

Christ Our Object: Joy is a Result of Having Christ as Our Object

Philippians 3

Philippians 3. In the previous chapter we had the danger of strife warned of. Christ was set before us as our pattern in humility, and this as the secret to unity among believers. Now in ch.3, the apostle speaks of another danger, that of influence from the Judaizing teachers, and the whole system of natural religion. The solution to this danger is Christ again, now as our object or focus. In ch.2 we were directed to Christ as a man on the earth to deal with strife, but in ch.3 we are directed to Christ in heaven to deal with vainglory! Paul brings in his own personal history to show what grace can do in a person's life when they have Christ as their object.

Contents

- [Joy in the Lord and What Can Spoil it \(3:1-3\)](#)
- [Paul's Experience Under Judaism and in Christianity \(3:4-14\)](#)
- [Exhortation to Follow Paul \(3:15-21\)](#)

Joy in the Lord and What Can Spoil it (3:1-3)

CHAPTER 3

1 For the rest, my brethren, rejoice in *the* Lord: to write the same things to you, to me is not irksome, and for you safe. **v.1 Rejoicing in the Lord.** Throughout the epistle to the Philippians, a common theme is joy. But before v.1, the joy is always mentioned in conjunction with a circumstance; e.g. joy in seeing God use difficult circumstances to further the gospel (Phil. 1:18), the joy of Christian fellowship (Phil. 1:25), or the joy of seeing our brethren go on in one mind (Phil. 2:2). But here it is an exhortation to “*rejoice in the Lord*”, and this plane is maintained for the rest of the epistle (Phil. 4:4). This is a joy we can have that is independent of circumstances. This is the same character of joy that Paul and Silas exhibited in the Philippians jail while they were held in the stocks, after having

been severely beaten. *“And at midnight Paul and Silas, in praying, were praising God with singing, and the prisoners listened to them”* (Acts 16:25). To rejoice in the Lord is to have our focus fixed on *Him*, and therefore to delight in who He is and what He does. Without joy in the Lord we will not have joy in our circumstances. But Satan is endeavoring to steal that joy from us, as he was with the Philippians. Paul would *“write the same things”* to the saints - exhorting them to rejoice in the Lord - and it would not be irksome or annoying to him to do so. This was first of all because Paul’s heart was full of Christ, and he wanted the saints to share in that. It was not an annoyance to speak of something precious to him! But secondly, Paul loved the Philippians, and desired their blessing; *“for you it is safe”*. Knowledge of the truth is not enough to keep us; we need to have our affections attached to Christ as well. It is impossible to over-emphasize or over-repeat this. Joy in the Lord is *necessary* for our preservation!

2 See to dogs, see to evil workmen, see to the concision. v.2 Warning to Steer Clear of the Judaizers and Their Legalism. Next Paul warned of a particular danger, which threatened the well-being of the saints in Philippi. There was a class of false teachers who were moving among the assemblies spreading wrong doctrine. These were the Judaizing teachers that Paul wrote so vehemently against. The effect of their ministry was to blend Judaism with Christianity, and put the saints under law. This is the very *opposite* of rejoicing in the Lord. Rather than have Christ as the object and joy of our life, the law makes *self* the object, and puts the soul at a distance from Christ; *“Ye are deprived of all profit from the Christ as separated from him, as many as are justified by law; ye have fallen from grace”* (Gal. 5:4). Paul refers to these men under three headings. First, they are called *“dogs”*, which means they were shameless and unclean persons, worthy of disgust. This was a term reserved in Old Testament times for the Gentiles, but now applied to unconverted Jews who rejected and perverted the gospel. Second, they were *“evil workmen”*, or those who labored to bring in wicked and perverted teaching. Third, they were *“the concision”*, or ‘the mutilation’. This a play on words. *Circumcision* means ‘cutting off’ and *concision* means ‘cutting up’, or ‘mutilation’. The teachers were those who pressed the outward form of circumcision, but produced mutilation in a spiritual sense; i.e. they only harmed those they influenced. The mixture of Judaism and Christianity is positively harmful! These three summarizing statement show us that the Judaizing teachers were: (1) shameful, (2) sinful, and (3) harmful. Note that the mention of *repetition* in v.1 may apply equally to the warning against Judaizing teachers as well as rejoicing in the Lord. We must always be on guard against the tendency to mix Judaism and Christianity, to mix law and grace.

Judaizing teachers are mentioned in many of the Epistles: they had made inroads among the Corinthians (2 Cor. 11:22), the Philippians (Phil. 3:2), the Colossians (Col. 2:18), but

nowhere with as much success as among the Galatian assemblies. The tendency towards natural religion has been the bane of Christianity. They were those of whom Paul wrote, "*desiring to be teachers of the law; understanding neither what they say, nor whereof they affirm*" (1 Tim. 1:7). They were of Jewish ethnicity, but had come under the umbrella of Christianity. They found some benefit to being among Christians. Their primary motive was to gain a following after themselves, and perhaps to profit financially. They claimed to be closely connected to the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem, but they could not prove their genealogy as Paul could (Phil. 3). Paul was raised up as a suited vessel to deal with the Judaizers, because he himself had been one!

3 For "we" are the circumcision, who worship by *the Spirit of God*, and boast in Christ Jesus, and do not trust in flesh. **v.3 Christianity in a nutshell.** Next Paul gives the true character of Christianity. This is really the only doctrinal statement in book of Philippians (perhaps vv.20-21 also), but worthy of our attention. When Paul says "we" he refers to believers; those in the full Christian position. In the Old Testament, the Jews were the circumcision because they had the outward mark of it. But here Paul turns the term "circumcision" around. It doesn't matter if we were Jews or Gentiles before. Since the cross, Paul says that the true circumcision, in a spiritual sense, are those who "*put no confidence in the flesh*". In v.2 we had three statements that summarized the Judaizers, and in v.3 we have three statements that summarize Christianity in practice. First, we "*worship by the Spirit of God*". The believer has the Holy Spirit of God indwelling them individually and among us collectively. A primary function of the Spirit is to lead out the worship of God's people (see also Eph. 5:18-19). In Heb. 2:12 we find that the Lord Jesus leads in the song of praise (see Heb. 13:15), but it is orchestrated by the Spirit. This worship is in contrast to the outward ceremonies of Judaism. Second, we "*boast in Christ Jesus*". I take this to be a general thing; we acknowledge that all of our blessing comes from and is associated with a risen Christ. This boasting is in contrast to boasting in religious accomplishments. Third, we "*do not trust in flesh*". We understand the meaning of the cross, that nothing good can come from the flesh, and since God has condemned it, we should put it in the place of death.

The Spiritual Application of Circumcision. There are actually *two* kinds of circumcision. Paul speaks in Eph. 2:11 "*the circumcision in the flesh made by hands*" and in Col. 2:11 of "*the circumcision made without hands*". The former refers to that with outwardly identified the Jew; i.e. a physical mark in the flesh. The latter refers to the spiritual position that we have been brought into through Christ. Although *literal circumcision* has nothing to do with Christianity, and should not be practiced for religious purposes, yet it does represent something spiritual. As literal circumcision was physically the "cutting off" of the flesh, so it morally represents the believer passing judgment on the flesh. In Colossians circumcision is

applied to the believer in this way. In Col. 2:11 it is viewed as something that a believer does when they believe the gospel; *"In whom also ye are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ"*. But then we find in Col. 3 that there is an ongoing need to pass judgment on the flesh as well. We find the same thing in Philippians 3; *"For we are the circumcision, which worship God in the spirit, and rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh."* This is how circumcision is applied to the believer in the New Testament.

Paul's Experience Under Judaism and in Christianity (3:4-14)

4 Though *"I"* have *my* trust even in flesh; if any other think to trust in flesh, *"I"* rather: **v.4 Saul an Exemplar.** Next Paul sets himself forward as an example of what it means to have confidence in the flesh. He is not just an average example, but an extraordinary specimen; *"if any other think to trust in flesh, I rather"*. It is interesting that Paul is set before us an example for what we should be (1 Cor. 4:16; 11:1; Phil. 3:17), and also - when he was Saul of Tarsus - for what we should not be (Gal. 1:13-14). We get both of these aspects in 1 Tim. 1:15-16; Saul was the chief of sinners, but Paul was *"a pattern to them which should hereafter believe"*. Here Paul is comparing himself to the Judaizing teachers who trusted in their qualifications, which Paul simply calls *"the flesh"*. Some people have the mistaken idea that the flesh can only produce vile, base, and vulgar actions. But the flesh also capable of putting up a facade, an outward form of godliness, although the motives are not right. This is what we call *religious flesh*. It is important to see that the flesh is an energy which fallen man can trust in, rather than rely on God. This is how Paul could remain outwardly *"blameless"* (v.6) while at the same time being *"the chief of sinners"* (1 Tim. 1:15). Religious flesh is insidious, because it is sin disguised as a cloak of godliness (John 16:2; Matt. 16:23). Paul explains that, according to Judaism, he had even better credentials than these false teachers did. This is important because later, when Paul was converted, all of those credentials were worthless to him.

5 as to circumcision, *I received it the eighth day; of the race of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; 6 as to zeal, persecuting the assembly; as to righteousness which is in the law, found blameless; **vv.5-6 Saul's Resume.** When you look at Paul's resume, it is quite extensive. Ceremonially, he was circumcised *"the eighth day"*, according to the law. This meant a that he was a Jew from the beginning, not a*

later convert. He was *“of the race of Israel”*, not a proselyte brought in from among the Gentiles. Paul belonged to one of the most prestigious tribes in Israel; *“the tribe of Benjamin”* (Judges 5:14). When the other ten tribes abandoned Judah, Benjamin remained faithful. He was full immersed in the ethnicity of the Jews; a *“Hebrew of Hebrews”*. From a religious standpoint, Paul was a Pharisee. The word ‘pharisees’ means ‘the separate ones’. In Acts 26:5 he he said *“after the most straitest sect of our religion I lived a Pharisee”*. The Pharisees were scrupulous in their attention to detail, following the smallest instructions in the law. Concerning zeal or religious energy, Paul went so far as to persecute the assembly. He led the charge against the Christians, those who were of *“the sect of the Nazarenes”* (Acts 24:5). Morally also, Paul was *“blameless”* as far as keeping the commandments and ordinances of the law. All of these things were what the flesh could boast in. There was ceremonial pride, racial pride, tribal pride, ethnic pride, sectarian pride, personal pride, and legal pride.

7 but what things were gain to me these I counted, on account of Christ, loss. **v.7 Gain turned to loss.** Before he was saved, Paul thought of his successes in Judaism as “gain” or “advancement” (Gal. 1:14), but when he was converted he counted it *“loss for Christ”*. He even changed his own name from Saul to Paul. Saul means ‘desire’ or ‘unrestrained’, but Paul means ‘restrained’ or ‘little’. Grace makes us humble. What a change took place when that voice spoke to him from heaven, and the light shone around him! He went from a ‘hero’ of Judaism to a ‘zero’ almost instantly.

8 But surely I count also all things to be loss on account of the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, on account of whom I have suffered the loss of all, and count them to be filth, that I may gain Christ; **v.8 All Things Loss in Comparison to Knowing Christ.** There is an advancement in v.8 over v.9. First, *“what things”* is now changed to *“all things”*. As the *“excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus”* grew in his soul, like the brightness of the light that shone from heaven (Acts 22:6; 26:13), Paul’s estimation of everything else was totally eclipsed. In v.7 it is past tense *“I counted”* but in v.8 it is present tense *“I count”*. It was a personal knowledge of Christ, captured beautifully in these words; *“the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord”*. This Person, whom Paul came to know, was so valuable to him that Paul would *gladly* part with his reputation under Judaism. He had *“suffered the loss”* in a passive sense by following a rejected Christ. But he counted it worthless in an active sense. A *“loss”* is worth something, but *“filth”* is worth nothing. If we are occupied with self, with man’s opinion, we will have difficulty counting these things as filth. But if we are focused on Christ, discounting our successes will be easy. Paul’s object in life now was Christ, and his goal was to know Him more. Our lives demonstrate what our object is. If our object is money, our life will show it. If our object is pleasure, our life will

show it. And if - by grace - our object is Christ, our life will show it.

9 and that I may be found in him, not having my righteousness, which *would be* on the principle of law, but that which is by faith of Christ, the righteousness which *is* of God through faith, **v.9 What it means to be found “in Him”**. Paul speaks of being found “*in Him*”, that is “in Christ”. To be found in Christ’s place before God is a most blessed thing, and the characteristic statement of Christian position. Here it is viewed as a future thing, though true of us now. In Christianity, our righteous standing before God is not on the basis of what we do (“*not having my righteousness*”), but it is a righteous standing that we have “*of God through faith*”. It isn’t something we can earn or merit through our own efforts. If we could, it would be “*on the principle of law*”. But, as Paul shows in Romans (Rom. 3:30; 4:16) and Galatians (Gal. 2:16; 3:12), and which is nicely summarized here, true justification can only be had “*by faith of Christ*”. Paul would happily exchange his legal righteousness for the righteous standing that God offers, and which is given to those who are found “in Christ”. In Romans it is a question of the righteousness which God gives compared to our sins. But here it is the righteousness which God gives compared to self-righteousness.¹

10 to know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being conformed to his death, **11** if any way I arrive at the resurrection from among *the dead*. **vv.10-11 What it means to “know Him”**. But more than being found “in Him”, Paul wanted to “*know Him*”. To know Christ is to have a personal knowledge of Him by walking the pathway in fellowship with Him. This is something that begins with conversion, and progresses throughout the Christian life. Second, Paul wanted to know “*the power of his resurrection*”. As Paul explains in Eph. 1 and elsewhere, the greatest display of power the world has ever seen was in the resurrection of Christ. It was not a flashy, external display only, but a deep, moral reality. The power of Christ’s resurrection is a power that rises above every obstacle. The believer shares Christ’s resurrection life! Paul wanted that power to be manifest in his own path, as he passed through difficult circumstances.² Third, Paul wanted to know “*the fellowship of his sufferings*”. The sufferings of Christ (here not including the atoning sufferings, which we cannot have fellowship in) were something the Jews detested. The Christian is happy to suffer with Christ, because to be *with* Him is the great object. It was neither the miracles of Jesus nor His crown of glory that Paul wanted fellowship with, but rather the *suffering* Christ, now risen and in heaven. Paul explains this further in vv.10b-11. What he desired most of all was *total conformity to Christ*. To be with Christ means to be with Him in the lowest points and also the highest points. To be “*conformed to his death*” means to have the full meaning of Christ’s death applied to our soul. What does that entail? Carried to the full extreme, it means being willing to suffer martyrdom, as Paul was here. But in principle, it means to realize that the glory of the world

is empty, to realize that the flesh is incorrigible, and to realize that the first man is unable to improve himself. To “*arrive at the resurrection from among the dead*” is to get the victory over sin and the power of Satan through the power of God. Ultimately this is what every believer will experience at the first resurrection (v.21); total and complete victory over the power of sin. [Read more...](#) When he says “*if any way*” in v.11 he means that he was even willing to suffer death, if that lay on the path to the resurrection from among the dead. None of us have “arrived” to that moment yet (v.12), but we are to live and long for that day.

12 Not that I have already obtained *the prize*, or am already perfected; but I pursue, if also I may get possession of it, seeing that also I have been taken possession of by Christ Jesus. **13** Brethren, “I” do not count to have got possession myself; but one thing — forgetting the things behind, and stretching out to the things before, **14** I pursue, *looking towards the goal*, for the prize of the calling on high of God in Christ Jesus.

vv.12-14 Running to obtain. Perfection in the sense of v.12 is total conformity to the Person of Christ, which will not be reached until the rapture, when the dead are raised and we all are changed (vv.20-21). Paul viewed his life as a race which he was still running. He says, “*Not that I have already obtained the prize, or am already perfected; but I pursue*”. We are still running the race. What are we running for? What is the goal of this race? Christ. To be with Christ and like Christ. Paul wanted to gain possession of Christ, but Christ had already gained possession of him; “*if also I may get possession of it, seeing that also I have been taken possession of by Christ Jesus*”. Again, Paul insists in v.13 that he had not reached the goal or gotten the prize. It is not possible this side of heaven to be fully conformed to the image of Christ. But we can still pursue that goal (v.14). The “*one thing*” we are to do is keep our eye on the goal. This entails “*forgetting the things behind*”, which refers to the past successes in Judaism. Some people say that this refers to past failures, as if we can be indifferent to our sin. Paul never lessened the seriousness of his past failure.

Paul's sense of his own sin did not lessen with time. There can be a tendency to think higher ourselves as time passes in light of past wrongs. Not Paul. Writing in A.D. 54 he referred to himself as “*not fit to be called apostle*” (1 Cor. 15:9), in A.D. 64 as “*less than the least of all saints*” (Eph. 3:8), and in A.D. 65 as “*the chief of sinners*” (1 Tim. 1:15). His humility only grew as time went on! Interestingly, his sense of the light of God's glory which shone about him on the Damascus road also increased each time the story is told (Acts 9:3; 22:6; 26:13).

In addition to forgetting the successes of the flesh, Paul was “*stretching out to the things before*”. He was longing for heaven, to see his Lord and Savior.

Exhortation to Follow Paul (3:15-21)

15 As many therefore as *are* perfect, let us be thus minded; and if ye are any otherwise minded, this also God shall reveal to you. **v.15 Various Stages of Growth.**

16 But whereto we have attained, *let us walk in the same steps.* **v.16 Consistency of Walk.**

17 Be imitators *all together* of me, brethren, and fix your eyes on those walking thus as you have us for a model; **v.17 Paul as a Model.**

18 (for many walk of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they *are* the enemies of the cross of Christ: **19** whose end *is* destruction, whose god *is* the belly, and *their* glory in their shame, who mind earthly things:) **vv.18-19 The Earthly Minded.**

20 for “our” commonwealth has its existence in *the* heavens, from which also we await the Lord Jesus Christ *as* Saviour, **21** who shall transform our body of humiliation into conformity to his body of glory, according to the working of *the* power which he has even to subdue all things to himself. **vv.20-21 Our Commonwealth in Heaven.**

Footnotes

1. A poor man may not part with his old coat; but if you give him a new one instead, he will soon have done with it. The moment the soul has the eye fixed on the Lord Jesus, all our righteousness becomes filthy rags, and the heart revolts from mixing it up with Him. - Darby, J.N. *Brief Thoughts on Philippians.*
2. In a world where Christ had been rejected, the object of all my hopes is at the right hand of God. I have got a life completely paramount over death. The resurrection of Christ was past sin, past Satan's power, past judgment, past death. The second Man had gone into death - was made sin; but He is risen, and all that is past. God has been glorified, and death belongs to us now as we belonged to it in the first man. We have got this divine life which is above everything in the world. - Darby, J.N. *Brief Thoughts on Philippians.*