

# “Found in Him”

## The Sixth in a Series of Sermons on Philippians

*Texts: Philippians 3:1-11; Isaiah 51:1-8*

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One writer says that “chapter 3 of Philippians is without dispute a singularly powerful passage—a foundational building block for theology and a true classic of Christian spirituality.”<sup>1</sup> Well said and quite true. After exhorting the Philippians to stand firm in the face of persecution coming from those outside the church (Greco-Roman pagans) Paul warns the Philippians in no uncertain terms about those attempting to disrupt the church from within. Known as Judaizers—because of their insistence that Gentile converts must live as Jews after undergoing circumcision in order to be justified—Paul first encountered them in Galatia, but now Judaizing missionaries have made their way from Asia Minor into Greece, causing havoc in the church in Philippi. In the process of warning the Philippians about the destructive ways of the Judaizers, Paul gives us a glimpse into his life before his conversion. This is one of the few places where we gain genuine insight into Paul’s thinking as an up and coming Rabbi, who was extremely zealous to see Christianity wiped out before it could really begin. Paul speaks of finding a justifying righteousness not his own (that of Jesus) which comes through faith, as well as how he longs to know firsthand the glories of the resurrection power of Jesus since Paul has been privileged to suffer for the sake of his Lord. This is an important and a remarkable section of Paul’s Philippian letter, and truly one of the high points in all the canonical writings of Paul.

We are continuing our series on Paul’s letter to the Philippians and we come to chapter 3. The transition from Paul’s lengthy exhortation (which began back in verse 27 of chapter 1 and continued on to verse 18 of chapter 2), to the Apostle recounting certain details of his life (in verses 4-6 of chapter 3) is not as abrupt as it may first seem. Upon concluding his exhortation for the Philippians to stand firm in the face of persecution (2:18), Paul expresses his desire to send Timothy to Philippi to bring them a word of encouragement (vv. 19-30). Since Paul was presently under house arrest in Rome awaiting his appearance before Caesar, Paul needs Timothy to remain with him until the settling of his appeal. Since Paul or Timothy are unable to travel to Philippi, Paul will send Epaphroditus (he, of course, is the minister sent by the Philippians to Paul upon learning of Paul’s imprisonment in Rome).

Until Paul can make his way there, the Philippians are to live in a manner consistent with the gospel which he first preached to them, and which the Philippians had obeyed (to use Paul’s term). The Philippians were also to follow the example set by Jesus, who, in his incarnation, humbled himself, taking the form of a servant, not using his divine attributes to gain advantage. In striving to be of one accord, loving one another, and being one in mind, the Philippian Christians are to cease grumbling and complaining, and live as children of God ought to live, blameless and innocent, in the face of the crooked and twisted generation in which they found themselves. The expression “crooked and twisted”, as we saw, is an expression taken from the Old Testament and used in reference to unbelieving Israel while God’s disobedient people were wandering for forty years in the Sinai wilderness. It was now (ironically) applied by Paul to both the Greco-Roman pagans and the Judaizers then troubling the Christians in Philippi. But in a real sense, all generations following (including ours) are twisted and crooked.

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<sup>1</sup> Silva, Philippians, WEC, 165.

So, when we read in the opening words of chapter 3 of Paul's stern warning to watch out for the Judaizers, those "evil-doers" who mutilate the flesh, the Apostle is not so much beginning a new thought, as he is explaining why the lengthy exhortation he had just given was so important to heed. The Judaizers are a serious foe, they are destructive to Christ's church, and they are not to be taken lightly. Paul grants them no quarter. He anathematized them in his epistle to the Galatians and warns of their tendency to boast about the number of converts they had been winning. When the Judaizers show up in a church founded by Paul, it is as though a claxon on a warship sounds "battle stations."

So with that, we turn to our text, vv. 1-11 of Philippians 3. Verse 1 opens with yet another imperative. "*Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you.*" Paul's call to "rejoice" in the Lord (the theme of this entire book) is another exhortation in the string of imperatives which began in chapter one. When we hear the word "finally," we are apt to think that Paul is about to wrap up and close this epistle, or that this is his last exhortation, but such is not the case. Rather, the word "finally" (*loipas*) can mean something like "and so" which makes what follows the outcome of the previous string of commands.<sup>2</sup> To read it another way, "it follows then," that those who hear Paul's exhortations (chapters 1-2) and attempt to heed them will "rejoice" in the Lord as Paul has done (3:1).

When Paul exhorts the persecuted Philippians to rejoice he does not mean to put a fake smile on your face in some sort of stoic sense of pretending not to suffer when you really are suffering, but rather to realize that God is working in their current situation to will and do according to his good pleasure. To rejoice in this sense is to anticipate better things to come—even if these better things are delayed until the day of Christ Jesus. But in the next clause, when Paul says "*to write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you,*" he virtually apologizes for repeating himself in the previous series of exhortations. Paul is a bit troubled by saying the same things in different ways, but he knows these things are important—not only to him, but to the Philippians. If they do these things they will remain safe from the persecutors without and the heretics within.<sup>3</sup> So, Paul will repeat himself to make sure the importance of these points is understood.

But in verse 2, however, Paul sounds the alarm. Everything he has written so far points to this. "*Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh.*" Three times Paul uses an imperative (command) for the Philippians to be on guard for those whom Paul identifies as "dogs," "evil-doers," and "mutilators of the flesh." Given what we know from elsewhere in the New Testament about the teaching of the Judaizers and the trouble they have caused in the churches (Galatians, Acts 15) there is no doubt that this is the group to which Paul is referring.

The first pejorative used by Paul is the word "dogs." It is a term of insult and was used by Jews in reference to Gentiles. Dogs were domesticated throughout much of the ancient world, but very few people kept them as pets in anything like the modern sense. Jews considered canines unclean because they bred rapidly, ran together in packs, and constantly scavenged for food. Dogs suffered from all kinds of skin trouble (mange), they carried fleas and parasites, there was no veterinary care so many were injured or maimed. They ate garbage and dead animals. So, it was only natural that Jews would use the term "dog" of anyone who did not keep the Jewish dietary laws or follow the ceremonial washings.

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<sup>2</sup> Martin, Philippians, NCB, 157.

<sup>3</sup> O'Brien, Philippians, 351.

Paul's use of irony is again apparent, when he calls the Judaizers "dogs," which is very likely the same term of derision which the Judaizers had been using of Gentiles—over whom they felt greatly superior.

The second term Paul uses ("evil-doers") is a very loud echo from the Psalter. A couple of examples should suffice. In Psalm 5:5, the Psalmist warns the people of Israel about "evil-doers." David warns Israel that "*the boastful shall not stand before [YHWH's] eyes; you hate all evildoers.*" Likewise in Psalm 6:8, David cries out "*depart from me, all you workers of evil, for the LORD has heard the sound of my weeping.*" By identifying his opponents with this specific label, "evildoers," Paul is calling attention to the Judaizer's distortion of the true meaning of circumcision so that it becomes the "doing of evil," (just as occurred with unbelievers in Israel) even though the Judaizers saw these "works" as a condition for justification—thereby denying Paul's gospel. Once again Paul takes a well-known Old Testament image of disobedient Israel and applies it to the Judaizers. This may also be in reference to the fact that the Judaizers were very zealous and took their distorted gospel as far as Greece, in a move which Paul could only interpret as an act (of evil) which was intended to undercut his message.<sup>4</sup>

The third pejorative used by Paul is those who "mutilate the flesh," i.e., surgically remove the male foreskin. Understood properly, circumcision was a sign and seal of the covenant (as Paul speaks of it in Romans 4) which God made with Abraham—an administration of the covenant of grace. In this sense, circumcision of the male child on the eighth day was an act on the part of the parents in ratifying (believing and claiming) God's covenant promise to be God to his people and to claim this people as his own possession. Circumcision, of course, is replaced by baptism in the new covenant. The sign changes from a cutting ritual (circumcision) to a water ritual (baptism), but the thing signified (ratification of God's covenant promises) does not change.

But the Judaizers had completely distorted the meaning of circumcision as the sign and seal of God's gracious covenant, and instead saw circumcision through the lens of Moses and the law (through the lens of the blessing/curse principle). According to the Judaizers, those who submitted to circumcision did so in obedience to the law of Moses—not as an act of ratification of God's covenant promise. In doing so, they distorted the act of ratifying God's covenant promise in faith and instead turned it into a meritorious work. To put it a different way, the Judaizers turned the sign of God's gracious covenant (gospel) into a human work which we must do to secure God's blessing (law). Paul saw this error as an out and out denial of the gospel, and in his letter to the Galatians he anathematized anyone teaching such a thing. Those who see circumcision as a work required for salvation do not have a sign and seal of the covenant, but rather a mangled part of the human body.

Demonstrating yet again his skill in flipping his opponents arguments against them, Paul claims that all believers in Jesus are the true circumcision of God—even if they are uncircumcised Gentiles. In verse 3, he boldly states, "*for we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh.*" Since the Judaizers are dogs (even if they use this language of uncircumcised Gentiles), since the Judaizers are evil-doers (in their zeal to teach people false doctrine), since they are mutilators of the flesh (forcing converts to undergo circumcision in order to be justified), then the irony should be easily seen. The Judaizers are the dogs, the evil-doers, the mutilators of the flesh, all the while those who they call dogs and evil doers and uncircumcised Gentiles, those are truly circumcised in the sight of God. Christians (even uncircumcised Gentiles) are now the true Jews. And those Jews who claim to be righteous because of their circumcision or their good works are the true dogs,

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<sup>4</sup> See the discussion in, O'Brien, Philippians, 355.

evil-doers, and mutilators. This is why Paul warns the Philippians not to be taken in by these people while at the same time zealously desiring to see his people Israel (the Jews) turn to Jesus.

The term “true circumcision” is applied by Paul to the church of Jesus Christ, who spiritually circumcises the hearts of all his people—according to Paul in Romans 4. Members of true Israel are those who properly worship YHWH in and through the Holy Spirit, are trusting in the merits and finished work of Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh (the supposed merit of the cutting of the foreskin). It is those who believe in Jesus, not those who have cut their skin, who are the truly circumcised. As Paul will state in Colossians 2, with the coming of Jesus, the prophetic meaning of circumcision was fulfilled by our Lord’s own spiritual circumcision on the cross—in his shedding of blood so save us from our sins.

In the new covenant ushered in by Jesus, the sign and seal of the covenant of grace, circumcision, has been replaced by baptism which is the sign and seal of believers dying and rising with Christ. Once Jesus has fulfilled all righteousness and the sign and seal of the covenant has been changed to baptism, any time someone trusts in a surgical procedure, they do so “in the flesh,” and not in the Spirit. There is nothing meritorious about circumcision. It may demonstrate that someone is a Jew (bearing the outward sign of the sons of Israel), but there is no longer any sacramental value in the rite. To claim there is—as the Judaizers were doing—is to deny the sufficiency of the death and resurrection of Jesus. It renders baptism useless and redundant. It is to associate oneself with the flesh (and this present evil age, crooked and twisted, not the Spirit, who is the herald of the age to come and the guarantee of the resurrection of our bodies (Ephesians 1:13-14).

At the end of verse 3, Paul sharply breaks off his point about circumcision and engages in a discussion of what it means to be “in the flesh” and therefore “cut-off” from God—pun not intended, as this is what Paul means, even though one has been circumcised and is absolutely devoted to the religion of Israel. Paul’s point is that if anyone knows what it is to boast in the flesh yet be under God’s curse, it is he. Paul knows firsthand how that the zeal of the Judaizers is not the sign of true faithfulness to YHWH, but is essentially self-deception. In verse 4 and what follows—the dash in the English Bible, extends to period at the end of verse 10—is truly a remarkable self-admission by Paul. These words reveal a great deal about his state of mind while still a Jew, and how he regarded himself while a teacher of the religion of Israel.

In verse 4, we read Paul’s reminder to those Judaizers who were confident that they possessed sufficient merit to be righteous before God by adding the merits of circumcision to the merits of Jesus, “*though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also.*” Paul’s point is that if you do not think he knows what he is talking about—if you have heard that he was a dissatisfied Jew looking for something better, or that is a Jew by birth only, or that Paul is in this to boast about his followers—then just look at his resume as a Jew. Paul’s CV is far longer and much more prestigious than any one of these Judaizers plaguing the church, if not all of them put together! Paul tells the Philippians, “*If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more.*” Boy, does he. With his apostolic credentials under attack by the Judaizers, it is important for Paul to make clear that the Philippians know Paul’s background.

The Apostle begins rehearsing his resume in verse 5. I was “*circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews.*” Paul, apparently, had gone on Ancestry.com, and discovered “who he was.” Since circumcision was a matter of debate, Paul begins by reminding all that as a good Jew from a good Jewish home, he was circumcised on the eighth day so whatever the Judaizers may say of him, Paul is a true Jew and a member of national Israel—the chosen people of God. Paul is no convert to Judaism (even if he grew up in the Greco-Roman city of Tarsus in Asia Minor) before moving to Jerusalem, he is an Israelite by birth. This is important to Paul, as in Romans 9:5,

where Paul writes of Israel, “*to them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever.*”

Paul is also from the tribe of Benjamin, who was the son of Jacob and Rachel, and born in the land of promise (Genesis 35:16-18), and from whose line Israel’s first king descended. The Benjamites remained loyal to David and after the exile, many of them resettled to the area around Jerusalem—in the fact the city was within Benjamin’s tribal boundaries. Paul has documented Jewish roots, and given what Paul says here, it is possible his family traced their origins back this far.<sup>5</sup> This is better than being a Mayflower descendent! Paul is a Hebrew son of Hebrew parents—a Hebrew of Hebrews. This meant that his parents taught him Hebrew and Aramaic (in addition to the Greek—the commercial language of the age). This was a way of affirming that his family were observant Jews with religious ties to Jerusalem and the party of the Pharisees, not merely diaspora Jews whose faith was pretty nominal.<sup>6</sup>

Moving from his Jewish family and heritage to his own accomplishments, Paul affirms just were he stood in the broader Jewish world on the matter of zeal and conformity to the law. He says, “*as to the law, a Pharisee.*” Paul was not a theological liberal of the day. He was not a politically minded zealot, nor was he in favor of getting along with Rome even if that meant a fair amount of compromise of his Judaism. Paul was devoted to obeying the law of Moses and sought with everything in him to conform to the Jewish piety of the Pharisees (or separated ones), who would not tolerate any form of ceremonial uncleanness, such as entering into a Gentile home or eating their food. In Acts 22:3, Paul tells us that he was a student of Gamaliel, the leading Pharisaical teacher of that age. In Galatians 1:13–14, Paul reminds the Christians there, “*for you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers.*” No Judaizer can question Paul’s obedience to the law of Moses, nor criticize his efforts to be “righteous” according to its demands.

Neither can anyone deny that Paul was an arch-foe of Christianity. In verse 6, he reveals that “*as to zeal, a persecutor of the church.*” The first Christians feared Paul. Paul whole-heartedly approved when the Jewish high priest in Jerusalem ordered Stephen, the first Christian martyr, to be put to death. The robes of those throwing the stones were laid at Paul’s feet (Acts 8:1). We read in Acts 8:3 that Saul (Paul’s name before his conversion) “*was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.*” But Paul was suddenly and dramatically converted while on his way to Damascus to hunt down and arrest Christians when Jesus appeared to him and blinded him, calling Paul to serve as our Lord’s hand-picked apostle to the Gentiles.

As for conscience, well, Paul was anything but a guilty man, worried about his standing before God. On the contrary, he tells us “*as to righteousness under the law, blameless.*” Paul did everything he was supposed to do with much greater zeal than most of his contemporaries. He was the rising star among the Jews in Jerusalem—a man destined to be a famous Rabbi, perhaps even a high priest. There was no sense in Paul’s mind that anything was wrong and that he needed anything more. That is until the day Jesus appeared to him and said, “*Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?*” (Acts 9:4). In that moment everything changed for Paul, now facing the fact that Jesus was the Son of God and Israel’s long-expected Messiah. On his way to becoming a Rabbi, Paul became Jesus’ chosen apostle to the Gentiles.

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<sup>5</sup> O’Brien, Philippians, 371.

<sup>6</sup> O’Brien, Philippians, 372.

Verse 7, recounts Paul's new birth and the recognition that he was not so righteous after all. He simply tells us, "*but whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ.*" Suddenly, being the "Jew of all Jews" did not matter. Paul's great zeal for the law, and his passionate desire to defend the faith of his fathers were of absolutely no worth to him after that moment his eye-sight left him when Jesus appeared and spoke to him. All of the things Paul had done from misguided zeal were useless. This was all of the flesh, and none of it was of the Spirit. Only Jesus mattered to Paul now, and everything else which Paul had achieved was not to his gain, but only increased his guilt before God, something which he never realized until that very moment. He thought he was righteous and blameless. He was anything but.

From that moment on, Paul will say, as he does here, "*Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.*" From Paul's new perspective (pun intended), all the self-righteousness, the misguided zeal, and the accomplishments which pleased his family and the Rabbis now meant nothing to him. Stripped of his self-righteousness by the realization that Jesus was Israel's Messiah, he could now see that his "blamelessness" was really nothing but self-righteousness. Paul could see how dead wrong he had been about his standing with God before Jesus appeared to him. For the first time Paul saw this all as loss in comparison with knowing Christ Jesus his Lord.

Paul moves from describing his changed perspective (as a result of his conversion) to giving a theological explanation of what had happened to him (in verses 8-10). Beginning in verse 8, the Apostle writes of knowing Jesus through faith, that "*for his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith.*"

In the light of the risen Christ's appearance to him, Paul could finally see that his own righteousness was nothing but rubbish (as many of you know, Paul uses the Greek term for dung). His zeal, his personal accomplishments, his Jewish pedigree, his personal righteousness through law-keeping, were all but so much dung. Because of Jesus' appearance to him, Paul lost everything he possessed before. But was this really loss? He gained something so much greater—he gained the very righteousness of God, that for which Israel's prophets had longed, that righteousness which can withstand God's holy scrutiny. As we saw, for example, in our Old Testament lesson, Isaiah prophesied that the righteousness of God will be manifest in conjunction with God's promised salvation which would be revealed to the nations when Messiah came. Paul understood that this promised messianic righteousness was revealed in the person of Jesus—that one whose followers he hated. This righteousness was not earned by works nor gained by his zeal. It certainly did not come through circumcision as the Judaizers were teaching. Rather, this righteousness was freely given to all those who, through faith in Jesus, are "found in him."

Being found in Christ through faith, as he now sees, is to Paul's great gain. This union with Jesus came not through Paul's works or his zeal, but by simply trusting that God grants the perfect righteousness of Jesus—who obeyed God's law perfect every moment of his life and who died for the guilt of each and every one of our sins—through faith (trust). He could finally see that this is such a great gift that everything else he had done before was nothing but rubbish. He could also see that the only way the very righteousness of Jesus could be received was by abandoning all hope of being righteous enough, zealous enough, good enough, Jewish enough, and accepting that Jesus was perfectly righteous, and that his righteous became ours through no other way than by faith alone.

But to know this to be true, and coming to the realization that his own righteousness was actually self-righteousness, pushes Paul to want something else. Because he was now reckoned righteous before God,

and his eternal destiny was forever settled, in verses 10-11 Paul expresses his deepest desire, “*that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.*” With the real possibility that his appeal could soon end in death (it did not, but Paul was martyred under Nero in Rome just a few years later), Paul’s desire is to know as fully as possible Jesus’ resurrection power. The same Jesus who appeared to him years before, had himself suffered and died before being raised from the dead. Paul knows that he too may suffer and die, but should that happen, he desires to share in Christ’s suffering (not because he is some sort of mystic, or even a masochist—there is pleasure in suffering) but because as was the case with Jesus, suffering unto death is the entrance into eternal life and the means to experience the bodily resurrection at the end of the age. Paul sees in Jesus’ suffering and resurrection the pattern which he himself will experience. If Paul became like Jesus in death (i.e., by dying) so too he will be raised with Jesus to live forever.

It is our Lord Jesus’ great promise and the hope of every Christian that we will all be raised on the last day. But this promise is true only if we are found in him (Jesus), possessing not a righteousness of our own (dung), but that righteousness of Jesus himself, earned for us by his obedience and suffering unto death, and which becomes ours through faith, not through good works, zeal, or religious ceremonies (like circumcision). If you are “found in him,” then the righteousness of Jesus is yours and you will share in the resurrection power of Jesus. And like Paul, you will attain to the resurrection from the dead.