

Pillar Passages – Phil 3:2-4
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Don't Let the Dogs Ravish Your Joy

Welcome to another Pillar Passage. Today we are looking at Philippians, chapter 3, verse 2 through 4.

The initial command here—the main command here—is to look out for someone. To look out for the *dogs*. We're going to find out what those are. But first, we need to see the context.

The context here is all about—joy. Paul is in the middle of his letter, but basically making his last and most important point; the central theme of his letter; the central goal of his writing is the joy of the Philippian Christians. *Rejoice in the Lord*. He's already said this but he says, "It's worth me saying it again to you. This is so important. As I said in Nehemiah, the joy of the Lord is our strength. It is the central theme of the Christian's life—is our joy. As we will see, not in ourselves, but in the Lord.

Paul says in that context, therefore—there is an implied *therefore* here—*look out for the dogs*. These are dogs who would steal—ravenously take away—joy, so watch out for them. *Look out for the evildoers*. Evil is—at its heart—something that promises joy and actually—in the end—steals joy.

Who are these dogs? They are people who do evil. They're evildoers. Okay, what do they do? Well, they *mutilate the flesh*. So, no tattoos? No. No, more particularly he's talking about circumcision. There was a party of people who followed him around who insisted Christians need to go back to the old Mosaic Law and insisted that Gentile Christians be circumcised. And really, enter into all of the old law in order to be right before God; in order to be holy; in order to experience the righteousness of God.

Paul says here something fantastic and important and deep. He says, "*For we (Christians) are the circumcision*. What does he mean by this—we *are* the circumcision?

There is a sense in which circumcision pointed to a reality that has now come; and that reality is in Christians ourselves. The logic here is, since the reality has come, the symbol that pointed to that future reality is no longer needed. When the reality has come, you don't need the symbol any more to point to the reality. The reality's here.

What is that reality? The reality is that we are those people who—we need to make sure, not just assume, we are in the we, but that we understand who the we is—the we here is those who worship—who worship in two way: ... *by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus*. Therefore, number 3, as an outcome of that we can say, (or the other side of the coin maybe, so perhaps not a 3 here but just the other side of the coin) *who put no confidence in the flesh*.

This last phrase is profound. It exposes a willful moral misunderstanding that generations of people had about circumcision.

You may remember that circumcision first came about with Abraham in Genesis. Abraham believed God, it says, and that faith—Abraham’s faith—was credited to him as righteousness. Then, as a sign of that, of that exchange, of God exchanging Abraham’s faith for righteousness ... In a fallen world, none of us can possess holy, holy, holy righteousness in and of ourselves, so God in His grace sees fit to substitute righteousness with faith. Abraham’s faith was credited to him as righteousness. The symbol of that was circumcision—the cutting off of the foreskin of the male sexual organ.

What Paul is saying here is profound. Circumcision was never about the act itself. Circumcision was never about the flesh that was left. Circumcision was about the flesh that was cut off. Circumcision was an act that said, “I am *not* trusting in the flesh, and I will symbolize that—the no confidence-vote in my flesh—by cutting off a part of it. I can’t get rid of my whole flesh because right now I still live in a physical world with a physical body, so I can’t cut off my whole body, but I will cut off a very important part of it—a very sensitive part of it—as a symbol of my no confidence in the flesh. Whereas, for generations, the Jews had flipped that over and said with circumcision, what was left was the symbol. What was left and the act was what was important. When in reality, the act was a symbol of no confidence in the thing that is left, but I am putting my confidence somewhere else.

So then, it says here—Paul says, we are the circumcision for two reasons. Because *we worship by the Spirit*. The Spirit is our connection with God. We cannot communicate with God and relate to God in worship except by the Spirit. The Spirit is our conduit, our link, our connection to God. And, at the same time, the Spirit is a gift *from* God.

We are not only dependent on the Spirit to communicate with God—to worship God—but that link; that connection is a gift from God. All that we need to communicate with God; to relate to God; to connect with God—God has provided. So we worship by the Spirit of God completely dependent on God.

Number 2, we *glory in Christ Jesus*.

Before I get to that, this reminds me of one passage. This part about the Spirit of God. In Galatians 5, Paul says about the Spirit, *if we live by the Spirit* (same phrase) *by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit*. What do you mean, Paul? *Let us not become conceited* (the opposite of humility). *Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another*. At the heart of living by the Spirit, or back in Philippians 3, at the heart of worshiping by the Spirit, is humility. A child-like dependence on God; or which comes from a child-like dependence from God. Same principle operating here in both place; here in Galatians 5 and back in Philippians 3.

To worship by the Spirit is to worship in complete dependence on God to provide this Spirit to connect us with God.

But then, number 2, we also *glory in Christ Jesus*. The phrase here, “glory” also means to “exalt in” to be thrilled by. We glory in, we exalt in ... ourselves? Anything in ourselves? No. In Christ

Jesus. It's helpful to listen to how Paul phrases his names of Jesus. Here he puts the name Christ first in emphasis, that Jesus is the long promised anointed one, who came and served as our Messiah, who died on the cross for us—who did all for us. He lived righteously and He took all of our unrighteousness upon Himself that we might stand before God just as He does—accepted, righteous, holy, and one day, glorified.

All that we need to connect with God, God has provided in the Spirit. And all that God demands of us, and requires of us, God has provided in Christ Jesus. Thus, who among us ought to be any confidence in the flesh. No way. NO WAY! All that we have needed, and God has demanded of us—God has provided. So now, we are the circumcision. We are the living embodiment of what circumcision was always meant to point to—no confidence in the flesh, but every confidence in God. Every confidence in God, which is why Paul will go on in the rest of the chapter to list the reasons why he—though he has many reasons to put confidence in the flesh—he counted all those things as but filthy rags; just trash to be thrown aside. Why? For the sake of getting Christ Jesus.

Now, one more thing. What does this have to do with joy? What does this have to do with rejoicing in the Lord? Well, I hope you can see it now. Your joy in the Lord comes from putting no confidence in our flesh, and seeing that we have every reason to put full confidence in the Lord.

We ought to watch out for those who preach a gospel—and the whole world is preaching some gospel. It's not a matter of whether someone preaches a gospel but which one. Is it an environmental gospel? Is it a statism gospel, to put great confidence in the state? Is it scientism? The scientists are our hope. The vaccine is our hope. This new discovery is our hope. Do we put our hope in what we learn at university? Do we put our hope in any -ism?

Paul says, look out for them, because anyone who comes along preaching a lesser gospel than this is a “dog.” This is how you ought to see them. A dog who means to ravenously steal your joy; to grab on to it like a piece of meat and consume it. So, look out for those ones.

Then continue to preach the gospel to yourself—for your own joy. Pursue your own joy. Which means—which actually ironically means—a self-forgetting humility. A self-forgetting humility in the sight of God, in Christ. Fix your eyes on Christ and forget yourself for your own joy.

Now, one more thing. I said earlier that the circumcisers were people who wanted the Christians to go back to the old Mosaic Law—particularly the ceremonial law. But one might think here of then the Christian life is no longer following the law. No, no. We are the circumcision. In other words, we are the ones who are most able to follow God's timeless moral law of righteousness now. Which is why Paul will later say that he has not attained this but he—in his joy; in his joy that comes from processing the righteousness God that depends on faith—that he now presses on to know the power of Christ's resurrection in his life now. He will say this with great humility. Not that I have already obtained this or have already been made perfect, but I press on to make it my own. Why? Because Christ Jesus has made me His own.

The gospel proceeds the doing and once we perceive the gospel, we are filled with joy and it is that joy that energizes us to press on in the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.