



THE LETTER TO THE PHILIPPIANS – STUDY GUIDE

LESSON 7 DO NOT GIVE WAY TO THE JUDAIZERS

CHAPTER 3:1-11

Our rejoicing is in the Lord. Therefore, although Paul has said it many times before, he must stress again that it is no use going back to the rituals of the law, like circumcision. Paul had been brought up as a strict Jew. But he left Judaism for the blessings of faith in Christ.

1: Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord.

“Finally” seems to mean “furthermore” (as in 1 Thessalonians 4:1; 2 Thessalonians 3:1). Paul is moving on to his next point. “Rejoice in the Lord” emphasises what Paul is leading up to in the chapter. By contrast, he must first warn about the Judaizers.

Christ and the Law of Moses

Since the Christian faith has its origin in the Jewish faith (it is indeed “the hope of Israel”), it was inevitable that even converts to Christ who were Jews had difficulty in throwing off much of their Jewish origins. Not that the law and the prophets, the Old Testament Scriptures, were any less relevant now. As a result of the coming of Christ their full significance could be understood. But because Christ fulfilled the law, since he was perfectly obedient to his Father, its ritual requirements were no longer necessary, e.g. sacrifices, ritual washings, Sabbath day observance (keeping Saturday as a day of rest in which no form of work at all could be done). No longer were the temple and the priests needed. For Christ was now the true High Priest in heaven and no other priests were necessary. Baptised believers in Christ were now “the temple of the living God”; they were a spiritual temple in which God, through Christ, could truly live. The literal temple in Jerusalem was going to be destroyed; this happened in AD 70.

Christ had called Paul to be an apostle to the Gentiles. He was anxious that no barriers should be placed in the way of Gentile converts, and at an important conference in Jerusalem this had been agreed (Acts 15). But what people agree in the atmosphere of a conference or special meeting sometimes turns out to be very different from what they do when they get home, or what others will do whom they represented. So Paul constantly faced difficulties from Jews trying to stop the spread of Christianity, and from Jews converted to Christianity who still tried to make Gentile Christians conform to Jewish customs.

Of these customs, circumcision was the cause of greatest conflict. For an explanation of circumcision look up Genesis 17:9-14. The point is made in the New Testament that circumcision involved cutting away the flesh (the foreskin) of the male organ needed for reproduction. It was a vivid reminder that the children of God came into existence not by human means, but by the action of God. What’s more, “flesh” is contrasted with “spirit” in the Bible. One reminds us of man’s earthly, selfish desires, the other his godly spiritual potential. In Romans, Paul argues that a real Jew has cut away in symbol his fleshly desires, not just his actual, literal flesh (Romans 2:25-29). Literal circumcision is not necessary for those who strive to follow Christ.

We can now return to the text of Philippians 3!

To write the same things to you, is not irksome to me and is safe for you.

Paul does not mind repeating the points to follow. He has told the Philippians before, but he feels it is safer to remind them yet again.

2: Look out for the dogs, look out for the evil-workers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh.

This is not a very complimentary term, but one that was usually reserved by the Jews for the Gentiles. Paul has turned it around, calling the Jews dogs who are insisting that Gentile Christians must be circumcised. They wanted to mutilate, to cut off the flesh, literally, and thereby cut off the Gentiles from the family of God.

3: For we are the true circumcision, who worship God in spirit, and glory in Christ Jesus, and put no confidence in the flesh.

By worshipping God according to the spiritual principles of His word, as fully revealed by Christ, we demonstrate what circumcision should be all about. This is far more important than thinking salvation comes just by the circumcision of the flesh.

4-6: Though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If any other man thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law a Pharisee, as to zeal a persecutor of the church, as to righteousness under the law blameless.

Paul now reminds them that actually nobody could have been a stricter Jew than he had been. He was a model Pharisee (the Pharisees were a leading Jewish sect who rigorously upheld the Law of Moses, according to the strict traditions of their ancestors). He had conducted a vigorous campaign as a young man against the early Christian believers.

7: But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ.

But all the advantages he had gained from a first-class training as a Pharisee and the prospect of an excellent career, he cast aside with absolutely no regrets after his conversion (described in Acts 9:1-30).

The Excellency of Knowing Christ

8: Indeed I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as refuse, in order that I may gain Christ

Paul stresses how strongly he feels about the excellence of knowing Christ contrasted with the waste of any other approach to life. Particularly when we are young, there are many things in the world around us which are attractive. But the more we appreciate the real quality of life in Christ, the more we learn that there is simply nothing which will compare to it. Everything else can be classed as dung, that is, refuse or garbage.

9: and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own, based on law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith;

For in Christ we can be forgiven our sinfulness, thus enabling us to enter into a relationship with God. (Remember the point about the atonement? We cannot be "at one" with God who is completely righteous, while we are sinners.) For the Jews, life was one long burden of trying to make sure they carried out every rule and regulation devised by people like the Pharisees in an attempt to fulfil the Law of Moses perfectly. But it could not be done (see Acts 13:39). It was actually impossible for mere men to match God's righteousness.

What a relief to face up to this fact and to realise that Christ, by his perfect obedience to God, in fulfilment of what the law was really all about, had taken away the burden. Now, by faith in Christ demonstrated in repentance and baptism, anybody - Jew or Gentile - could be counted righteous before God (Romans 3:20-24; Galatians 3:19-29).

10: that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death,

As a result he could now enjoy the benefit of a relationship with Jesus of the closest kind. "Know him," means not simply "know about him" or "be acquainted with him". It carries the idea of a deep understanding. Because of this closeness, Paul can identify with "the power of his resurrection", that is the living influence of the risen Christ; he can also "share his sufferings". By suffering for Christ (see 1:29) and "becoming like him in his death," we link ourselves to the sacrifice of Christ.

If we "become like" something, it means that we go along with it. In this case, we go along with the death of Christ by associating ourselves with it in baptism, and thereafter week by week in the breaking of bread, or memorial service (because we "remember" the Lord's death). (See Romans 6:4-6; John 6:53,54; Luke 22:17-20; 1 Corinthians 10:26.)

11: that if possible I may attain the resurrection of the dead.

It is clear from the references just listed that by this association with Christ we make possible for ourselves the hope of the resurrection. The “dying” now is not just the outward act of baptism, or the regular weekly meeting together on the first day of the week, or at other times for the breaking of bread service. These things must be done, but if they become mere outward show, they would be like circumcision had become for the Jews, a rite with no meaning. If we are truly “dead” with Christ, it means that we have declared we no longer wish to be sinners. The direction of our life will now be Christ-wards. He has made possible the forgiveness of our sins. We must strive to let God work in us (2:13) so that the character of Christ shines through us and we effectively witness to the Gospel (2:16).

Questions

1. Who is Paul warning the Philippians about in this section of his letter?
2. Why is it unnecessary for Christians to be circumcised?
3. What did Paul give up when he became a disciple of Jesus Christ?
4. How do believers become like Jesus in his death and resurrection?
5. Why are the things of Jesus Christ so much better than the things of the flesh?
6. Should a disciple of Jesus keep the Sabbath day? Explain your reasons.