

Philippians 3:1-11
(Psalm 46; John 17:1-3)
“The Surpassing Worth of Knowing Christ”

Introduction

Paul again, remarkably – writing from prison to people facing persecution – calls his friends to rejoice: “Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord” (3:1). He then warns them against those who would seek to put them back under bondage to religion. The people Paul describes as “those who mutilate the flesh” are teachers who insisted that gentiles could not become children of God without submitting to circumcision and the laws unique to Israel. The gospel had set people free from religious ritual and custom, but these teachers had visited the Philippian Christians, telling them that Paul’s radical teaching on grace was not sufficient for salvation, that faith in Jesus was insufficient, that they must also follow the religious traditions of Israel.

Over against this teaching, Paul uses his own story – the story of one whose basis of confidence had once been his ethnic and religious identity – as a warning to those who would, in his words, put their confidence in the flesh rather than in God’s grace. In the course of drawing this contrast, Paul first describes those whose hearts are pleasing to God, those who – in Moses’ words repeated by the prophet Jeremiah – have had their hearts “circumcised” (Deuteronomy 10:16 & 30:6; also Jeremiah 4:4). Paul then describes one whose confidence is completely and tragically misplaced, and concludes this section by describing one whose confidence is properly based.

Body

1. Paul begins by describing those whose hearts are pleasing to God (3:3).

- Those who worship by the Spirit of God
- Those who glory in Christ Jesus
- Those who put no confidence in the flesh

2. He then describes those whose confidence is misplaced (3:4-6).

- Those whose confidence is in national or ethnic identity
- Those whose confidence is in religious membership
- Those whose confidence is in their own religious zeal

3. Finally, he describes those whose confidence is properly based (3:7-11).

- Those whose only confidence is in Christ’s righteousness
- Those whose greatest treasure is knowing Christ

- Those whose greatest ambition is becoming like Christ

Conclusion

Let me conclude by leaving you with the three questions that I have been asking myself as a result of this text:

First, What is the basis of your confidence in life and in death?

Second, Is there anyone or anything so valuable to you that you would lose Christ rather than lose it?

And, finally, What is your great ambition, the one thing that you think will make your life worth living?

Listen again to the apostle Paul, writing from prison: “But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of Christ Jesus my Lord” (3:7-8).

© John M. Wood, all rights reserved