



Steadfast Bible Fellowship

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### “A Warning about Doctrinal Error,” Philippians 3:1-14

In 3:1 Paul began with the term translated “finally;” this did not mean he was about to conclude the letter, but that he was switching subjects—a warning about doctrinal error. A specific doctrinal threat in the early church was from a group known as the Judaizers. This was apparently the group to which Paul was referring in chapter 3.

Who were the Judaizers? They followed Paul in his journeys and challenged him constantly on the seeming simplicity of “salvation by grace through faith” alone (see Ephesians 2:8-9). They declared that this was too easy. For a more complete justification and a more complete sanctification, one needed to keep certain aspects of the Law: Circumcision, keeping certain Feast Days and, apparently, some of the kosher food laws as well. Paul had declared that this was “another” gospel, not the one centered in Jesus (see Galatians 1:6-9).

#### The Warning, 3:1-3

3:1: An exhortation—Paul calls for the Philippians to “rejoice in the Lord.” Paul used this exhortation frequently in this letter (see 1:18 [twice]; 2:17-18 [twice]; here in 3:1; 4:4 [twice]; and 4:10). Repetition is vital to learning—and Paul was a master at using that technique. Paul was reminding them to not lead a circumstance-controlled life, but a Spirit-controlled life, where He produces the fruit of joy.

3:2: Paul’s warning about the Judaizers was introduced by “look out” or “watch out,” used three times:

- Their character: “watch out for the dogs,” a term of derision in Judaism. Dogs were regarded as the most despised, most insolent and miserable of the unclean animals. It was what they called Gentiles.
- Their conduct: “watch out for the evildoers;” they aggressively promoted doing evil and thereby perverted the Gospel.
- Their doctrine: “watch out for those who mutilate the flesh,” a reference to their teaching that circumcision was necessary for salvation.

3:3: Paul now gave a reason for his warning: “we are the circumcision,” a metaphor declaring that the followers of Christ are the true spiritual children of Abraham (see Galatians 3:25-29, Romans 2:28-29 and Jeremiah 4:4). He then elaborated on what this genuinely involved:

- We “worship by the Spirit of God;” only the Spirit energizes and inspires true worship in spirit and truth (see John 4:24).
- We “glory in Christ Jesus,” i.e., in His redemptive work (see Galatians 6:14).
- We “put no confidence in the flesh,” i.e., to earn or merit favor with God through anything that adds to Christ and His finished work.

### The Illustration of Paul, 3:4-14

3:4: In this paragraph, Paul used himself as a supreme example of one who could have “placed confidence in the flesh.” But, he did not!

3:5-6: Here Paul detailed 7 reasons why he could easily have “placed confidence in the flesh:”

1. Four hereditary achievements;

- “circumcised on the 8<sup>th</sup> day,” the sign of the Abrahamic covenant (Genesis 17:12)
- “people of Israel,” a citizen of God’s covenant people
- “tribe of Benjamin,” last of Jacob’s 12 sons; Jerusalem was in Benjamin’s land grant; they held the place of honor in battle (see Judges 5:14); and this tribe remained loyal to the Davidic monarchy after the split into two kingdoms after 931 BC
- “Hebrew of Hebrews,” referring to his upbringing in which he learned the Hebrew language and the customs and traditions of His people

2. Three personal achievements:

- “as to the Law, a Pharisee,” the strictest of the sects of Judaism. The common people looked up to them as the teachers of the Law, to which they added many rigid interpretations.
- “as to zeal, a persecutor of the church;” he persecuted the church with a “good conscience,” believing he was doing God’s will (see Acts 23:1; 8:1, 3; 9:1-2).
- “as to righteousness under the Law, blameless;” his life was lived in meticulous conformity to the 613 laws of Judaism.

3:7-9: In this paragraph, Paul reviewed his justification. Note the strong adversative, “but.” Paul did not regard those seven achievements as a “gain” when it came to his salvation. In fact these “gains” shifted to the “loss” column when it came to Christ. His words are a distinct and forceful refutation of all human effort to merit salvation. In fact, everything is “counted” as “loss” when compared to “knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.” Why? Everything in the former “gain” column was in effect “rubbish” (*skubala*; excrement) when compared to the “gain” of Jesus Christ. He delighted in being “found in Him,” a reference to His new position and His new identity. That position was the result of justification by faith, not any human work or effort!

3:10-14: In this paragraph, Paul reviewed the process of his sanctification. Verses 10 and 11 are result clauses flowing from his justification. In His walk now with Christ, Paul desired

- to “know” (*gnonai*; experientially, relationally, intimately) Jesus
- and the “power of His resurrection,” i.e., that supernatural power now available to believers by faith in Christ through his Spirit
- to “share in His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death,” which means that he was willing to suffer and die for Jesus, as indeed Ananias declared he would do in Acts 9:16.
- to “attain” the “resurrection” from the dead. The term for resurrection here is *exanastasin*, used only here in the NT. It apparently has the sense of out from among other corpses, perhaps referring to his teaching in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18.

In v. 12, Paul humbly declared, “I am not there yet.” But now “I press on” (used twice) to reach these goals because Jesus “has made me His own” on the Damascus Road. As he pressed on, what was his

posture; what was his strategy; what were his plans? He was looking forward only, “pressing on” toward the “prize,” of the “upward call.” His past was covered by the blood of Jesus, so he did not look back. He longed for and expected the promised glorification that awaited Him when he saw Jesus.

Questions:

1. Why do you think Paul was so hard on the Judaizers? What were they adding to the Gospel?
2. Do you understand Paul’s phrase “put no confidence in the flesh?” Do you have the tendency to do that? How might pride fit into this?
3. Paul shifts the things in his life that most people would argue belong in the “gain” column of a spreadsheet and places them in the “loss” column. What in your life should shift from the gain to the loss column?
4. Paul made this shift in the columns of his life in order to be “found in Christ.” Have you made that shift?
5. In vv. 13-14, Paul summarizes the forward-looking dimension of his life. He did not look back; rather, he “pressed on.” This is powerful! Have you committed to no longer looking back? Are your old habits covered by the blood? Are you pressing on toward the “prize?”

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