

AN EXEGETICAL PAPER ON
PHILIPPIANS 3:1-11

A Paper
Submitted to Dr. Norris Grubbs
of
New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Course
Hermeneutics BSCM1300
in Leavell College

Gregory M. Finch
December 10, 2004

INTRODUCTION

Paul's letter to the Philippians is unique within the Pauline Epistles because it is primarily a correspondence of joy and encouragement. Indictment and correction are replaced with heartfelt thanks and a brotherly appeal to maintain their unity. "Only let your conduct be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of your affairs, that you stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel, and not in any way terrified by your adversaries, which is to them a proof of perdition, but to you of salvation, and that from God. (Phil. 1:27, 28).

The third chapter of Philippians is a turning point in Paul's letter to the church at Philippi. Paul's tone changes from one of praise for their consistent obedience, to a passionate and transparent warning.

Philippians 3:1-11 is, in general, a warning against legalism. The passage is steeped in the conflict between Jews and Gentiles in the early church. Understanding the historical and cultural differences between these people groups is essential to a full understanding of the passage.

GRASPING THE TEXT IN THEIR TOWN

What did the text mean to the Biblical audience?

Paul opens this discourse with a foundational statement to his brethren to direct their praise to the Lord, and a bonding statement regarding his attitude about serving Christ

through serving the Philippians. “Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things again is no trouble to me, and it is a safeguard for you (Phil. 3:1).”

Paul used rich contrast to warn the Philippians of a threat they were not keenly aware of because of the lack of Judaizing influence in Philippi. He told them to beware of the dogs (Phil. 3:2). To the Philippians this meant “those whose moral impurity will exclude them from the New Jerusalem, and implied impudence. The contrasting meaning to the Jews was that of ceremonial impurity in the Gentile church.”¹ Paul next warned to beware of the evil workers (Phil. 3:2). To the Philippians it would mean those who wanted to bring legalistic ceremonial rituals, and to the Jews it would mean those who would eliminate traditional ritual. Paul’s third and final warning in this passage presents a cultural contrast that divided Gentile and Jew to their core. Paul told the Philippians to beware of the false circumcision (Phil. 3:2). Jewish believers placed great importance in the obedience to the Covenant of Abraham through circumcision. The Gentile believers had no history or cultural ties to this practice. Paul made it very clear that circumcision was not a requirement of salvation through Christ Jesus. Paul was bold in his rebuke to the Jews when he told the Philippians to put “no confidence in the flesh (Phil. 3:3).”

Paul used his own life as an example of the actions and heart condition necessary to be a part of the “true circumcision (Phil. 3:3)”. Paul accounted for all his Jewish assets from proper circumcision to his blamelessness in the Law (Phil. 3:5,6), and then, with disregard for politics and legalism, counted it all as loss and rubbish (Phil. 3:7,8). Paul was speaking of the change of heart, stripped down to the true knowledge of Christ, which alters and changes men, their judgments and manners, and creates a new core

¹ W.E. Vine, Vine’s Expository Dictionary of Old Testament and New Testament Words (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1997), 184.

belief system. The “true circumcision” prefers Christ, knowing that it is better for us to be without all worldly riches, than without Christ and his word.²

Paul’s conclusion to this crucial warning to the Philippians was again painted in contrast. The Jews pursued a righteousness of their own derived from the Law. While a Pharisee, Paul had achieved the pinnacle of worldly righteousness. As an apostle for the Gospel of Jesus Christ, he was in a unique position to teach of a true righteousness, righteousness only available to those willing to die to worldly accolades and accept the forgiveness that is exclusive to the shed blood of Jesus Christ through faith. The true follower of Christ would suffer for a righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith (Phil 3:9,10).

MEASURING THE WIDTH OF THE RIVER TO CROSS

What are the differences between the Biblical audience and us?

AUTHOR

Philippians 1:1 confirms that this letter to the Philippians is from Paul and Timothy. In Phil. 3:5 the necessary confirmation of Paul is made clear through a descriptive roster of personal attributes: “circumcised on the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee.”

Saul of Tarsus, who was later renamed Paul, was known for his brutality and persecution of Christians before his conversion experience. That experience came on the

² Henry, Matthew. "Commentary on Philippians 3". "Matthew Henry Concise Commentary on the Whole Bible".

<<http://bible.crosswalk.com/Commentaries/MatthewHenryConcise/mhc-con.cgi?book=php&chapter=003>>. 1706.

road to Damascus where Saul intended to bind all the believers in Damascus and bring them back to Jerusalem in bondage. He encountered a blinding light from heaven, and the voice of Jesus asked him why he was persecuting Him. He lay prostrate and inquiring what he should do. Jesus told him to go into the city and he would find what he desired. Saul was led into the city where he prayed for three days in his state of blindness. At the Lord's command Ananias went to Saul and laid hands on him. Saul's sight was restored, and he was baptized. Paul began teaching immediately.

As God revealed to Ananias, Paul was chosen by God to bring the message of salvation to the Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel. Paul suffered greatly at the hands of those he tried to save. He was beaten and tortured many times. Paul wrote this Epistle, or letter to the Philippians during his first imprisonment in Rome. Ultimately, under Nero, Paul was led to the place of execution. After he gave his final prayers he was beheaded by two of Nero's soldiers.

AUDIENCE

The church at Philippi was unique in that it had not yet been affected by any Judaizing influence. There were very few Jews in the area. Philippi had no synagogue, only a Jewish *Proseucha*, or oratory, by the river.³ This passage in Philippians was written as a strong warning against the Jewish legalism that was infiltrating into other early churches.

³ The expanded version of the Jameison-Faussett-Brown Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible by Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset and David Brown, 1871 Web page available <http://bible.crosswalk.com/Commentaries/JamiesonFaussetBrown/jfb.cgi?book=php&chapter=000>

Philippi was known as the *Macedonia Prima*, because it was located farthest eastward, and farthest from Rome. Paul and Timothy entered Macedonia through Philippi. The Philippians were Roman citizens with full voting rights in the Roman tribes. They were autonomous from provincial governance with their own senate and magistrates to tend to Roman law. The official language was Latin.

The church was strong in faith, but lacking in comforts. “Now, brethren, we wish to make known to you the grace of God which has been given in the churches of Macedonia, that in a great ordeal of affliction their abundance of joy and their deep poverty overflowed in the wealth of their liberality (2Cor. 8:1,2).” The only concern Paul mentions about the church at Philippi was that some of its’ members would get irritated with each other as they went through these trials of poverty and persecution. “So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling;” (Phil. 2:12) “Do all things without grumbling or disputing;” (Phil. 2:14)

OTHER ISSUES

Paul uses the term “dogs” in Phil. 3:2. Paul used the term to refer to “those whose moral impurity will exclude them from the New Jerusalem. The Jews used the term of Gentiles under the idea of ceremonial impurity. Among the Greeks it was an epithet of impudence⁴.” The multifaceted meanings of the word complement the stark contrast and comparison used in the passage.

⁴ W.E. Vine, Vine’s Expository Dictionary of Old Testament and New Testament Words (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1997), 184.

Circumcision means “a cutting around” and literally involves removing the foreskin. Circumcision was a sign of obedience to the covenant between Abraham, his male descendants, and God. The Israelites referred to the Gentiles as “the uncircumcised”. This became a term of contempt for a people they deemed impure. After the Gospel was opened to the Gentiles, through Paul, conversions of Gentiles became prolific. A sect of Jewish believers, known as “the circumcision” took the position that salvation without circumcision was in conflict with the Law, thus voiding the conversion. Paul boldly refers to this faction as “the false circumcision” in Phil. 3:2.

CROSSING THE PRINCIPALIZING BRIDGE

What are the theological principles in this text?

The apostle Paul’s transparent and selfless commitment to Christ, exemplifies these four theological principles in Phil. 3: 1-11: (1) Christians are called to rejoice in the Lord at all times. (2) Christians are to avoid those who would bring empty practices into our lives, and distract us from bringing glory to God. (3) Christians should not place value on personal accomplishments that do not further the kingdom of Christ. (4) Christians should value, above all else, an intimate relationship with Christ Jesus, and a willingness to share in His sufferings on the basis of pure faith.

GRASPING THE TEXT IN OUR TOWN

How should individual Christians today apply the theological principles in their lives?

Effective and productive Christians are focused on the Father's business. Spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ is a divinely authentic act of worship that requires spiritual authenticity from us as mere humans. Coveting praise for our actions and worldly achievements is not only ineffective it is blasphemous. The apostle Paul draws a comparison between "the evil workers (Phil. 3:2)" and those "who worship in the Spirit of God (Phil 3:3)". We must acknowledge the difference between what we do in the name of Christ, and who we are, at our core, under the grace of God. The church has suffered dearly for the worldly works done in the name of Christ.

We must follow Paul's example and return to the authentic righteousness. Righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith requires a change of heart. Those things that we once perceived as gain; our jobs, home, cars, and degrees must now be embraced as loss. Those times spent listening to a co-worker lament about the lifeless house in which he and his family are hopelessly bound, is now welcomed as the fellowship of Christ's sufferings. When this transformation takes place there is rejoicing in the Lord at all times.

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