth has become a liability, so far as salvation is concerned. The same thing can be said of position and power, or intelligence, or education. Whatever we trust in other than Christ, whatever becomes a substitute for faith in Christ, is a liability. **Matthew 24:44-46.**

Paul is not yet satisfied with his description of how precious knowing Christ is to him. He goes on to say that he has come to the point where he is willing to joyfully suffer the loss of all things for Christ. For the Jew, suffering was the worst possible fate, and the consequence for sin on the part of someone (see **John 9:1-2**). He who once zealously inflicted suffering on those who knew Christ now joyfully accepts the same suffering. He does not begrudgingly give up **“all things;”** he joyfully casts these things aside, seeing them as **“dung”** or **“garbage.”** I do not weep when the trash men pick up my bags of garbage; I rejoice because these are things that I did not want. That is the way Paul views anything that competes with the ultimate pleasure of knowing Christ.

Paul has spoken about those things that he once looked upon as assets but has now come to look upon as liabilities compared with Christ. What is it, then, that Paul now considers his **“assets”**? At the end of verse 8 through verse 11, Paul begins to look ahead to his ultimate goal, which he describes as **“gaining Christ.”** How does Paul **“gain Christ”**? He does so experientially, day by day. He experiences the resurrection power of Christ in his daily walk (verse 10).

This is explained more fully in the Book of Romans. Paul knew full well that his salvation called for a new lifestyle. In Christ, he had died to sin and had been raised to newness of life through the resurrection of Christ (**Romans 6**). While he was obligated to give up his old way of life and live for Christ, he was not able to do so in the power of the flesh (**Romans 7**). The works of the flesh that could not save him cannot sanctify him either. His problem was that his body was incapable of resisting sin and of accomplishing righteousness acceptable to God (**Romans 7:24**). The good news of **Romans 8** is that, in Christ, Christians are no longer under condemnation for their sin, and that God’s Spirit now indwells them. The same Spirit that raised the dead body of our Lord to life is the Spirit who indwells us, giving our dead bodies resurrection life (**Romans 8:1-11**). Our **“body of death,”** which was incapable of resisting sin or performing righteousness is now indwelt by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit raises our dead bodies to newness of life, just as He raised the body of our Lord to life. As Paul lived his life in reliance on Christ, and the power of His Spirit, he experienced **“the power of His resurrection.”**

Paul experienced Christ in yet another way. He experienced Christ through sharing in His sufferings (**Philippians 3:10**). What an amazing truth this is. The Jew tended to assume that suffering was the result of sin and was divine punishment (**John 9:1-2**). This is precisely what Job’s friends persisted in telling him as they sought an explanation for his suffering. But Paul now sees suffering in a very different way. Our Lord voluntarily suffered in obedience to the Father, for the salvation of the

saints (***Philippians 2:5-11***). As Paul suffers *for* Christ, he in some way also suffers *with* Christ. There is a kind of sharing or bonding in this, so that Paul comes to know Christ more intimately. Thus, Paul purposes to know Christ more intimately through suffering for Christ.

Our Lord not only suffered, He died, in obedience to the Father. This is the end to which His suffering led. Paul purposes not only to be like Christ in His suffering, but also in his dying. If death is to be the price that he must pay for following Christ, so be it. We know that to die is to gain (1:21), so death holds no fear for Paul. Here is his final and ultimate opportunity to identify with his Savior.

Some may be troubled by the language of verse 11: “*And so somehow to attain to the resurrection from the dead.*” Paul does not doubt that he will be raised from the dead; he is simply not certain as to the actual mechanics of this event – ***Philippians 1:23***. Thus, we would expect Paul to be less than dogmatic about the timing of his death, which would be followed by his resurrection. However and whenever, his death might come, and by whatever process his body would be raised and transformed, Paul looked forward to the day of our Lord, when he would dwell in His presence forever.

Conclusion

What a marvellous text this is. It reminds us of the revolutionary change salvation brings about in our life. It takes us from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light; it transforms us from being dead in our transgressions and sins to being alive in Christ. And, in our text, it absolutely revolutionizes our value system. In fact, salvation reverses our values - (***Romans 12:2***). Paul’s words should cause us to reflect on our own values, to see whether ours match his. If not, our values are wrong and inconsistent with the gospel. Our values significantly shape our sense of joy.

Reference

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