

03 – Running towards Jesus

Philippians 3

1. Rejoice in the Lord, false confidence in the flesh (3:1-3)

V.1: Question: How/why can we be exhorted to rejoice?

- Usually when someone tells me to be happy, I get even more annoyed.
- What are we to rejoice in?

Christian joy is joy **in** and **through** Jesus. That means: He is the source of our joy but also the object of our joy: We rejoice in him and over him. We can be joyful even in a prison cell because we are united to Jesus.

What is joy, then? Do joy and sadness exclude each other?

- Being happy and constantly frolicking?
- Is it never being sad and always being emotionally healthy?
- There is a joy deeper than that.

Example: In “the last battle” the final book of C.S. Lewis’s chronicles of Narnia, the characters experience the end of the world and how all things are made new. As they then start exploring this new creation, they experience the deepest joy they ever have, but none of them break out in laughter or silliness. And then it says: “there is a kind of happiness and wonder that makes you serious. It is too good to waste on jokes.”

Paul doesn’t grow tired of exhorting to Philippians to rejoice because he knows there is an infinitude of joy to be found in communion with Jesus. It’s a joy that satisfies and sustains us. Nothing can separate us from Jesus and his love for us (Romans 8:31-39). If this union between us and him is unbreakable, so is our joy. This doesn’t mean we won’t experience pain, loss and trauma. It doesn’t mean we won’t be affected by illnesses bodily and mentally. It means that in everything Christ is with us. Christians don’t suffer hopelessly. We have the sure hope that God will one day make all things new and is in the process of doing so. Our joy in Jesus now is a small taste of the fullness of the joy we will have in the new creation.

Lastly, I consider this less a command and more a consoling invitation. “I know you’re suffering dear Philippians. Rejoice in the Lord Jesus. He is an anchor of sure hope and joy”.

V.2-3: But now we learn that this joy in Jesus must be guarded.

We are told three times to “watch out!”. We are to watch out for the “dogs”, the “evil workers” and those who mutilate the flesh”.

Who are these people?

Paul’s “nemesis” so to say was that in pretty much every church he planted, at some point people would show up who believed that in order to really be Christians, people had to become Jews by being circumcised and by observing the mosaic law. Paul went into great lengths in his letters (e.g. Galatians) to show that this is not the case. The only thing required to really be a Christian is ... what? These “hardcore Christians” were convinced that faith and grace alone are not enough, but you have to be ethnically Jewish or at least make every attempt to follow Jewish customs. Paul and the other first Christians were saying: Everything the Old Testament prescribed and taught was a foreshadowing of Jesus and a promise of something greater. Jesus has fulfilled this. Therefore, these cultic and dietary laws are no longer binding. They have been fulfilled by Jesus.

Now, these hardliners would often refer to the non-Jewish nations as “dogs”. For them that didn’t mean cute pets you keep in your house and treat as a family member. Dogs were considered dirty and unclean animals which you chase away when they come too close.

It’s similar with the “mutilation”: The sign God had given Israel of his promises was circumcision. Every male was to be circumcised on the eighth day after birth. It was a sign of the promise that through Abraham’s descendants, God would bless all peoples and effectively draw them to himself. But Paul calls these “Christians” who demanded that gentile believers must be circumcised those “who mutilate the flesh”. They had forgotten that this has always only been the sign of a promise that had now been fulfilled in Jesus. The “Drama of Salvation” had reached a new phase, so to speak. God is now fulfilling his promise to draw people from every nation and tribe to himself.

But already in the Old Testament, God time and time again emphasizes that he cares less about the nit-picky-stuff of the law than about the heart-posture behind the large ideas of it. They are to emulate love and mercy. Their hearts need to be circumcised, rather than just their genitals. It’s not merely about the exterior signs and observations but about what they signify. These “hardcore Christians” had developed a sense of ethnic superiority. “We are the chosen people

of God. We are the heirs of God's promises. The nations are dirty and unworthy of God's salvation".

This was quite the departure from what God had intended the people of Israel to be. They were meant to be a light of God's restoring goodness in a broken world. The promise God gave Abraham, that through him all peoples would be blessed, had been turned into a very ethnocentric perversion. And they made the mistake of believing that simply to do the outward signs of obedience to God means they were doing fine. When, actually, they had rock-hard-hearts. This is what we often refer to as "legalism". They're people who think that being a Christian is about keeping a set of rules. It's about wearing the right clothing and behaving the right way and saying the right things to maintain a good standing with God. It's about having something to show for yourself when God holds you accountable. Maybe God helps us out but at the end of the day you got to get your stuff together in order to make it. Essentially their thinking is: Sure, believing in Jesus as the saviour is the right thing to do. But in order to really be saved you need to do this and that.

Paul is turning their rhetoric on its head. He's saying that, actually, these super hardcore Christians who demand all this stuff, are the "dogs" and are not truly circumcised, but mutilated because their hearts don't love God, they just care about outward appearance. And then he goes: We, who only boast in Jesus and who worship God by the Spirit, we're the ones who are circumcised in our hearts. That means: God's Holy Spirit has renewed us and enables us to love God and worship him as we are meant to. Salvation is not about belonging to a specific ethnic group or about doing the right things. It's about believing in Jesus. And for this, you need a circumcised heart. The Holy Spirit needs to do surgery on your heart.

It's not about whether you're doing all the right things or come from the right people. It's about whether Jesus Christ is your everything. Whether he is your only confidence of why you will be saved. We can never say: "I am saved because I ...". Instead: "I am saved because of **HIM**. Because of who he is and what he's done".

➔ If we cannot earn salvation and aren't saved by our deeds, what does it mean to work out our salvation with fear and trembling (2:12-13)?

Our joy in Jesus needs to be guarded. Legalism is an enemy of the gospel and a thief of joy.

We get to boast in Jesus and in what he's done for us. Our obedience to Jesus is a reaction of thankfulness, not duty. In Jesus, we get to joyfully keep his commandments. Outside of Jesus, God's law will only condemn us and will always be a terrible burden.

Rejoice in Jesus. Look out for those who want to steal this joy by implying that faith in Jesus is not enough. You don't need Jesus and something extra. Lasting joy is found in Jesus not in keeping a façade of religiosity and correctness. You have nothing to show for yourself, so rejoice in what Jesus has done for you.

2. Loss and Gain (3:4-11)

V.4-6: Now Paul goes on to show that he can play their game as well: From the outside, Paul looks like the perfect Jew. He has an unbroken lineage, he's kept the right rituals, he violently persecuted Christians before he became one himself. He perfected the lifestyle under the mosaic law and kept the commandments of the covenant. He knew which sacrifices to bring for which sin, he observed the daily times of prayer, he never missed out synagogue on a sabbath. If these guys want to play the game of boasting in what they have, Paul will win that game of comparison.

V.7-9: "But whatever I considered to be gain, this I now consider loss because of Christ".

All these things Paul used to boast in are of no importance for him anymore. Applied to his context, being Jewish doesn't mean you're automatically saved. Similarly, for us, if you were baptized as a baby, or even show up to church regularly, that doesn't save you. Paul realized that everything he thought he had going for himself was worthless. The treasure he's found in Jesus far surpasses anything and anyone else. There were all these things Paul was taking pride in. He was as Jewish as it gets, and he was as radical as it gets. No one took the law of God as serious as him.

Illustration: But he made a fatal mistake in his accounting. I have been told that in accounting, you take track of credit and debit in separate columns, you calculate the sum of both and then see how close they come to another.

Paul thought that all his inherited and self-made righteousness was on the credit-column. He thought that everything was speaking for him to attain salvation, to be justified. But once he encountered Jesus, he realized that all these things were in fact on the debit column and he was

deep in debt! He had false confidence in his heritage and he had fatally misunderstood what it meant to love God. Not only were all these things worthless, but they added to his debt.

But knowing Jesus as **my** Lord is the all-surpassing worth, the infinite gain in comparison to which everything else is loss, rubbish, worthless and even damaging. Everything Paul now wants is “to be found in him”. He doesn’t care about his own righteousness by having observed Old Testament law carefully. That can’t save him.

It’s only the righteousness of Jesus by which we can stand as righteous before God, and this is a righteousness we can only receive. We receive this by faith in Jesus.

What is faith?

- Like a beggar, reaching out his hand to receive from a wealthy benefactor.
- Like a baby, focusing his or her eyes on someone’s face.
- It’s complete trust and abandoning confidence in anything but Jesus alone. To believe in Jesus is to consider everything as rubbish in order to have everything in Jesus. It’s expecting everything only from Jesus and not from yourself or anyone else.

The only righteousness that justifies us before God is the righteousness he himself gives us by faith in Jesus. And so, your heritage, your legalism, your descendance and anything else is completely worthless in comparison to the overwhelming worth of simply knowing Jesus and being found in him – to be united to him.

Illustration: Have you heard the saying “you are the master of your own destiny”? The idea is that only you decide who you are going to be. Your choices determine who you are and how far you’ll make it. It’s the idea that you’re an autonomous self and no one else can tell you who to be or what to do.

There is some truth to this: We are responsible beings, we make real decisions, and our deeds have consequences. What you do today will have an affect on your tomorrow.

But, this is also a radical overestimation of what humans are able to do. You see, Paul used to think similarly: I was born into the right people, I have kept the rituals and commandments, I am a highly trained Pharisee, and I will prepare the way for the messiah. He thought that his own righteousness was going to suffice. He thought he was righteous. He thought he could do this by himself. Salvation was in his own hands.

But when Jesus encountered him on that road to Damascus, he saw himself as he truly was. Paul realized that he had nothing to show before God except his sin which condemned him. If he was to hold on to this idea of wanting to reach salvation by his own strength he would be lost without hope. Only if he went all in on Jesus, would he be saved. Only if Jesus gave him his own righteousness would Paul be justified. For the Christian, Jesus is the master of our fate.

➔ In myself I am more sinful than I would have ever recognized. In Christ I am more loved than I could have ever imagined.

V.10-11: If Jesus is the highest gain, then Paul wants to know Jesus more and more. He wants to follow him in every way. The path of Jesus is the path to joy and life in him – even if it leads through death.

Do you remember what we said about Jesus in chapter 2 and how his life becomes the paradigm for ours? That’s where Paul is going here: “I want to know Jesus by experiencing the power of his resurrection, by sharing in his sufferings and by being conformed to his death, so that I will attain the resurrection of the dead on the day when Jesus comes in glory.

This is not masochism. It’s not about some weird gratification in suffering and pain. Suffering is never good in itself. But God brings about life even through death. This is about the joy and worth of knowing Jesus that far surpasses the weight of any suffering. If Jesus suffered, I will suffer too. If he was resurrected and glorified, so will I – because I am united to him. I will be made like him. The way in which God brings this about is through humiliation to glory. Being in Christ means suffering but also resurrection and glory.

3. Pressing on to reach the goal (3:12-16)

The resurrection of the dead is the goal Paul strives to get to. Being in Christ means that Jesus will resurrect him on the last day. This gives his entire life its purpose and direction. Then he will know Jesus fully and enjoy him forever. Now, in V.12-16 Paul clarifies that he’s not there yet. He hasn’t reached the finish line, so to speak.

Illustration: Do you know the story of Eric Lidell? He was Olympic champion of the 400 meters race in 1924. There was a point where, not far from the finishing line, he was pushed aside and stumbled. For most athletes, the race would’ve been over right there. They’d accept that they just lost this race. There is no way of catching up. But Eric Liddel got back up immediately and fast like a lightning he caught up with the others and even overtook them just

before the finish line. He won the race. To do this he had to forget whatever had happened and set his mind on the goal before him: to win the race.

This is Paul's basic idea in these verses: Forget what is behind and give everything to reach the finish line. All these things that once were so important for Paul are now irrelevant. The only thing that counts is pressing on so that he may know Jesus more and enjoy him fully. He just wants Jesus. Like an Olympic athlete who wants nothing more but to win gold in his or her discipline. To live is Christ. To die is gain.

There are three persons involved in this race:¹ 1. Paul presses on; 2. Christ holds him; 3. God called him.

(1) We've seen what it meant for Paul to run this race. It is similar for us. It's as if we're running a race and we need to give it our everything in order to reach the goal and win the prize.

(2) V.12: Jesus has laid hold of Paul. Paul belongs to Jesus. This is the cause and the grounding for why Paul is able to lay hold of Christ. Paul is certain to reach the finish line and be made perfect, because Jesus holds him as his own. I think that's what he's saying in v.16 as well: Christ has us and we have him. Hold on to him as he holds onto you.

(3) V.14: God has called us to this. This like Jesus calling Lazarus out of the grave, or God saying, "Let there be light" and there was light. This is an effective summons, like a king orders his army to gather. But God has not called us to battle. He's called us into his presence in Christ Jesus. He's summoning us into his presence through the work of Jesus. We're not earning this. We just keep running until we're there. God will finish his good work in us until the day of Christ.

4. Imitate worthy examples (3:17-19)

How can we follow someone's example if we're all sinners in need of redemption?

This might seem strange to us. Paul just stated that he isn't perfect yet, so why follow his example? Because he runs toward Jesus and imitates him. "Imitate me as I imitate Jesus". It's simply that newer Christians are to learn from more mature Christians. This is not about glorifying leaders and seeing them as these Super-Holy-Special-Christians. Our leaders are meant to be examples to us. We follow them insofar as they follow Jesus. In chapter two Paul

¹ Ferguson, Let's Study Philippians, 86-7.

mentioned Timothy and Epaphroditus as examples the Philippians are to follow. It's not that they are perfect, but they have matured in their faith and follow Jesus wholeheartedly. Here, Paul is mentioning himself along with anyone else who "lives his life in this way", that is: anyone who presses on to run the race and wants nothing more but to know Jesus deeper and deeper.

In chapter 2 Paul also talked about the example that Jesus is for us. Very importantly, Jesus is not merely an example to imitate, but our unique saviour and redeemer. But his life is the paradigm for our life in him. The goal of our salvation is that we will be transformed to be like Jesus. God is doing this work currently in all believers and he will complete it when Jesus comes again. On "the day of Christ". Although still very imperfectly, all Christians are "living illustrations of Jesus himself".²

And what kind of person do you think Paul is warning against?

He described them earlier.

- People who think Christ alone is not enough. Christ + something else.
- They are enemies of the cross, but they consider themselves Christians. They're not openly against Christianity. But they push a perverted gospel onto people.

What does Paul imply when he calls them enemies of the cross of Christ?

- ➔ With their views and behaviour, they despise what Jesus did on the cross, even if they don't say that the death of Jesus wasn't enough. If you think you can add to the cross of Jesus, you haven't understood what Jesus did there.
- ➔ They think they are including the sacrifice of Jesus in their Theology. But Paul (and the other apostles) make clear that as a matter of fact, they are enemies of Christ.
- ➔ Paul charges them with having the wrong mindset: They are too preoccupied with genealogies, circumcision, are you doing the right things, not paying attention to their heart-posture.
- ➔ "Their end is destruction": On the day of Christ, when he will judge all people, they will be found guilty because their faith was not in Jesus but in themselves.

² Ferguson, Let's Study Philippians, 90.

But consider also that Paul shed tears for these people and for the damage they were causing. We have to call out false teachers. We have to guard the gospel from perversions. But there is no gratification in that. Pointing out false teachers should never be done condescendingly or hatefully. We do right in shedding tears for them and the people they lead astray. Whenever we hear a new preacher, or some teaching or movement on a hype let us ask this: Do they, like Paul, say “far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world (Gal 6:14)”? Or put it like this: Is the cross at the centre of their theology or somewhere on the fringes?

5. Awaiting the Saviour (3:20-21)

I want to point out three more things:

(1) Our citizenship is in heaven.

That’s where we belong. Home is with Jesus, in the new creation, not in this world. Whatever country your citizenship is in, if you’re a Christian your home is with Jesus in God’s presence.

- The Philippians were a roman colony outside of Rome. We are citizens of heaven, waiting for our king.
- Here Paul uses the creedal formulation again: Jesus is Lord, Saviour, Messiah. We eagerly await his coming. Then he will make all things new, and we will finally be perfected and enjoy him fully forever.

(2) Our Bodies will be transformed to resemble Jesus in the resurrection when he comes.

- When Christ comes, our bodies will be transformed. No more illness, brokenness, pain. We will be made like Jesus. But: You remain you and Jesus remains Jesus. But Jesus is has ushered in the new creation and will fully realize this when he comes again. Then our bodies will be transformed into bodies fit for the new creation.

(3) All things are being and will be subjected to Jesus Christ the king.

- He will do this by his power. This power, which the Father has given him enables him to subject everything under his good reign.
- Sin, death, Satan and fallen humans now rebel against king Jesus. But every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus is God, Saviour and King.

That is why we press on and run the race: We are going home to be with Jesus and be in God's presence. Our path will lead from suffering to glory. But Jesus, who went before us, keeps us until the end.