

THE ROADBLOCK TO SALVATION

A Study Guide on Philippians 3:4–7

Based on the message examining Paul's religious résumé and the danger of confidence in the flesh

Scripture Text

Philippians 3:4–7

4 although I myself might have confidence even in the flesh. If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more:

5 circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee;

6 as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless.

7 But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ.

Main Idea

Confidence in religious activity, pedigree, or personal performance is a roadblock to salvation. True saving faith rests solely in Christ, not in the flesh. Even the most impressive religious résumé cannot reconcile a sinner to God.

Key Theme

The danger of the religiously lost. While dramatic conversions of hardened sinners are celebrated, many remain lost while trusting in church membership, baptism, doctrinal precision, or moral performance. Paul's former life proves that religious excellence can actually harden a person against the gospel.

Paul's three marks of true circumcision (true believers): worship by the Spirit of God, glory in Christ Jesus, and put no confidence in the flesh (Philippians 3:3).

Message Outline:

I. Paul's Challenge (v. 4)

Paul confronts those who place confidence in human religious effort. He does not speak theoretically—he himself once embodied the highest form of that confidence.

(a) The Challenge Was Personal

“Although I myself might have confidence in the flesh...”

Paul looks back on his pre-conversion life. He had poured years into perfecting religious performance. His works did not remedy his sinful condition; they became a web that imprisoned his soul. He was active but blind, religious but dead.

(b) The Challenge Was Presented

“If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more.”

Paul throws down a gauntlet. He invites comparison. Galatians 1:14 confirms he was advancing in Judaism beyond many of his contemporaries. His argument is simple: if even his unmatched religious résumé could not save him, no lesser effort can save anyone else.

Discussion Questions

1. Why is it often harder to reach a religiously sincere person than someone with an openly sinful lifestyle?
2. In what ways can “evangelical works” (baptism, church membership, public confession, doctrinal precision) become modern equivalents of Paul’s confidence in the flesh?
3. How does Paul’s personal history make his warning more forceful than if it came from someone who had never been religious?

II. Paul’s Credentials (vv. 5–6)

Paul presents his religious résumé—seven pillars of confidence in the flesh. In human terms he was a “shoo-in.” These were the very things he once counted as gain.

1. Circumcision — “circumcised the eighth day”

Performed exactly according to Genesis 17:12. Unlike Ishmaelites (age 13) or Gentile proselytes (as adults), Paul was born into the covenant community and never stood outside it.

2. Nationality — “of the nation of Israel”

He belonged to the people entrusted with the oracles of God (Romans 3:2), chosen as Yahweh’s treasured possession (Deuteronomy 7:6). He shared in the privileges listed in Romans 9:4–5.

3. Lineage — “of the tribe of Benjamin”

Benjamin remained loyal to David’s line. The temple later stood on Benjaminite land. The tribe carried aristocratic status; Israel’s first king, Saul, was a Benjamite—likely the namesake of Saul of Tarsus.

4. Tutelage — “a Hebrew of Hebrews”

Raised in a Hebrew-speaking home amid a Greek-speaking world. He refused cultural assimilation. Trained in Jerusalem under the renowned Pharisee Gamaliel (Acts 22:3).

5. Status — “as to the Law, a Pharisee”

The Pharisees were the strictest sect—never more than about 6,000. They were the spiritual elite, the “PhDs” of Judaism. Paul rose to the top of even this exclusive group.

6. Zeal — “as to zeal, a persecutor of the church”

His persecution flowed from sincere (though misdirected) devotion. William Hendriksen observed: “If persecuting zeal could ever have opened the gates of heaven, Paul would have walked right in.”

7. Morality — “as to the righteousness, which is in the Law, found blameless”

Not blameless before God (Romans 3:10), but blameless according to the Pharisaic system. The Greek *amemptos* means “without fault or reproach.” He was the poster boy of religious achievement.

Discussion Questions

1. Which of Paul’s seven credentials do you think would have carried the most weight in first-century Judaism? Why?
2. How does the fact that Paul was “blameless” according to the Law yet still lost challenge the idea that moral performance can save?
3. In what modern religious circles might a similar “résumé” still be prized as evidence of spiritual standing?

III. Paul’s Conclusion (v. 7)

Everything changes when Paul meets the risen Christ on the Damascus road (Acts 9). He does not merely gain new information; he gains a new valuation of everything.

(a) The Gains He Accumulated

“But whatever things were gain to me...”

The Greek *kerdos* means profit or advantage. Paul uses accounting language. A lifetime of prestige, pedigree, and performance had been entered in the “gain” column.

(b) The Losses He Acquiesced

“...those things I have counted as loss...”

The Greek *zemia* denotes loss of something previously possessed. What once looked like treasure is now recognized as rubbish—refuse, even excrement (see v. 8). Before God can save, a person must see that personal contributions are not only unnecessary but unclean (Isaiah 64:6).

(c) The Possession He Acquired

“...for the sake of Christ.”

This is the great exchange. Paul trades putrid self-righteousness for the precious Pearl of great price. He now wants only “to know Him” (v. 10) because of “the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord” (v. 8). The former Pharisee now calls himself the chief of sinners (1 Timothy 1:15).

Discussion Questions

4. What does it mean practically to “count as loss” something that once gave you a sense of spiritual security?
5. Why is the language of “rubbish” or “dung” (v. 8) important? What does it reveal about the true value of self-righteousness?
6. How does Paul’s new identity as “chief of sinners” demonstrate the transformation that occurs when confidence shifts from the flesh to Christ?

Personal Application

The message ends with a searching question: **Where is your confidence?** Use the following questions for honest self-examination.

1. When you think about standing before God, what do you instinctively point to as evidence that you belong to Him?
2. Are there religious activities, affiliations, or experiences (baptism, altar call, church membership, doctrinal distinctives, moral track record) that you have treated as grounds of acceptance with God?
3. If those things were suddenly stripped away, would your assurance of salvation remain intact?
4. Have you ever consciously renounced confidence in your own righteousness and rested solely in the finished work of Christ?
5. What would it look like this week to “count as loss” any lingering trust in the flesh and to glory more fully in Christ Jesus?

Helpful Cross-References

Isaiah 64:6 — All our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment.

Romans 3:10–12, 20 — There is none righteous; by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified.

Romans 9:4–5 — The privileges of Israel that Paul once claimed.

Galatians 1:13–14 — Paul’s former advancement and zeal in Judaism.

Acts 9:1–9; 22:3–16 — The Damascus-road encounter that overturned Paul’s confidence.

Philippians 3:8–11 — The surpassing value of knowing Christ; the desire to be found in Him.

1 Timothy 1:15 — Paul’s later self-assessment: “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost.”

Luke 18:9–14 — The Pharisee and the tax collector—two different places of confidence.

Memory Verse

“But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ.”

— **Philippians 3:7**

Closing Reflection & Prayer

Faith in religious accomplishments is a roadblock to salvation. No work we perform—however sincere, sacrificial, or orthodox—can take away our sin problem or our God problem. The only sufficient ground of confidence is the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Suggested prayer: *Lord Jesus, search my heart. Expose any place where I am still leaning on my own performance, pedigree, or religious activity. I renounce confidence in the flesh. I count all such things as loss. Grant me the grace to rest solely in Your finished work and to know You more. Amen.*