

Philippians Unplugged

Meditations from a pastor: 3:1-21

The theme of chapter one was having joy in the midst of adversity. Recognize that what happens to you, good or bad, can be used to advance the gospel. Remember Paul had been a prisoner for several years and told the church not to feel sorry for him because his imprisonment has allowed the imperial guards and officials to recognize that he is imprisoned for Christ, giving him another audience to advance the gospel. It's the kind of attitude Joseph displayed in his life when he was imprisoned from the age of 17 to 30 and still had a sensitive heart for God and aimed to glorify Him in his work to Potiphar and his imprisonment in an Egyptian dungeon by interpreting dreams.

Chapter two, revolved around humility. But we had to differentiate between what we call moral conscious humility and Christ-like humility. Moral conscious humility is the kind where you try to be humble by focusing on your behavior. The problem is when someone does something to attack your character or do something that you consider to be injustice; your focus is on the injustice done to you. But Christ-like humility is the kind that considers oneself as nothing, despite if they are treated unjustly or not. Intrinsicly, they consider other people better than themselves. It is the kind of humility Christ displayed when he left heaven and added lowly humanity to his nature, who became a humble servant in perfect obedience to the Father. Despite the injustice that was bestowed on him, he looked down on all the people who called for his blood and yelled, "Crucify him" at the top of their lungs, and asks the Father to forgive them because of their ignorance and sin against him.

In chapter three, we are dealing with changing our perspective in the way we view Christ; that is changing the way we think about our accomplishments, about our past, about our life, and contrasting it to the greatness that was displayed in Jesus! So let's begin with verse 1.

Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you.

In this book the writer repeats this phrase over several times; we are to rejoice because of what Christ has done for us. But in order for us to continually rejoice in what he has done for us we have to change our perspective. We have been programmed to rejoice for something initially but then that feeling often fades with familiarity. Familiarity is perhaps the chief culprit when it comes to stripping our joy, even the familiarity of those closest to us like our family or children. Familiarity causes us to depreciate when it comes to joy. In fact, you never realize how much joy has vanished until you lose it. It could be a family member. A job. A relationship. You name it. We tend to realize the value of something when we lose it. Imagine a person who loses their sight around their twenties. Gone is the whole world they once experienced in fully splendor with their eyes.....the flowers, the leaves, the trees, the sunshine, the mountains, the rain clinging to a raindrop, and the pinecone that falls from a tree. We become so familiar with these things that we don't realize the joy they bring until we can't see them anymore. Now if this blind person regains their sight, the joy that comes from sight is opened up, it is unleashed in visual beautiful force. It is even probable that such a person would want to get up extra early in the morning just to experience more visual pleasures like a sunrise. But here is the problem; if that same person lives for another 20, 30 or 40 years....familiarity.....will threaten to make visual joy depreciate. Familiarity is always on the prowl to steal joy, or make it go into hibernation.

So Paul repeats this theme of joy throughout his epistle so we won't allow familiarity to pry its hooks into our appreciation for Christ. He wants us to change our perspective. He wants us to change the way we look at Christ. He wants us to contemplate what Jesus has done in our lives and continue to know him more. Familiarity should never allow the impact of Christ to be lessened in life. When we think we are familiar with Christ we stop learning. Though the apostle Paul walked with Christ for many years...probably at this writing in his late sixties.....his one yearning in life is to know Christ more and more. If a man such as Paul who was mightily used by God yearned to know more of Christ—that means there is a lot more to know about him for you and me.

Beware of Dogs: One of the things that get in the way of the joy we should have for Christ is people, like hardcore legalistic religious leaders. Paul addresses this next in these verses.

2 Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh. 3 For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh— 4 though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also.

If you are just learning the Bible, this would be a confusing passage. The writer, talks about dogs, evildoers, people who cut themselves, and then refers to himself and the church as *the circumcision*. This is a very strange section that we need to learn how to explain to those who are just learning the Bible. Remember they are learning this from their cultural perspective, where dogs, mutilators of the flesh, and circumcision mean different things.

Here Paul is talking about a group of religious leaders who theologians have affectionately referred to as *the Judaizers*. These folks were Jewish people who followed the Law of Moses and eventually became Christians. However, they still thought it was necessary to follow the Law of Moses in addition to placing their faith in Jesus. They had a big problem with non-Jews (Gentiles) who became Christians and did not feel it necessary to follow the Law of Moses. So the pattern went like this: Paul would win non-Jews to Christ and then these false teachers would try to influence these Gentile Christians to obey the Law of Moses and become circumcised. This was a big struggle in the early church mostly because following the Law had been such a part of their history and had been impressed on them as children.

In verse 2, Paul does a little play on words because the Jews would often refer to Gentiles as *dogs* because they considered them unclean. Paul reverses this and calls these Jewish Christians “dogs” and tells the church at Philippi that they (though uncircumcised) were the *true circumcision*; meaning the ones who were truly a part of God’s covenant people. In a nutshell, these religious leaders stated that in order for a person to be saved they needed to add the Law of Moses to faith in Jesus. Keep in mind that Paul believed passionately these folks were false teachers who minimized the work that Christ accomplished on the cross. In Paul’s mind....and according to orthodox Christian doctrine....Christ’s death and resurrection are self-sufficient.....meaning *nothing can be added to them* when it comes to our salvation.

Today’s Dogs: Today, he would refer to religious leaders of Mormons and Jehovah Witnesses as “dogs” because they teach the self-sufficiency of Christ is not enough to get Christians into heaven, at least the highest level. These groups have tiers of heaven that are reserved for those that not only believe in Christ but add good works to their spiritual resume. For example, the Mormons believe in the death and resurrection of Christ, but add to it the doctrines of Joseph Smith and the importance of getting married in the temple to achieve the highest level of heaven (exaltation). Likewise, the Jehovah Witnesses believe in the death and resurrection; but add to it the importance of membership in the Watchtower organization and also to be obedient to their organization so they can make it to one of two levels in heaven, the earthly and the anointed classes. Consequently, with Mormonism and Jehovah Witnesses faith in the works of Jesus are not enough to assure you of experiencing the highest form of heaven with the Father, you have to add your accomplishments as a supplement.

If Paul were here today he would refer to these groups as “dogs.” I realize that is politically incorrect and seems insensitive, but Paul is challenging us to think differently. View our salvation from his perspective. I know a person from my old neighborhood that is dear to my heart who is a Mormon and I have nothing but respect for him as a man. But when it comes to adding our accomplishments to the work Christ did on the cross as much as I care for him; he is dead wrong. Salvation is at stake. This issue was very sensitive with Paul because he used to be a high-ranking legalistic religious leader.

If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: 5 circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; 6 as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. 7 But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ.

Here, Paul shares for instructional purposes his accomplishments, which were quite impressive in his day. Not even the most pious Jew would question Paul credentials. Yet, he regards his accomplishments as a loss for the sake of knowing Christ. He is essentially saying that his spiritual resume does not add to his standing before God regarding salvation. Instead they are insignificant and without power when contrasted with Christ’s work on the cross. But it is

not just his spiritual accomplishments Paul considers a loss; he considers everything in his life a loss for the sake of Jesus.

8 Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.

Paul counts everything in his life a loss for the surpassing worth of knowing Christ, which would include his family, his resources, his accomplishments, his education, you name it. This is the kind of mindset Paul wants us to have. So here is the ultimate question: What do you place your confidence in when it comes to your life? Now we know that for those who don't know Jesus they place their confidence in their accomplishments—meaning whether or not they have done some good in their life and were decent people to others.

We are a very insecure people. As we survey our life there are several things that tend to make us feel good about ourselves. Maybe someone has a great education and they are considered highly educated. These are the folks that solve problems in life with their mind and place their confidence in their education. Knowledge is their security. Some may not be educated but have done well in life at making money. If you ask them what they place their confidence in it is their money. Other people place their confidence in their looks, other relationships, you name it. Yet in the end, accomplishments don't impress God. What impresses Him is Jesus. Paul realizes this and sets an example of having a right perspective in life that is Christ-like.

For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ
9 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

So when it comes to prioritizing his life, Paul concludes that everything is insignificant when compared to knowing Jesus Christ; it is the ultimate priority. Christianity is the only faith where you cannot earn righteousness from God. Our righteousness comes through faith in Christ alone. Nothing else can be added.

— 10 that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, 11 that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Paul likes to contemplate the power of Christ's resurrection? For him the resurrection means that one can now go to heaven. The fact that we are heaven bound is a testament to the power found in the empty tomb. In the next verse Paul answers the question how does one know Christ more? You know him by sharing in his sufferings. By becoming like him in his death. In other words, you get to know Christ by modeling his life with yours. Paul wants to know Christ so he can attain the resurrection from the dead. I

I have talked with several Christians over the years who have switched churches several times because they weren't being fed. As you probe a little more you will hear things like I am not growing in my faith at that church. If you want to grow in Christ, most of the time the solution is not to switch churches but to suffer for Christ. Paul teaches us that to know Christ we have to be willing to experience the hardships he endured as he shared the gospel. Ultimately, that is how we identify with Christ. "Jesus you experienced persecution for sharing your faith—now I can relate." "Jesus I never realized how good it feels to help others in need. This is what you felt like." "Jesus, it is so worth it to get up early in the morning and spend time in prayer with the Father. This is what you must have felt like." Bottom line is that we know Christ when we make it a point to experience the sufferings associated with Jesus. That is how you know someone more. In the end, Paul was driven to know Christ.

Yet, though he wanted to know him more; he has not experienced the ultimate power from the resurrection yet. He has not been made perfect. No we will all experience this power when we are raised from the dead. That is when we will experience the full reaching scope of Christ's resurrection.

But until then Paul presses on.

12 Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. 13 Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do:

forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, 14 I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

In order for him to concentrate on the future Paul says he has learned to stop looking back. His perspective is not earth focused; but heaven focused. He does not harp on the past and reaches for tomorrow—which is another day closer to Jesus. That is the one of the benefits of getting older. Everyday we draw closer to heaven. Now some of you may think I can't forget about what has happened in the past; it was too important. Paul is not saying that our past will be wiped out from our memory banks; he is saying that as we progress we have to move forward. The reality is that there are a lot of people who are living in their past. This is especially difficult if someone has lost a loved one and they cannot move forward and start another relationship because they are trapped from something that happened ten years ago.

Paul uses his past to share how it propelled him to Jesus. Likewise, we can use our past experiences to help us move forward. Does that mean it is easy? Absolutely not—and perhaps this is why Paul says he strains forward to what lies ahead. The “straining” makes us aware that it is not easy at times; but at least one is making an effort to move forward. The last thing we can allow our past to do is paralyze us.

Paul concludes this section with some practical application.

15 Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. 16 Only let us hold true to what we have attained. 17 Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. 18 For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. 19 Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. 20 But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, 21 who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.

Paul concludes with two comments that stand out in this section. 1. Imitate the way Paul lived for Christ. If you want to know Christ, the answer is not going to another church; the answer is sharing in Christ's sufferings. He goes on to add that we should surround ourselves with others who are like-minded. Really, one reason we don't have more to show for Christ is because of the people we hang around. Let's make sure we surround ourselves with people who love Jesus—not just in word—but in action and deed. 2. Paul mentions that our citizenship is in heaven. We have to train our minds to think differently. The reason some of the most successful saints were influential is because they always had their minds focused on heaven, not earth. As we live out our lives let's develop the mindset that strives to bring others to the place where we are now citizens. Let's live to give others the opportunity to make heaven their home as well.