

Study 6

THE SURPASSING WORTH



Modern mosaic portraying St. Paul landing at Neapolis on his way to Philippi (in Koundouriotou Street).

Background

I once heard the story of a church goer who invited a non-Christian friend to come along to his church. The friend was inquisitive about all the standing, sitting, kneeling, weird song lyrics about lamb's blood, and why a funny wooden plate thingy was passed along without food on it? And then the preaching started.

“What’s he doing?”

“Preaching.”

Twenty minutes later the inquisitive friend heard the preacher announce with great gusto, “Finally.”

“What does that mean?” he asked.

“Absolutely nothing” replied his Christian friend as the preacher continued on for another twenty minutes!

Some scholars consider Paul's opening statement in Philippians 3 to be like this preacher's. That is, to them, they thought Paul was intending to close his epistle to the Philippians at this point, but he got side-tracked and continued on. But Dr. Gordon Fee disagrees. He regards Paul having several themes that he intended to write to the Philippians about, and now he was about to close his epistle by dealing with the last of them. Some scholars also consider that this was not Paul's first epistle to the Philippians since he states that he was now writing to them about "the same things" (Phil. 3:1). But upon closer examination we will observe that this is *not* what Paul was saying at all.

1. What does Paul ask the Philippians to do in Philippians 3:1? (Note 1Thess. 5:16)
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Righteousness Through Christ

Paul's last epistles, of which Philippians was one, were each concerned with *doctrine*. One of the main responsibilities of an apostle was to maintain *sound doctrine* (1Tim. 6:3; Titus 1:9; 2:1). In the opening chapter of Philippians, Paul alludes to those who were opposing the Philippians (Phil. 1:28). This required, Paul tells them, 'standing firm in one spirit, with one mind, striving side by side for the faith of the gospel' (Phil. 1:27). The New Testament uses the term, *the faith*, to refer to 'the beliefs of Christianity'. That is, *sound doctrine*. What Paul states in this closing section of his epistle was "safe" (ESV) or a "safeguard" (NET, NIV) for the Philippians. This final section of his epistle was designed to safeguard these believers from those who opposed them with false doctrine.

The Principle of Context

The apostle's language in Philippians 3:2 is quite strong. But what we in the twenty-first century may not appreciate is that the term *dogs* was a common Jewish expression for hostile to the gospel (Matt. 7:6; 15:26; Rev. 22:15).

2. Note Paul's descriptions of those who were opposing the gospel in Philippians 3:2. He describes the same group of people in three ways. To understand who he is referring to requires reading this verse in context. Read Philippians 3:3 and discuss how the context reveals who is describing.

The Judaizers were a group of Jewish Christians who believed that in order to be a true Christian a person needed to put their faith in Christ *plus* keep the Law of Moses. For men, this involved being *c* _____ *d*. This would have been no problem for a *Jewish* convert to Christianity (although the Judaizers also insisted on keeping the sabbaths, the ceremonial days - Gal. 4:10; Col. 2:16). But for a Gentile convert it was confusing and contradictory to the gospel they had received.

3. Read Ephesians 2:8-9. Based on this passage, what is necessary for someone to be saved from their sins?

One of the aspects of the *Principle of Context* is that no verse of Scripture can be interpreted in a way that it contradicts the overall message of Scripture.

4. The Judaizers taught that righteousness was linked to being circumcised, but according to Philippians 3:3, who were the truly 'circumcised' and why?

5. Why did the apostle Paul know that ethnicity or the works of the Law could not save a person's soul, based on his comments in Philippians 3:4-6?

I Count Everything as Loss

Every bragging right that the Judaizers had — and claimed was necessary for salvation — the apostle Paul also had. But it could never make a person righteous before God.

6. What value did Paul put on these religious efforts according to Philippians 3:7?

7. What value did Paul put on the opportunity now made available to every believer to know Christ? (Phil. 3:8-10)

But I Press On

Becoming a Christian is not just an event, or a singular moment, it is a moment of soul transformation that leads to a new believer becoming a follower of Christ.

8. What did Paul say was involved in following Christ based on Philippians 3:12-14?
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There must have been some godly and solid leaders in the Philippian Church who knew how to shepherd and encourage their brothers and sisters.

9. In Philippians 3:15 Paul seems to identify two kinds of believers. Which two kinds of believers does he identify and does he say that God will do to the lesser of these?
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10. How did Paul expect the Philippians to obey Philippians 3:16 - and how can we?
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Application Discussion

- Paul was very strong in condemning the false teachers upsetting the Philippians - even calling them “dogs”. How should church leaders condemn false teaching today?
- Paul paid a high price for following Christ - and said that it was worth it. What has been the price that you have had to pay in following Christ?
- How can a church congregation be guarded against false teaching?