

The Upward Call

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Introduction.

- A. It's not uncommon for us to encounter from time to time Scripture in unexpected places. For instance, over the archway of the main building of the University of Texas is inscribed the quote, "And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." That's an ironic thing to see on the campus of any major university these days, but it's particularly ironic in Austin, which is about as godless and corrupt a town as I've seen.
- B. On the screen behind me, though, we see a much more familiar quote in the first three words of Philippians 2:3. The next time you're driving along and you see one of those houses with the unkempt lawn and the "Beware of Dog" sign nailed to the tree above the barking pit bull, think to yourself, "That's from Philippians!"
- C. By contrast, the spiritual application here is a little harder to spot. Judging from context, it seems likely that when Paul is talking about the dogs and the evil workers and the mutilation, he's talking about the same group: Judaizing teachers who tried to bind the Law of Moses, especially circumcision, on Christians. They were people who urged our first-century brethren to trust in the righteousness of the flesh, rather than in the righteousness of God. There may be some of them around someplace, but I've never met one yet.
- D. Even if the Judaizing teacher has passed from the list of our spiritual problems, though, Satan still tries to get us to put confidence in the flesh. He tries to get us to believe that fleshly pleasure will make us happy. He still tries to get us to believe that if we are good people, we can earn our way to heaven by our own righteousness.
- E. That's why we still need to listen to Paul's warning to put no confidence in the flesh. Satan's methods may have changed, but his object is still the same. He still wants to use the flesh to destroy us. That's why we need to hear Paul's warning instead. That's why we need to follow the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

I. Our Early Progress.

- A. This upward call begins with something that is not upwardly pointed at all. It starts with **FALSE CONFIDENCE** in the flesh. Paul describes the false confidence that he had in Philippians 3:4-6. This is the roll call of Paul's spiritual qualifications before he became a Christian. From the perspective of a Jew from Paul's time, this is an extremely impressive list. He was circumcised the eighth day, just like the Law commanded him to be. He knew not just vaguely that he was a Jew, but that he was a member of the tribe of Benjamin. That meant that he was literally able to trace his genealogy back, ancestor for ancestor, 2000 years to Abraham himself. Folks, 2000 years ago from now, my ancestors didn't know how to write yet!
- B. Better still, Paul wasn't just any garden-variety Jew. He was, as he says himself, a Hebrew of Hebrews. He was a Pharisee, a member of one of the strictest and most committed Jewish sects. He did everything right according to the Law, and he was so committed to serving God that he dedicated his life to fighting against the people he thought were the enemies of God. If anybody could have confidence in the flesh, Paul could.
- C. Of course, there are plenty of people today who place confidence in the flesh just like Paul did, except without nearly as much reason as Paul had. Every time we run into one of those people who says that God just wants them to be a good person, that's what they're doing. They're trusting in the flesh. They're imagining themselves saying to God, "I'm a good husband and father, I work hard at my job, I don't drink, I obey the law, I pay my taxes, so I've earned the right to go to heaven." They think that they are already doing everything they need to do to live up to God's standards. They think that they don't need Christ at all.
- D. Paul used to think the same way. Next, though, he describes the importance of **LOSS TO GAIN CHRIST**. Consider his words on the subject in Philippians 3:7-8. Talk about a life change, folks! Many people are held back from giving their lives to God because of all of the things they will lose if they do. Paul gave up literally everything except the mere fact of his existence, and he knew he was living on borrowed time. Before he became a Christian, Paul was one of the most admired Jews in the entire Jewish nation. He was a leader of his people, possibly even a member of the ruling council itself. Once he became a Christian, though, all of that was gone forever. His own people who had loved him so much now tried repeatedly to kill him.
- E. Why did Paul do it? Why did he surrender everything to Jesus? We see the answer here. He gave up everything, because next to Jesus, everything was rubbish. "Rubbish" here is kind of a funny word. It sounds awfully tidy and British, when the concept actually isn't very tidy at all. The Greek word here actually means garbage, manure, everything that is stinking and nasty and valueless and needs to be thrown out. Next to Jesus, Paul thought that all the honors of his country were just a big steaming pile of worthlessness.
- F. Folks, that's something that many today need to understand. Everything that we have and value outside of Christ is worthless next to having Him. The sins that we love that we would have to give up are garbage. The affection of people who want to hold us back from Jesus is as precious as a heap of manure. Jesus is everything. The things that keep us from Jesus are nothing, and we need to give them up as soon as we can.

- G. Paul explains why Jesus is worth so much in Philippians 3:9-11. First of all, only in Jesus can we have righteousness. Among many other things, Jesus' life on earth showed all of us up for the evil people we have always been. When God compares us to the standard of Jesus, we do NOT shine in the comparison! Next to Jesus, our righteousness is garbage too. The only way that we can be righteous is to trust in His power to make us righteous. Instead of rolling around in our own garbage, we have to turn our feet toward God.
- H. Paul then goes on to tell us how we can do this. Just like him, we don't stop when we put on Christ. Instead, we use our Christian walk as a means of coming to know Christ. This isn't the kind of knowledge that comes from reading some theologian's commentary about Jesus. This is the kind of knowledge that comes from living like Jesus. Paul begins by discussing his desire to know the power of the resurrection of Jesus. Folks, that's a power that we must come to know too. It's the power that changes our lives after we have been raised from the watery grave of baptism. It's the power that conforms us to the image of Christ. As we do this, we will inevitably suffer. As Jesus Himself said, if they hated the Master, they will hate the servants. The only way that we can hope to escape the persecution of the world is by living like the world, at which point we're no longer Christ's servants at all. More than that, as we come to know Jesus, we will die like Jesus, just as Paul did, who said of himself that he died daily in Christ. Daily, we crucify ourselves and live for the Lord.
- I. Why do all this? Why go through suffering and death for Jesus? We do it for the prize that waits at the end: the prize of resurrection and eternal life. Imagine how much Bill Gates would pay live forever. Imagine the billions and billions that he would fork over just for the chance to be a disembodied soul in a computer for the next several thousands of years. Folks, what the Christian has got coming is infinitely better than that! We have the promise of living with Jesus forever, and I can't imagine anything that could be worth more.

II. Our Later Progress.

- A. We see how Paul regards this reward in his determination to keep **PRESSING ON**. This shows up in his words in Philippians 3:12-14. In this context, Paul says repeatedly that he hasn't obtained the resurrection from the dead yet. Imagine that! Paul, even after all the places he preached, all the trials he endured, all the miracles he worked, knew that he wasn't guaranteed a place in heaven yet. Friends, if Paul hadn't laid hold of the resurrection at this point of his life, we certainly haven't laid hold of it yet either! We can't just hold the basketball and wait for the shot clock to run down on our lives. We have to keep pressing on too.
- B. As part of that, we have to forget what lies behind and seek what waits ahead. Just like the children of Israel did during their wilderness wanderings, there are a lot of Christians who look back over their shoulders to the Egypt of sin. They start thinking that all those evil things were mighty fun to participate in. They start thinking that maybe they'd still be good enough if they left the church and went back to living like a good person. Folks, all of those things are lies put in our heads by the devil. The good stuff is in front of us.
- C. Paul exhorts the Philippians to live in this way in Philippians 3:15-17. It's interesting, though, how Paul tells the Philippians they need to do this. He says that they need to live by the same rule as Paul. He informs them that they need to follow his example. He encourages them to look to Paul and those like him, and to use their behavior for a pattern. When I decided to preach on Philippians 3, I never thought that part of the text would be about conforming ourselves to the example of the first-century church, but this is exactly what it says. We can't decide on our own route to follow the upward call. We can't devise our own rules and think that those will help us to claim the resurrection from the dead. Instead, we have to learn everything we can about what Paul and the other early Christians did and imitate that precisely. We have to walk according to the pattern.
- D. There are two possible ways we can respond to Paul's exhortation in this chapter. Let's look at **ONE OUTCOME** first. It's described in Philippians 3:18-19. These are the people who stop listening to the upward call and set their mind on earthly things instead. Instead of worshiping God, they worship their appetites. Instead of being ruled by what God wants, they are ruled by what they want. People like this, people who reject Christ, may think of themselves as just spiritually neutral, but Paul makes clear that they are enemies of the cross of Christ, and on the day of judgment, they will be treated like enemies. Their end is destruction. We have to keep pressing on because we don't just go back to the beginning if we don't. We fall unimaginably far, and we lose all that we are and all that we have worked for forever. Let's remain faithful instead.
- E. Clearly, when compared to destruction, **THE OTHER OUTCOME** is far preferable. Paul explains just how preferable it is in Philippians 3:20-21. Christians aren't citizens of the earth, friends. We don't belong here. The place where we belong, where our true country waits for us, is heaven. All of our spiritual mountain-climbing is really just eager waiting. After all, none of us will arrive in heaven ahead of schedule. Before we make it to heaven, though, we will receive an incredible blessing from the Lord. Jesus Himself will transform each one of us into conformity with the glory of His divine body. I don't know everything that that means, folks. I don't know and probably can't even imagine what Jesus is like now, but I am confident in His promise that on that day, He will make all of His brothers and His sisters to be like Him. That's why we wait.
- F. That's why we see Paul's closing admonition in Philippians 4:1. It seems like he's changed gears here, but he really hasn't. Standing firm is the same thing as pressing on and eagerly waiting. That's the way to heaven.

Conclusion. If you want to go to heaven, you can begin your journey today by obeying the gospel of Christ.