

TRUE JOY AND FALSE CONFIDENCE

Phil 3.1-7

INTRODUCTION

I am sure some of you are familiar with the old adage, *Some preachers say 'Finally' and finish; whereas others say 'Lastly' and last!* Well, Paul was someone who frequently used the word **'finally'**, but rarely did he use it to round off a letter. Here in Philippians, the word occurs at the halfway point in the letter (3.1); and it crops up again in 4.8. And that's not because once he started to write, he found it difficult to stop – but because the word he uses in these two verses doesn't mean "I'm about to finish". Strictly speaking, it means **'for the remainder'**. So we could paraphrase it something like this: *as for the remainder of what I want to say to you, listen to this ...*; or it might even mean, *from this point onwards in your Christian lives, bear these things in mind, which I'm about to tell you*. Paul tended to use the word when he wanted to introduce something of real importance that he wanted his readers to take on board and live out for the rest of their lives on earth.

And so here in 3.1, it introduces

1. A STIRRING EXHORTATION (v1)

Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord! It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you. Everything else Paul wants to say in this letter can be summed up in the command, *Rejoice in the Lord!* – or **find your greatest joy in Jesus** is how one person has put it. And this instruction, which Paul has already given back in 2.18 (*you too should be glad and rejoice with me*), he repeats in 4.4 because he regards it as being so important. *Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!* Four times in this letter, Paul urges us to find our greatest joy in life in Jesus – and to express that joy openly and enthusiastically.

Why? – because *the joy of the Lord is your strength*, Nehemiah reminded the people of his day (Neh 8.10). When we are delighting ourselves in Jesus, when he is our greatest source of happiness and satisfaction, our Christian lives will be kept on the right tracks. But if we start looking for happiness and satisfaction elsewhere, our lives will soon come off the rails, and we will have made a shipwreck of our faith (to mix the metaphors). Our greatest joy in life should be Jesus himself.

Two books I read while I was away in Scotland, illustrated the fact that the search for happiness is a universal one.

- One was by **Jason Robinson**, the England rugby captain. In the book, he describes how he achieved fame and fortune at a very young age with Wigan, the top rugby league club of the late 1980's and 90's. But his personal life was a complete wreck. He was drinking heavily, got charged with assault, and fathered a child whilst still only 20. This is how he describes his life at that time (p59). *My career was moving in a positive direction. ... Sadly, I couldn't make the same claim for my life off the rugby field. It was a total mess. I was in the middle of a mad social scene. I was young, had money in my pocket, a smart car, and by now, I was easily recognisable.... I had all a young man could want, except deep down, I had nothing. I was naïve enough to suppose that when I was drunk, I was invisible (p61).*
- But by God's mercy, alongside him in that same club was an outstanding Christian, the big burly Samoan Inga Tuigamala (who went on to play for the Newcastle Falcons). *I was a young lad with the world at my feet*, Jason Robinson explains (p70), *but in an ever-deepening black hole. Still, I kept drinking as a means of escape. But through the fog of my own despair, I couldn't help but notice Va'aiga Tuigamala. This big man from Western Samoa was to prove the starting point of my salvation. In Inga I saw a man who was always happy. I had looked for happiness from relationships, from cars, from alcohol, but nothing so far had fulfilled what I was searching for. I might be happy for a week, for two weeks, but it never lasted. I was chasing material things – a bigger house, a nicer car. I was never satisfied; but Inga wasn't chasing anything. He didn't go out drinking with the lads. He didn't sleep around. He didn't have the best car in the car park. So, why was he so happy? Sometimes you would go into the treatment room and find Inga reading the Bible. He read aloud. Clearly, this meant so*

much to him. We talked together. I asked some simple questions, and he gave me some straightforward answers. As a born again Christian he had placed his life in the hands of God and that was the source of his contentment. I didn't need to hear too many words from Inga. What impressed me was the way he lived. To see him full of joy each morning when he came into the club was revealing. He was the only person I knew who genuinely enjoyed his life. And if you want to know how Jason Robinson himself came to find his greatest in Jesus, you'll have to buy the book to find out!

- Even the rich and famous are searching for true joy and happiness – even those whom we reckon have got everything going for them in life. But so much of what people are chasing after is an illusion, like a mirage in the desert. The closer they get to their goal, the more false they realise it's been. And that's why Paul says to us with such passion in this verse, *find your greatest joy in Jesus – always. He's the only one who can truly satisfy your deepest longings.*
- Someone has said, 'When can no more satisfy the deepest longings of our souls with things than we can satisfy our physical hunger with sawdust or quench or physical thirst with saltwater. It's simply the way we've been made. We've been made in such a way that our greatest longings will only ever be satisfied by God himself, by us enjoying a living relationship with him through Jesus. We've been made for him, and until our life is filled by Jesus, there will always remain that God-shaped blank at the centre of our soul.'
- The other book I read while I was away was by **Syd Little**, who is coming to the church in November. He had also achieved great fame and fortune in his life, through his partnership with Eddie Large in show business. But Syd Little's life was so hectic he had no time for the children he had fathered or the woman he had married. Domestically, his life was a mess, and his marriage eventually broke up. But in 1974, Little and Large were offered a spot at the London Palladium where Cliff Richard was topping the bill. And this is how Syd Little describes Cliff (p92). *We watched Cliff rehearse, and we knew we were watching a star. It was unbelievable how he conveyed this inner strength. It was then that I found out he was a Christian. When you meet Christians like Cliff, they always seem to have that inner peace. He'd be on stage and everything would be going wrong – mikes would be going off, lights would be in the wrong place – and yet he never got mad. He was never in a hurry, and he'd always take time to listen. I admired him for this and hoped that one day I would find what he had. And again, if you want to discover how Syd Little came to find his greatest joy in Jesus, you will have to buy the book – or come along to the church on 18th November to hear him speak!*
- Jesus said (John 6.35), *"I'm your food for life. The person who comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."* He alone can satisfy our deepest longings.
- He also said (John 8.12), *"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."* There's no joy to be had from groping around in the dark, only from living in the light of God's love and truth.
- *I have come so that people may have life in all its intended fullness*, Jesus declared in John 10.10.
- And in John 17.3, he explained what he meant by that. *This is eternal life - life from the realms of eternity, where things are permanent and real, not illusory and transient. Eternal life – real life – consists of knowing God, the one and only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom he sent into the world for our salvation. For no one comes into a relationship with to God as their Father except through me*, Jesus declared in John 14.6. *I am the way, the truth, and the life you are looking for.*
- *Find your greatest joy in Jesus*, Paul urges us here. Discover true and lasting happiness through cultivating an ever-deeper relationship with him.
- *It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again*, Paul explains; he didn't find it irksome to have to repeat himself; for he knew that keeping Jesus as our greatest joy *safeguards* our spiritual life.
- You see, Satan will always be seeking to draw us away from Jesus. He will forever be seeking to lure us away from Jesus with alternative sources of supposed happiness. He will try to dazzle us with them, impress us with how appealing they seem.
 - He may tempt us to throw ourselves into pursuing pleasure, as an end in itself. But as Jason Robinson

discovered, the bigger the kick we get from pleasure, the bigger still it has to be the next time around to give us the same level of stimulation. It's like a drug we will always be wanting more of.

- Some people throw themselves into their careers to find joy and satisfaction, often because they find it difficult to make proper relationships with other people, particularly within their family circle. It's a form of escape.

- Others go on a quest for power, or money. Someone said to me recently, "However much money I earn, I never seem to have enough." How tragic, I thought to myself. Later on in this letter, Paul will say (4.12-13), *I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength.* Contentment comes from making Jesus our source of greatest joy – not things, not other people, not our careers or our leisure pursuits; and not even our church life – but Jesus himself. We must learn how to find our greatest joy in him.

- We begin by reminding ourselves of all that he has done for us and given to us. In chapter 2.6-8, we read of his amazing self-emptying and self-sacrifice, to win us back to his Father God. How we should bless him for all he endured at the cross for our sakes.
- And in other parts of this letter, we read of all he imparts to us as a result of the cross.
 - In 1.6, there's the prospect of a totally transformed life: *I am confident of this*, Paul writes, *that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.*
 - In 2.13, Paul speaks of the transforming power behind this transformation. *It is God himself who works in you (by his Holy Spirit) both to will and to act according to his good purpose.* We possess a new dynamic for living, thanks to Jesus.
 - And we look forward to wonderful hope through Jesus, Paul will explain in 3.20-21. *Our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.* How could we ever fail to find our greatest joy in Jesus, in view of all that he has done for us!
 - In 3.8, Paul will declare that Jesus is infinitely worth knowing, and worth getting to know better and better as time goes by. *I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.*

Make sure you find your greatest joy in Jesus, Paul urges us, for nothing else will be able to satisfy you like him.

Now, in verse 2, Paul moves on from his stirring exhortation of verse 1 to issue a solemn warning, and he does so using some very strong language indeed.

2. A SOLEMN WARNING (v2)

Watch out for those dogs, he writes, *those men who do evil, those mutilators of the flesh.*

When Paul refers to people as dogs in this verse, he's not being complimentary. The people of his day and culture had a rather different view of dogs than our own society, where they can be pampered beyond belief sometimes!

- In Paul's day, dogs were regarded as being 'unclean' animals, so the term was used disparagingly by Jews to refer to non-Jews. Dogs were regarded by the Jews as 'the most despised, insolent and miserable of creatures' someone has written! (Martin, p136).
- So, who is Paul speaking about here? Well, the reference to *mutilators of the flesh* at the end of the verse indicates that he was referring to a group of people who were insisting on the Jewish rite of circumcision for every new Christian.

Back before Easter, in our Sunday evening series on the life of Abraham, we saw that circumcision was introduced as a sign of the covenant God made with his people through Abraham. It's worth glancing back to Genesis 17 for a moment, whilst keeping a finger in Phil 3. In verses 4-8 of Genesis 17, we see a number of the features of the historic covenant God made with Abraham.

- It was **personal** to Abraham (vs 4-6); it contained a number of promises that were specific to Abraham as an individual. *"As for me, this is my covenant with you, God told him. You will be the father of many nations. No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you.*
- But the covenant was also **national** in its scope; it contained promises for Abraham's descendants (v7a). *I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come.*
- Most importantly, the covenant was **spiritual** in its nature (v7b). *I will be your God and the God of your descendants after you, the Lord declared.*
- It needed to be **territorial** too, verse 8 reveals. *The whole land of Canaan, where you are now an alien, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God."*
- And so verses 9-14 then spell out the **obligations** that would be on Abraham and his descendants if they were to benefit from this covenant. *Then God said to Abraham, "As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come. This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you.*

So circumcision was the sign of the covenant God had established with Abraham and his descendants. And it seems that in Paul's day, a group of Jews was going around insisting that every Christian had to undergo this rite. But this was to misunderstand **the unfolding nature of God's purposes for his people**. You see, with the coming of Jesus, God had established **a new covenant** with his people – and his new covenant superseded the old one, rendering it redundant. This is all spelt out in **Hebrews 8.7-13**. So keep your finger in Phil 3, whilst turning over to Hebrews 8 for a moment.

*If there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another. But God found fault with the people and said : "The time is coming, declares the Lord, when I will make **a new covenant** with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they did not remain faithful to my covenant, and I turned away from them, declares the Lord. This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. **I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts.** I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbour, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more." By calling this covenant "new," he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear.*

The new covenant has replaced the old one. So we are no longer bound by the obligations of the old one. The new covenant is far better than the old one, not simply because it has secured forgiveness for our failings, thanks to Christ's death on the cross for our sins – but because it speaks of a new dynamic for living – God writing his laws on our hearts, by his Spirit.

- So what counts now is not a person undergoing a physical mutilation of their body, as in the rite of circumcision; but a person living out the life of the Spirit! For God imparts his Holy Spirit to everyone who puts their trust in Jesus, his Son. That is now the indelible mark of someone truly belonging to God's people – not the outward mark of circumcision, but the inwardly reality of God's Spirit within them.
- And so those who were insisting on the old rite of circumcision were completely missing the point of the new covenant – either deliberately or through ignorance. They were seeking to drag people back into something that had become obsolete in God's sight. And in so doing, they were implying that Jesus was somehow slightly inadequate, not quite enough for a proper place amongst God's people. It's what Paul spells out very forcibly in Gal 5.2-3. *Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law.* Circumcision belongs to a former system that is

now completely redundant. So that if a person insists on the rite of circumcision, logic demands that the whole of the Jewish law would have to be kept as well.

- Now, all this discussion about circumcision might sound a little archaic and even irrelevant to us today. But what lies at the heart of Paul's concern here is not just the Jewish rite of circumcision, but the nature and adequacy of the new covenant God has made with us through Jesus. You see, down through the ages, there has always been a tendency for people to try and add something to the sufficiency of Jesus - either for our salvation, or for our place amongst God's people, or our on-going progress in the Christian life.

- Some place a great deal of emphasis on religious ceremonies and rituals – even baptism.

- Others place an emphasis on having to belong to their particular stream of the church.

But anything that suggests Jesus is not quite enough is a terrible affront to him and to God – hence the vehemence of Paul's language here.

- What matters is knowing God personally, through the presence of his Spirit in our heart – not the performance of religious rituals, however impressive they might seem to be outwardly. What matters is the living relationship we are enjoying with Jesus, not our membership of some particular branch of the church. *In Christ Jesus, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value*, Paul writes in Gal 5.6.

The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.

And so Paul is warning us here against the 'Jesus-plus' brigade, those who suggest that Jesus is good for us, but not quite enough. Have nothing to do with them, Paul warns us, for they will rob you of your joy, by drawing you away from the sufficiency of Jesus.

And so having given us a stirring exhortation and having issued a solemn warning, in verse 4 Paul makes

3. A STRONG ASSERTION (v4)

It is we who are the circumcision – that is to say, the true people of God - *we who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh* (that is to say, in our human credentials or achievements). Paul is providing us here with three marks of a true believer, someone who is truly a part of God's chosen people.

First, those who are truly God's people

3.1 Worship him by his Spirit

Our worship of God comes from deep within our soul, for it is prompted by God's very own Spirit, living within us and motivating all we are about. Worship is not about performing religious rituals. It's not about following the correct procedures. It's something that wells up from deep within us, because of the presence of God's Spirit within us.

- In John 4.23-24, Jesus said, "*A time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth.*" And clearly we can only worship God in Spirit if we possess his Spirit to enable us to do so! This is the way we must worship God, Jesus says. These are the only kind of worshippers God seeks – those who possess his Spirit, and worship him at the prompting of his Spirit. God has no time for people performing religious rituals, if they are not prompted from his Spirit within them.
- And, of course, the gift of God's Spirit is part of the new covenant God has made with his people. Indeed, it's precisely what makes it new, in contrast to the old covenant made with Abraham.
- *I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you*, God promised his people through his prophet Ezekiel (36.26-27). *I will remove from you your heart of stone* (a heart that is dead to me) *and give you a heart of flesh* (one that's alive to me). How? *I will put my Spirit in you.* This is the essence of the new covenant (cf Joel 2.28-29). This is the distinguishing mark of those who truly make up God's people, so much so that Paul writes in Rom 8.9 that *if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ*. Having God's Spirit living within us is what marks us out as one of God's people.
- It's why Jesus told Nicodemus, a very religious man (John 3.7,3,5), *'You must be born again. ... No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.... No one can enter the kingdom of God unless he*

is born of ... the Spirit. I read a book recently in which the author was shying clear of the term 'born again' Christian. I prefer to speak about us 'rediscovering God' he wrote. But the phrase 'born again' is expressing a profound theological truth that we must never let go of, for it is speaking about what God does to us when we come to Jesus in repentance and faith. He grants us a new life. His own Holy Spirit comes to take up residence within us. Becoming a Christian is not just about us discovering God to be there and real. It's about God imparting a new life to us!

The second mark of a someone who truly belongs to God is that we

3.2 Glory in Jesus

Some people say they believe in God, but they have little time for, or interest in, Jesus – and so we have to conclude, sadly, that they are not a part of God's people, for we cannot truly believe in God without also committing ourselves to Jesus as our personal Lord and saviour.

- In John 6.28-29, the crowds asked Jesus, "*What must we do to do what God requires of us?*" And quick as a flash, *Jesus answered, "The work God wants you to do is this: believe in the one he has sent."*
- We live in an age in which people are keen to blur the boundaries between the different religions of the world. Prince Charles reputedly wants to be known as a 'Defender of Faith' in general, rather than as a defender of *the* faith, the Christian faith.
- But what Paul is saying here is that unless people are prepared to give Jesus his rightful place, so that they glory in *him* and in him alone – literally *boast* about him, they have no part amongst God's people.
- It's not enough for people to believe in God in a rather vague, general kind of way. We must be those who glory in his Son. *He who does not honour the Son does not honour the Father, who sent him*, Jesus declared in John 5.23. The Father and Son are inseparable in the honour we are to give them.

The third mark of someone who is truly a part of God's people is that we have renounced all attempts at a DIY form of salvation. We place

3.3 No confidence in our human credentials or activities as far as our salvation is concerned.

We know we are saved by God's grace alone, through our faith in Jesus alone. There is nothing we are or can do to commend ourselves to God. We will look at this more closely next time. But what Paul is saying in verses 4-6 is that if anyone had cause for placing confidence in their own credentials and achievements, it was him.

- by birth, he was a Jew, *of the people of Israel*;
- he had been born into the *tribe of Benjamin*, from whom Israel's first king was chosen.
- he was *circumcised on the eighth day* of his life, as the law prescribed.
- and he had been brought up to speak *Hebrew*, the language of the Old Testament, by his Hebrew-speaking parents.
- So his pedigree was perfect. But Paul added to this impeccable pedigree through his own life choices.
- As far as the Jewish law was concerned, he chose to be *a Pharisee*. He observed the Jewish regulations down to their last detail.
- His zeal for the truth, as he then saw it, led him to *persecute the church*.
- So as far as his religion was concerned, he was as good as anyone could be. *As far as legalistic righteousness is concerned, I was faultless*, he was able to boast.

But whatever *was* to my profit I *now* consider loss for the sake of Christ. Paul had come to realise that we cannot commend ourselves to God no matter how impeccable our credentials are - either by our birth, or by our upbringing, or by our life's choices. Our best is never good enough for God. And that's why as Christians we place no confidence in ourselves whatsoever as far as our acceptance by God is concerned. We owe everything to Jesus. And that's why our boast is of him alone.

"Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom, said God through his servant Jeremiah, nor the strong man boast of his strength nor the rich man boast of his riches; but let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me," declares the LORD (Jer 9.23f).