

# Philippians 3.1-16

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*Striving towards heaven*

St Editha's

Sunday 11 September 2016

Finding Joy in the Journey (5)

## Part One: Rubbish

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### **A misunderstanding**

A salesman telephoned a household and a young boy answered. 'May I speak to your mother?' the salesman asked. The boy replied, 'She's not here right now.'

The salesman then asked, 'Is there anyone else there?' The boy replied, 'My sister'. So the salesman asked, 'May I speak to her?' The boy replied, 'I guess so'.

At this point there was a long period of silence on the phone. Then the boy returned and said, 'Hello?'

The salesman responded, 'It's you again? I thought you were going to get your sister.' To which the boy replied, 'I tried, but I can't get her out of the playpen!'

Misunderstandings can be funny. They can be annoying. But they can also be dangerous.

## **Confidence in the flesh (2-9)**

In the early church some people taught that Christians still had to obey the Jewish Law, that faith in Jesus wasn't enough. And so they insisted that Christians had to – among other things – be circumcised. That made Paul angry.

Why was he *so* angry? Because that teaching is not simply wrong, it is dangerous. When we lose our focus on Jesus, we not only lose the one who alone can bring true joy no matter what, we also lose the assurance of God's gift of life to us, no matter what.

It's all too easy to put our **confidence in the flesh** (3) isn't it? Look down at Paul's list: he could have had confidence in his birthright, being born into the people of Israel, circumcised at the right time, strict and zealous, **a Hebrew of Hebrews** (5-6).

For us, it might be more like, 'Born in England, baptised C of E, drink plenty of tea, go to church when I can, drive my neighbour to the shops, pay my taxes. I love my kids, I never hurt anyone, I haven't committed a crime: I'm a good person.'

I suppose there's nothing wrong with all of those things. That's not Paul's point. In fact, he *wants* us to be good neighbours, good citizens, to love and care for each other.

But not if they become the main thing, not if those things start to take the place of Jesus, not if we start to rely on those things, so we start thinking, 'I'm saved because I'm a good person,' rather than, 'I'm saved because of what Jesus has done for me.'

Friends, the bad news is that the *only person* who has ever been saved and will ever be saved by being 'a good person', is Jesus. It's a club of one, and it ain't you. That's the bad news.

The good news is that you don't have to make that grade. So Paul continues with the strong language:

I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.

*Philippians 3.8-9 (NIV)*

Paul says all that worldly stuff, that is so easy to rely on, is **garbage**, dung – that’s the word he uses. A stinky pile of excrement. That’s all the good those things will do you.

But it doesn’t matter, because in Christ we have something better.

Friends, it is such a relief, it is hugely liberating, it is a release to realise that we don’t need to make our own lives right with God: **not having a righteousness of my own... but that which is through faith in Christ** (9). We don’t need to try and earn it, it is a gift.

Which is a *very* good thing.

Some of you know that Jess is not my first wife. Seven and a half years ago my wife and I separated, and a couple of years later we were divorced. There was no affair, abuse or anything like that – we were simply two people who probably shouldn’t have got married in the first place, because after three years our ‘marriage’ wasn’t worth the paper it was written on.

In a few short weeks, the marriage disintegrated. I lost so much. So-called friends ignored my calls. People I looked up to said the most horrendous things to me. I lost the life I had worked so hard for: I resigned my job as a curate to move down south to be near my family – which of course that meant I lost my house too.

I lost my self-confidence. My education, my training, my middle-class background – it all counted for nothing. My list was similar to Paul's, and it included committed religious observance, with weekly church attendance, generous giving, sacrificial service – I was a young curate with a bright future.

But I failed, big time – and hurt a lot of people, and was hurt *by* a lot of people. All the stuff that gave me **confidence in the flesh** (3) was stripped away, and I was left with next to nothing – except I had everything that matters because God never took away **the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith** (9).

Down in the valley, with everything stripped away, God was still with me. I didn't want *him* for a while, but he wouldn't let me go. I couldn't hold on, but he didn't let me fall away.

That's why I love these verses so much. **I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, who whose sake I have lost all things** (8).

There's nothing wrong with the good things God gives us: the world, our family and friends, our work – *but Jesus is so much better*.

It doesn't depend on doing the right things or being the right person, which is wonderful because if it did I'd be a mess.

It depends on *him*.

We're now going to have our time of confession. We need to say sorry to God, not simply for the things we do that are wrong, but for our wrong *attitudes*.

What are the things in your life that, if you're honest, challenge Jesus for the number one spot?

Do you think of yourself as 'a good person', and have confidence in yourself, rather than in Jesus?

Let's pause for a moment and think about what attitudes we need to say sorry to God for.

*Pause*

Let us pray.

*Father, we are sorry for the times we put other things before you.*

*Thank you for the wonderful gift of life in Jesus.*

*By your Spirit, help us to live lives of gratitude,*

*saying thank you for the free gift of forgiveness in Jesus.*

*Amen.*

Now, for deep-seated attitudes and sin which has really hurt you and others, saying sorry once isn't usually enough. It's enough for God to forgive you, but it isn't usually enough for us to forgive ourselves, or to change our attitude and behaviour. That's because these things are serious, and often cause deep wounds.

But God's healing is deeper and more powerful than any wound. So I encourage you to go home and make this confession part of your daily prayers. It's not about making ourselves feel guilty, it's about finding healing and joy through the forgiveness and fresh start that *only* comes in Jesus.

Notice the first words of chapter 3? **Rejoice in** – what? who? – **rejoice in *the Lord***. Being freed from the burden of making our own lives right with God, resting on what Jesus *has already done*, brings such relief, freedom from guilt – and true *joy*.

# Part Two: Striving

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## A work in progress (12-16)

Paul does love his metaphors. He uses five in v12-16:

1. Reaching the goal (12, 14)
2. Making it my own (12, 13)
3. Straining forward / pressing on (13, 14)
4. Claiming the prize (14)
5. Living up to what we already have (16)

He's trying to describe what it's like to be a Christian. On the one hand, we have been given the gift of life in Jesus, and nothing can separate us from the love of God in Jesus.

On the other hand, *we aren't perfect yet*. That's what the word means in v12 when Paul says he hasn't **arrived at [his] goal**. The word means the task isn't completed, it is still a work in progress.

It's a bit like giving Usain Bolt nine gold medals eight years ago, and then telling him he still needs to race as fast as he can at the next three Olympics. I don't know about you, but if someone gave me those medals *before* the race, I probably wouldn't try as hard!



But actually there is also some liberating about *not having to earn the prize*. Jesus won it for us – we simply need to **take hold** of it. That isn't something we do once, and then we can sit back and take it easy. It is a work in progress – we need to strive for it every day, to **work out our salvation** (2.13) every day, to have the **mind of Christ** (2.5) every day, to let the truth of who we are bubble up every day so it affects everything we do and say and think.

Jesus has won the prize for us – we are a work in progress.

Notice the other thing Paul says – **forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead** (13). Sometimes our past can overwhelm our present. Many people live in the shadow of their past mistakes, and it can paralyse us, make us afraid.

But friends, God can heal all of that. Believe me, I know! I was stuck in my anger – angry with myself, with others for abandoning me, with the injustice of the way I was treated, with God for allowing me to make such a mess of my life. But slowly, over a long time, God brought great healing. It was not an easy process. And it doesn't mean I take lightly the damage and pain that I've caused to other people. But it *does* mean that, by the grace of God I can carry on, and trust in his power to heal – not only myself, but the others that I've hurt by my failures and failings.

The wounds are still there, like in Jesus' resurrected body – but the pain is (mostly) gone. Redemption doesn't mean the mistakes are ok, but it does heal the wounds and take away the shame.

We don't need to worry **what is behind** – but we also don't need to worry about **what is ahead**. God has *that* sorted, too. Because it doesn't depend on me, but on the free gift of God in Jesus.

Sometimes people read this verse and think that Paul is talking about the ultimate reward of heaven. Of course, that is where we will no longer be a work in progress, where we will finally reach the goal, and fully claim the prize. The great, perfect and complete joy will be in heaven when we get to be with Jesus. There we will know perfect forgiveness, and complete healing.

But there is still healing, there is still forgiveness, there is still joy in the journey as we strive together here and now to claim the prize. It's hard work, and it doesn't mean things will always be easy.

With God, the journey is as important as the destination. How we travel is as important as where we end up. So let us strive, not only *for* heaven, but *towards* heaven. We don't have to earn the prize; we don't have to be paralysed by the past – instead let's journey together, sharing our pain, our struggles – and our *joy*.