

Resurrection Sunday: Philippians 3:1-11

On this Resurrection Sunday, we're going to take a break from our series through Luke's book of Acts and reflect on Paul's letter to the Philippians (chapter three, verses 1-11). Paul begins this chapter with these words:

I. Philippians 3:1a — Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord.

Paul's "finally" tells us that he's taking up, now, the last main section in his letter, which is really all of chapter three. And it's this entire last section that Paul introduces with this simple imperative: "Finally, my brothers, *rejoice in the Lord.*" In other words, this isn't just an independent, one-off, stand-alone exhortation. Instead, as one commentator says, it's the "essential theological — and experiential — framework" for everything Paul is about to say in the following twenty-one verses. While the word "rejoice" won't appear again in the remainder of chapter three, the Lord in whom we are to rejoice as well as the reasons that we are to rejoice exclusively—only—in Him will be the main theme of this chapter.

We are to diligently and faithfully rejoice in the Lord, Paul says, so that we might not be lured away and enticed by any other substitute for Him. In other words, Paul's exhortation to rejoice in the Lord must be heard not just as a positive encouragement, but also as the Gospel antidote to a very serious spiritual danger. "Finally, my brothers, **rejoice in the Lord.**" This is of the utmost importance. This rejoicing in the Lord is essential to your spiritual safety and well-being. Paul continues:

II. Philippians 3:1b-2 — To write the same things again is no trouble to me, and it is a safeguard for you. Beware of the dogs! Beware of the evil workers! Beware of the mutilation!

We can feel right away the intensity of Paul's concern and the seriousness of his warning—not only in the threefold repetition ("Beware...! Beware...! Beware...!"), but also in the language that he uses to describe the danger. "Beware of the dogs!" In English, "the pejorative sense of... dog is normally applied insultingly to people considered worthless and vulgar" (Silva). But that's at least not the primary way that Paul is using the word here (cf. Fee). The word "dog" was a reference to "Gentiles," to those outside the covenant community who were considered ritually unclean (cf. Silva). When Jesus said to the Canaanite woman who was pleading for her daughter's healing, "It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs" (Mat. 15:26), the Canaanite woman didn't receive this as a personal insult. She understood that this was a reference to the salvation-historical priority of the Jews because of God's sovereign choice and election of the Jews as His Old Covenant people (Mat. 15:27). So when Paul says, "beware of the dogs," what does he mean? Beware of the Gentiles? But the Philippian church was primarily a "Gentile" church. In fact, in an ironic twist Paul is "turning the tables" on the Jews who would tell these Gentile Christians that they must become Jews—that they must accept circumcision and Old Covenant law-keeping (including food laws, etc.)—if they would be saved (these Jews are referred to today as the "Judaizers"). Who are the true "dogs," according to Paul? Who are the new "Gentiles"? They are these Jews! Who are the ones who stand outside of the covenant community among not just the ritually, but the ultimately unclean? They are these

Jews!—The very ones who **rejoice** in all their salvation-historical privilege (represented by their circumcision). This, then, explains Paul’s next two “table-turning” labels.

The Judaizers prided themselves in the “works of the law”—the covenantal Law that God Himself had given to them (Rom. 3:20, 28; Gal. 2:16; 3:2, 5, 10; cf. Rom. 9:30-32); they **rejoiced** in their “works of righteousness” (rooted in God’s covenantal law; cf. Titus 3:5). And yet Paul calls them the exact opposite: “Beware of the *evil workers*.” In the Psalms, the “workers of iniquity” were the wicked whom Yahweh hates (Ps. 5:5), who eat up Yahweh’s people as they eat bread (Ps. 14:4), who speak peace with their neighbors, while evil is in their hearts (Ps. 28:3), who aim bitter speech as their arrow, to shoot from places of hiding at the blameless (Ps. 64:2-4). The “workers of iniquity” were those who would be cut off from God’s covenant people (Ps. 101:8; 125:5). But who are the “workers of iniquity” now? They’re actually those who **rejoice** in their works of righteousness; they’re those who pride themselves in the “works of the [Old Covenant] law”—the law that God Himself had given to His people. Who are the “evil workers?” They’re actually the *Jews* who pride themselves in their salvation-historical privilege represented by their circumcision—which brings us to Paul’s third “table-turning” label.

“Beware of the mutilation!” The circumcision of the Judaizers, says Paul—the circumcision that they would have the Philippians accept—is nothing more than a mutilation of the flesh! Why? Because continuing to require the circumcision of Gentiles if they would be admitted into God’s New Covenant people is now the sign that all along they had been *relying upon*—and **rejoicing in**—the “works of the [Old Covenant] law” for their ultimate righteousness and salvation (cf. Gal. 5:2-3). But this is a perversion of the true meaning of Old Covenant circumcision. The outward circumcision in the flesh under the Old Covenant was ultimately a sign of the inward circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit (Rom. 2:28-29) which is now fully manifested and revealed under the New Covenant. This is the “circumcision made without hands,” Paul says, “in the removal of the body of the flesh, in the circumcision of Christ” (Col. 2:11). To continue requiring the Old Covenant circumcision of the flesh when the New Covenant circumcision of the heart has been manifested in Christ is to prove that all along one has been relying not on God’s gracious promise of salvation in the Messiah, but ultimately upon one’s own self-made righteousness in doing the “works/deeds of the [Old Covenant] law.” And so in this way, Paul says, the Judaizers’ circumcision is actually no more than a mutilation.

Again, we see the intensity of Paul’s concern and the seriousness of his warning not only in the threefold repetition (“Beware...! Beware...! Beware...!”), but also in the language that he uses to describe the danger (“Beware of *the dogs*! Beware of *the evil workers*! Beware of *the mutilation*!”). Paul recognizes that there’s a certain fleshly attractiveness to the Judaizer’s message and so he goes on to write in verse three:

III. Philippians 3:3 — For we are the [true] circumcision, who worship/serve [*latreuo*] in the Spirit of God and boast in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh...

Paul’s point is that the Philippian believers are already the true fulfillment of Old Covenant Israel—not by virtue of a continued adherence to the Old Covenant law with its circumcision of the flesh but rather by virtue of their new worship and service “in the Spirit of God” (a “circumcision... of the heart, by the Spirit”) and their new boasting in the Messiah, Jesus (the

“circumcision of Christ”). We are, therefore, “the true circumcision... *who put no confidence in the flesh.*” But the attractiveness of the Judaizers’ message is precisely in its elevation and exaltation of the flesh.

Calvin writes: “[I]n the term ‘flesh’ [Paul] includes everything... in man that he could glory in... or, to express it briefly, he calls ‘flesh’ everything that is outside [of] Christ.” Notice how “confidence in the flesh” is set over and against “boast[ing] in Christ Jesus” and how “boast[ing] in Christ Jesus” is set over and against “confidence in the flesh.” These two realities are mutually exclusive and wholly opposed to one another. “Flesh,” then, is a comprehensive, all-encompassing term. The “flesh” is ultimately *all of me* outside of and apart from Christ and life in the Spirit. The “flesh” is ultimately the entirety of my lived life—past, present, and future—outside of and apart from Christ and life in the Spirit. To say that we are those who put no confidence in the flesh, then, is a radical and completely counter-intuitive thing to say to those who are in the flesh (as—in a sense—we all are). It is, in the end, a complete denial of self. We could say that to put no confidence in the flesh is a complete losing of ourselves—even of our very life. Paul illustrates this reality by giving himself as an example in verses 4 and 5:

IV. Philippians 3:4–6 — ...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: circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless.

All the things Paul mentions here were at the very core of his old identity as a Jew. He had been “circumcised the eighth day” according to God’s word to Abraham (Gen. 17:12) and God’s word to Moses (Lev. 12:3). The Judaizers wanted to require that the Gentile believers receive this same circumcision if they would be admitted into God’s covenant people, but they could never be circumcised on the eighth day, as Paul had been. Paul was “of the nation of Israel”—he was of the physical seed of Abraham through Isaac and Jacob. Again, while the Judaizers wanted to incorporate the Gentiles into the Jewish people via circumcision, “Paul had been given this privilege by birth” (Fee). Not only was Paul of the nation of Israel, he was specifically “of the tribe of Benjamin.” Even if the Gentile believers received circumcision in order to be grafted into an Old Covenant Israel they could still never claim membership specifically in one of the twelve tribes of Israel. But Paul could—and not just in any tribe. “He belonged to the tribe of Benjamin, that favored tribe from whom came his namesake Saul, Israel’s first king, the tribe blessed by Moses as ‘the beloved of the Lord... whom the Lord loves...’ (Deut. 33:12), [and] in whose territory sat the Holy City itself [Josh. 18:28; but see also 15:63]” (Fee). It was Benjamin alone that remained with Judah in loyalty to the Davidic covenant when the ten northern tribes split away from Judah and Benjamin (1 Kings 11:31-36; 12:21). Paul was “circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, *a Hebrew of Hebrews.*” Paul’s “family could not be accused of having adopted [any] Hellenistic [any culturally Greek/Gentile] ways” (Silva).

In terms of his ancestry and upbringing, you couldn’t get any more “Jewish” than Paul. And, of course, this wasn’t just an ethnic and cultural identity. It *was* that, but it was also, preeminently, a religious identity. Paul asks in Romans chapter three:

- Romans 3:1–2 (cf. Deut. 4:7-8; Ps. 147:19-20) — [W]hat advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? Great in every respect. First of all, that they were entrusted with the oracles of God.

In Romans 9, Paul speaks of his kinsmen according to the flesh:

- Romans 9:3–5 — ...who are *Israelites*, to whom belongs the *adoption as sons*, and the *glory* and the *covenants* and the *giving of the Law* and the *temple service* and the *promises*, whose are the *fathers*, and from whom is the *Christ [the Messiah]* according to the flesh.

Can you begin to feel the immense weight of privilege in being able to claim, as Paul could, that he was “circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews”? But for most, this awesome privilege was twisted into a reason for *confidence in the flesh*. (This is what we do, isn’t it?) They began to find their identity in their privilege rather than in the God who gave that privilege to them. They began to suppose that God had graciously elected them and graciously given them all of these awesome privileges, and especially graciously given them the Old Covenant law *so that* they might achieve and present to Him a righteousness of their own. So Paul continues his autobiographical sketch with the statement that he was: “as to the Law, a Pharisee.” Paul says in Acts 26:

- Acts 26:4–5 — “So then, all Jews know my manner of life from my youth, which from the beginning was spent *among my own nation* and *at Jerusalem*; since they have known about me for a long time, if they are willing to testify, that I lived as a Pharisee *according to the strictest sect of our religion*.”

And in Galatians chapter one:

- Galatians 1:14 — I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my countrymen, being *far more zealous* for the traditions of my fathers.

This explains, then, what Paul says next in Philippians 3: “...as to *zeal*, a persecutor of the church...” Paul’s point, here, isn’t the persecution in itself. His point is the religious fervor and zeal that characterized his whole former life in Judaism. Paul persecuted the church not because he was a malicious and mean-spirited man, but because of his zeal for the law and the temple and his Jewish countrymen who he believed were in danger of being led astray by the proclamation of a “Messiah” who had obviously been cursed by God. This, then, leads to Paul’s final reason why he, of all people, might have confidence even in the flesh: “as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless.” Paul isn’t claiming to have been sinless. Instead, he’s pointing out that with respect to the “*observable standard of conduct*” (Silva) required by the Law, there was no *man* who could find fault with him (Paul was not a “hypocrite”; cf. Lk. 1:5-6). Again, when Paul speaks of “confidence in the flesh,” he’s not speaking of confidence in a sinless perfection or in a standard of righteousness invented by humans. Instead, he’s speaking of confidence in his achievement of an observable standard of righteousness revealed by God Himself in the *covenantal* law (the “works/deeds of the law” is the works/deeds of a covenant law). But is this Old Covenant righteousness really identical with the righteousness that God requires for salvation and eternal life? (cf. Silva). This is what the Judaizers (and, at one point, Paul) have all

assumed, and so as a result they've ended up placing their confidence in the flesh. Even their circumcision and their ethnic "Jewishness" because so associated in their minds with the "righteousness" of Torah (with the "works of the covenant law") that these ethnic and religious identity markers became—in themselves—a reason for confidence in the flesh.

Are you beginning to get a sense for how deeply Paul's whole identity was bound up with his Jewishness, and especially with that "righteousness" that belonged to the Old Covenant? This is who Paul was. It defined Him. It was his very life. It's in this light, then, that we can begin to grasp the mighty work that God did in Paul when he goes on to write in verses 7-9:

V. Philippians 3:7-9 — But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as **loss** for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be **loss** because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the **loss** of all things, and count them but **dung** [refuse; excrement] so that I may **gain** Christ and be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own which is from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God upon [the basis of] faith...

What are all those things that were once "gain" to Paul? It's not going too far to say that they were his whole life and identity. They summed up who he was and his whole reason for being. So when Paul says that he has counted them as "loss," this is no small thing. He means in a very real sense that he's lost *himself*. He's lost his *life*. Paul goes further: Not only does he count all those things that were once gain to him as loss, but he counts all things, period, to be "loss." In other words, whatever any man in the flesh might ever boast in—whatever any human being in the flesh might ever own as his identity—Paul counts it *all* to be loss. And so once again, what we see is nothing less than the losing of Paul's very life—of literally everything that had once been, or could ever have been, his reason for being (his reason for living).

And why has Paul counted all things to be loss? "[F]or the sake of Christ," he says in verse seven; and here in verse eight: "[B]ecause of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord." Here, perhaps more than in any other place, we're given a glimpse into the deeply personal and experiential nature of Paul's own faith. What can explain Paul's willingness to lose his life? Only the reward of finding his life (his "self"; his "identity") again in Christ. Christ Himself is the one "for whom," he says, "I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but dung..." On the one hand the loss of all things is something Paul can say he's "suffered." There's a certain, real suffering and painfulness in the losing of one's life—and even in the constant losing of one's life, of all that previously constituted who I am and what I boasted in. But when this "suffering" is measured against the "surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus [our] Lord," then all the loss (with whatever suffering or pain that loss might entail) becomes as nothing in comparison. Indeed, all those things that we have suffered the loss of are now the very things we count as dung (refuse; excrement). One commentator says: "[Paul] perceived with horror that the things he had hitherto viewed as benefiting him had in reality been working to destroy him because they were blinding him to his need for the real righteousness which God required" (Hawthorne; quoted in Silva).

Self-satisfaction; self-assurance; self-sufficiency; self-promotion; self-congratulation. When all this "self" is stripped away, then it's truly no exaggeration to say that I've lost myself; I've lost

my life. And what can explain Paul's willingness to lose his life? Only the infinitely greater reward and joy of finding his life again in Christ and in that righteousness that He Himself has achieved. "...so that I may *gain* Christ," he says, "and be found in *Him*, not having a righteousness of my own which is from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God upon [the basis of] faith. In other words, *Christ* is now *who Paul is*. Christ is Paul's life. No longer "self," but Christ. And this is so because Paul's *confidence* and *boasting* is no longer "in the flesh" (it's no longer in "a righteousness of [his] own which is from the Law"). Now Paul's confidence and boasting is exclusively in Christ (it's in that "righteousness which is from God" "through faith in Christ"). How big is this change—this transformation—in Paul? It's not limited to just the religious "compartment" in his life. Instead, it's nothing less than a death and resurrection. It's nothing less than a losing of his life and a finding it again in Christ.

We might ask: Can I find my life in Christ without first losing my life? And we understand even in the very asking of the question that the answer is "no." We *must* die to self *if* we would be found in Christ. We *must* lose our life *if* we would find our life in Christ. We *must* abandon all boasting in the flesh *if* we would boast in Christ Jesus (cf. Gal. 5:2).

And yet when we understand what is that true life that we find in Christ—that blessed assurance of God's love; that perfect peace of conscience; that supreme joy in the Holy Spirit—all because of the righteousness that *He Himself* has been made for us (righteousness is not a "commodity that can be separated from Christ's person), then we'll know that the "life" we lose is as nothing in comparison; indeed, it's less than nothing; we count it now as dung in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus our Lord. All that we once boasted in or might ever have boasted in we have now willingly suffered the loss of (we have willingly lost our lives) *in order that* we might *gain* the one thing in all of heaven and earth that's of true and eternal value (cf. Mat. 13:44-46).

If we've already died to self in a definitive, once-for-all sort of way, then the Christian life is also a continual dying. If we've already lost our life in a definitive, once-for-all sort of way, then the Christian experience is also a continual losing of our life. As long as we're still living in the flesh—with its lusts, and boastings, and selfish pursuits (1 Jn. 2:15-17)—how could it be otherwise? But why would we do this? Why would anyone be continually dying and always losing his life? There's only one possible explanation: So that he might be continually living and finding his life in Christ. Paul writes: "... I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but dung..."

VI. Philippians 3:10–11 — ...*that I may know Him*, namely [epexegetic *kai*], the power of His resurrection [cf. Rom. 6:4-5] and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead [cf. Rom. 8:16-17].

Here is the paradoxical power, then, of the death and resurrection of Christ—and of our union with Him *in* His death and resurrection. We suffer loss so that we might gain. We lose so that we might find. We die so that we might live—or rather, so that it might no longer be us who live, but Christ who lives in us (Gal. 2:20). The world mocks, and we say: Let the world mock! The world pities, and we say: Let the world pity! "For [we] have died and [our] life has been hidden

with Christ in God [the world cannot now see this reality]. When Christ, who is our life, is manifested, then [we] also will be manifested with Him in glory” (Col. 3:3-4). Jesus said to His disciples in Matthew 16:

- Matthew 16:24–25 (cf. Jn. 12:25) — “If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it.”

What does the death and resurrection of Jesus mean for us who have believed? It means that we, too, have lost our lives so that we might find our life in Him. It means that Christ is Himself our perfect righteousness, and therefore He is also our very life, and the one in whom is all our boast.

- Philippians 3:20–21 — For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by His working through which He is able even to subject all things to Himself.

Finally, then, my brothers and sisters, rejoice[!]¹—[always]²—in the Lord.”