

Paul's Letter to the Philippians

Session Eight May 13, 2020

Philippians 3:1-6

Paul begins the second half of the letters to the Philippians warning his friends about the possibility of Jewish Christians arriving and spreading false teachings about faith and practice.

Paul shares with the Philippian church that they embody “true circumcision”, then reminding them of his Jewish heritage as proof against any sort of argument.

Opening Question...

(1) Name a group or organization you are a part of. How does that group define “membership”?

Last week, Paul gave recommendations for Timothy and Epaphroditus to the church at Philippi. His plan was to send Epaphroditus back to his home church immediately with this letter to the Philippians after he had recovered from a grave illness. Paul also planned to send Timothy to Philippi after he received a verdict from the court case that was holding him in prison.

Chapter three in Philippians serves as a transition point in this Paulin letter. Some scholars have debated that maybe this was a separate letter that Paul wrote and that got merged at a later date. The “Finally” that begins verse one might indicate this. However, this may also indicate a pause in writing since Paul was in jail and he may have had his writing utensils confiscated, put away for a brief time because of the trial, or simply paused in writing and had more items to add at a later time. Whatever the case, we will let scholars debate that nuance and we will move forward with the content. What we do see in the beginning of chapter three is Paul addressing a recurring problem that Paul faced in other churches, while also addressing his past as sort of a “resume” for the justification for his arguments.

3:1 – Repeat – Rejoice!

Paul begins this section of his letter with a concluding nature, “Finally”, even though we have two more chapters to cover. This is a little confusing, however, this may relate to more towards this emphasis to the encouragement to REJOICE (that word again)! Paul repeats this word to the church again, but does this time with a warning – a safeguard. Paul was aware of outside trouble that had come after he had left churches in the past...

3:2 – Here comes trouble...Who they are and who they are not!

Paul uses the term “dogs, evil workers, false circumcision” in warning the Philippians about trouble that might come. Paul is most likely referring to Jewish Christian missionaries who would often come in after he founded churches and left and would insist that the believers must be defined and follow Mosaic law (like circumcision) to be true Christians. Based on the writing, it looks like they had not arrive in Philippians yet. However, these individuals had arrived in churches at Galatia, Corinth, and Ephesus, so Paul was warning the Philippians that they might come and be ready.

Paul was not referring to the Jewish faith. Unfortunately, throughout history relationships between Judaism and Christianity has not been good. This has led to many unfortunate atrocities in history where one religion failed to stand up for another religion (look at World War II for example). This is not Paul’s position here. Comparative religion would be lining religions side by side, saying this is what we like and this is what we do not like, and so my religion is better than yours is. Paul, instead, is practicing “Messianic eschatology”. He is saying that we believe that the One true God has sent Israel his Messiah, and his Messiah is Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is exalted and Lord of the World. The first century Jews knew many groups had proclaimed individuals as the promised Messiah. Each of these groups were either believed to be true or committing blasphemy. Unfortunately, in the first century this led to much unrest in the Roman Empire, often times between Jewish groups, because of these messianic claims. Paul’s claims was not we have a better religion, but that God has acted in Jesus Christ as the Messiah, and his death and resurrection has transformed what it means to be the people of God.

3:3 – We are the “true circumcision” ...

Paul is reminding the Philippians that anyone who says you must follow the Jewish law is taking it away from the new life in Jesus Christ. “True circumcision” is not of the flesh, but of the heart. The false circumcision that Paul mentions in verse two referenced more of a pagan cult cutting, rather than a Jewish circumcision practice. The more fascinating part of this verse is that Paul is talking to a diverse community when he is saying this “we” – Jews/Gentiles, slaves/free, men/women – a united family. This circumcision of the heart is referenced and discussed in Romans chapter 2. This new community/creation was controversial in Paul’s day – it was about INCLUSION, not exclusion! (Maybe the Christian church can learn a little bit about this today...) Paul is not saying that the Jews are being swept away as the “chosen people”, just that God has enlarged the family!

3:4-6 – Paul’s resume – In case anyone asks...

Paul knew that the Jewish Christians that often came in after him would question Paul’s authority. Paul wanted to remind the Philippians about his Jewish “resume” in case they questioned it, but also to remind them of where he came from (he is proud of it) and why he holds so strongly to his beliefs about Jesus as the Messiah today. Paul lays out seven things that categorized himself as a “super Jew”...

(1) Circumcised on the eighth day; (2) Of the Nation of Israel; (3) Of the Tribe of Benjamin; (4) Hebrew of Hebrews; (5) A Pharisee (as to the Law); (6) Persecutor of the Church (as the Zeal); (7) Blameless in the Law (as to Righteousness)

Paul lays each of these out and put all together they represent his covenant status as a devout Jew. No one should be able to challenge him on this premise. However, this gives us a glimpse into understanding why Paul is so devout in his faith as a Christian – specifically his covenantal relationship with God. Paul is emphatic that he knows what it means to being a committed believer of faith – to have a devoted relationship with God. Paul also knew that this relationship was not based on laws and customs but was transformed by the Jesus Christ, a cross and an empty tomb. That is why he was emphasizing the Messianic mindset to the Philippians (and to all Christians) so much. The foundation pieces were formed from his Jewish heritage – commitment, devotion, and passion.

This same commitment, devotion, and passion were now directed to Jesus Christ, his Messiah and Lord.

At the beginning of Chapter 3, Paul warned the Philippian Church to keep an eye out for Judaizing Christians that might arrive insisting on strict adherence to the Mosaic Law.

Paul encouraged the Philippians to stand strong, rejoice, and remember that “true circumcision” was of the heart, not the flesh.

Follow Up Questions...

Where in your life are you tempted to define yourself by something other than Jesus?

Where have you seen your pre-Jesus way of life trying to reclaim you?