

STUDY ON THE BOOK OF PHILIPPIANS

HAVE NO CONFIDENCE IN THE FLESH

Read Philippians 3:1-7

Introduction

Have you ever felt desperate to know God? To break through that "distance" or fog and feel God's presence intimately? You sense a bit of this hunger for God in Marie Barnett's praise song, "Breathe," as the refrain cries out:

"And I..... I'm desperate for you. And I..... I'm lost without you."

Paul felt that longing, that yearning, too. In this eloquent passage we hear his heart's cry for God – a prayer that I pray along with him. "I want to know Christ!" But how does this fit in the Letter to the Philippians? How does it come up? Paul is very concerned about some enemies who are trying to undermine the Gospel in Philippi.

Warning against the influence of legalistic Jews

"Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord. For me to write the same things to you is not tedious, but for you it is safe. Beware of dogs, beware of evil workers, beware of the mutilation!" (vv1-2)

This is a fitting theme "rejoice in the Lord" for the whole letter. Paul shared with the Philippians the principle of being able to rejoice in the Lord – not in circumstances or in situations, but in the Lord who works all things together for good. This abiding joy is fitting for the believer because it shows that we really do trust in a God whom we really believe is in control. When we believe this, it isn't any surprise that we are then filled with joy.

Based on verse 1, it seems clear that Paul has apparently written them before on this issue and is unapologetic about bringing the matter up again as a "safeguard" for them against false doctrine. Paul did not mind reminding them because he was passionately concerned about certain dangers, and he would speak out strongly against them.

Beware of dogs, evil workers, and mutilation

"Steer clear of the barking dogs, those religious busybodies, all bark, and no bite. All they're interested in is appearances—knife-happy circumcisers, I call them." (v2 MSG)

Who are these "dogs" that he refers to? For Jews and other Middle Easterners, a dog wasn't "man's best friend," but an unclean scavenger. To call someone a "dog" was an insult and demonstrates Paul's disgust at the false teaching they were pressing upon the church.

The "dogs" were what we call Judaizers. They were not only Jewish Christians who kept the Jewish law and worshipped Jesus as the Messiah. They were also quite vocal about their belief that a person couldn't become a Christian unless he became a Jew first – and submit to circumcision as the ancient rite of admission into the Jewish community. Paul uses the phrase "mutilators of the flesh" to caricature their position on circumcision.

Paul had met these people before during his earlier ministry in the Gentile city of Antioch.

"And certain men came down from Judea and taught the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." Therefore, when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension

and dispute with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles and elders, about this question." (**Acts 15:1-2**)

A watershed decision was made by the Jerusalem Council headed by James, (senior pastor of the Jerusalem Church, Jesus' brother, and author of the Letter of James), that was vital to the expansion of the Christian movement. Led by the Holy Spirit, the Council sent a circular letter to the churches to the effect that Gentile believers were not to be "burdened" with the requirement of circumcision (15:28-29).

The True Circumcision

"For we are the circumcision, who worship God in the Spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh" (v3)

Paul says, "it is we who are the circumcision...." In other words, Christian believers, not Jews who have rejected the Messiah, are the true heirs of the people of God. Paul is in step with Old Testament prophets from Moses to Jeremiah in recognizing that the outward act of circumcision is not the ultimate issue, but is a symbol of heart commitment and love for the Lord:

"Therefore, circumcise the foreskin of your heart, and be stiff-necked no longer." (Deuteronomy 10:16)

"And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live." (Deuteronomy 30:6)

"Circumcise yourselves to the Lord, and take away the foreskins of your hearts, you men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem..." (Jeremiah 4:4)

"For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh; but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God." (Romans 2:28-29)

To the Philippians Paul gives three evidence that the Christians indeed are the people of God rather than the unbelieving Jews:

Worship God in the Spirit. Jesus had told the Samaritan woman, "Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father... But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him." (**John 4:21, 23**). Spiritual worship is prayer, praise, and a life lived in dedication to God.

Rejoice in Christ Jesus. This also characterizes those of the true circumcision. Their joy is not found in their own ability to be justified by the law or by their law-keeping. Jesus and Jesus alone is their joy.

Have no confidence in the flesh. This is a third characteristic of the true circumcision. They do not trust in their own ability to be righteous before God through external works (the flesh), but their only confidence is in Jesus.

Paul's Response to Confidence in the Flesh

"Though I also might have confidence in the flesh. If anyone else thinks he may have confidence in the flesh, I more so" (v4)

Paul knew that he was more qualified to be justified by the keeping of the law than any of his present legalistic opponents were. Curiously, often those who promote the idea of having confidence in the flesh are the same ones who are the least qualified to have such confidence. This is because of the principle

Paul explains in Colossians 2:23 – *“These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh.”*

Paul’s Credentials (if we would boast in the flesh)

“Circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee; 6 concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless.” (vv5-6)

Circumcised the eighth day...: Paul first listed four things that were his possessions by birth, all reasons why he might have confidence in the flesh.

- Paul was circumcised the eighth day in accordance with Leviticus 12:3.
- Paul was of the stock of Israel, a descendant of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; and therefore, an heir to God’s covenant with them.
- Paul was of the tribe of Benjamin, a distinguished tribe. Benjamin was distinguished by the fact that it gave Israel her first king, Saul (1 Samuel 9:1-2). It was the tribe that aligned itself with faithful Judah when Israel divided into two nations at the time of Rehoboam (1 Kings 12:21). It was also the tribe that had the city of Jerusalem within its boundaries (Judges 1:21).
- Paul was a Hebrew of the Hebrews. This contrasted him with the Jews who embraced Greek culture as it spread through the Mediterranean. In that time, many Jews became ashamed of their Jewishness and tried to live and act as much like Greeks as they could, sometimes even to the point of having their circumcision cosmetically restored or hidden so they could enjoy the Roman public baths without being noticed as Jews. In contrast, Paul was raised by his parents as a Hebrew of the Hebrews.

Concerning the law...: Paul then listed three things that were his by personal choice and conviction, all reasons why he might have confidence in the flesh.

- Paul was concerning the law, a Pharisee. This tells us that among an elite people (the Jews), Paul was of an elite sect (the Pharisees), who were noted for their scrupulous devotion to the law of God. *“There were not very many Pharisees, never more than six thousand, but they were the spiritual athletes of Judaism. Their very name means The Separated Ones. They had separated themselves off from all common life and from all common tasks in order to make it the one aim of their lives to keep every smallest detail of the Law.”* (A Source) The concern that Pharisees had for keeping the law is reflected in passages like Matthew 23:23.
- Concerning zeal, persecuting the church. Paul was not merely an intellectual opponent of perceived heresies against Judaism; he was also an active fighter against them – even in his blindness to God. Paul’s observation that the Jews of his day have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge (Romans 10:2) was true of his own life before God confronted him on the road to Damascus.
- Concerning the righteousness, which is in the law, blameless. This shows that Paul achieved the standard of righteousness which was accepted among the men of his day – though this standard fell short of God’s holy standard. Because of how the law was interpreted and taught, there were those of that day who were deceived into thinking that they really were blameless, like the rich young ruler (Luke 18:18-23).

In summary, if anyone could lay claim to pleasing God by law-keeping and the works of the flesh, it was Paul. He was far more qualified than his legalizing opponents were to make such a claim.

Paul rejects all confidence in the flesh.

“But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ.” (v7)

Any of the corrupting teachers Paul warned against would be proud to claim Paul’s pedigree. Yet Paul made it plain: these things I have counted loss for Christ. The word ‘gain’ is plural in the Greek, namely, ‘gains.’... ‘Loss’ is singular. The various gains are all counted as one loss.

Paul counted these things loss. They were counted loss not so much because they were harmful to Paul, but because these things were ways in which Paul sought to please God in the energies of the flesh. Before Paul became a Christian, he thought all these things made him a success in the effort to please God by works. We can say that Paul’s attitude was the same that Jesus described in the parable of the pearl of great price (Matthew 13:45-46).

Do we have confidence in the flesh? In our earthly heritage? In our earthly possessions? Or in our attainments? Etc...

Hopefully not! Beloved, be imitators of Paul and have no confidence in the flesh. Paul said:

“Therefore, I urge you, imitate me.” (1 Corinthians 4:16)

“Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ.” (1 Corinthians 11:1)