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# Getting Our Stories Straight: A Meditative Reading of Philippians 3:2-11

By Robert F. Hull, Jr.

**S**tories. We cannot get along without stories. Not far from where I live, thousands of people gather every October at the National Storytelling Festival for the sole purpose of hearing and telling stories—old, traditional stories such as “Jack Tales,” and newly minted monologues, Garrison Keillor-like. It may seem odd that, in an age so driven by science and technology, the telling of stories could have again taken center stage and that biblical studies, preaching, and even philosophy have discovered—or rediscovered—narrative. The fact is, stories are central to the way we construe the world and our relationship to it, to other people, to ourselves, and to God. We lead storied lives, and it is crucially important what kinds of stories we tell—and what kinds of stories we hear. Many of the most powerful cultural influences we know operate on us through stories—not just the explicit plots of movies, books, and television shows, but, more subtly, the implicit stories of the lavish and expensive advertisements that place us on tropical islands, in seductive boudoirs, or in expensive automobiles. “This *could be* the story of your life,” they tell us.

What are the stories that make up the stories of our lives? How many other stories do we have to tell in order to tell our own stories? How do our present experiences, decisions, and commitments call us to revise the stories of our past? What are the stories we are not ashamed to commend to the world as the truest truth about ourselves—

the *real* stories of ourselves? How can we be sure, when we are telling about ourselves, that we have our stories straight?

These are some of the questions that have been forced upon me by a re-reading of Philippians, for this letter contains one of the three most important “autobiographical” passages in Paul’s letters (Gal 1:11–2:21; 2 Cor 11:21–12:10; Phil 3:4–14). I have called the following a “meditative reading,” because it is not a technical exegetical study nor a theological exposition nor a sermon, although there are elements of all these within it. Instead, it is an attempt to wrestle with a text that is somehow supposed to be part of the story of my life and of yours. It begins from the premise that Philippians 1:27 provides a kind of straight-edge by which to judge the stories we tell, for the challenge of Paul to his readers is that the stories they tell by the manner of their living are to be “worthy of the gospel of Christ.” (All translations are mine.)

**L**ook out for the dogs! Look out for the doers of bad deeds! Look out for the mutilators! (Phil 3:2). But first there are the dogs to deal with. In order to live a life worthy of the gospel, we first have to be able to say what the gospel is. Although Paul always clearly lays before his hearers the Jesus story (See Phil 2:5–11), he seldom has his listeners all to himself. Wherever he goes he is hounded by “false brothers” (Gal 2:4) telling a very

different version of the gospel than the one Paul has received. If we are going to talk about life-and-death issues, we may not have time for polite debate; when we use the word “dogs” to characterize our opponents, we have gone beyond the polite. There are two competing stories about how to “live a life worthy of the gospel of Christ.” One story says that it is important for the followers of Christ, both Jews and Gentiles (some would say “Gentile dogs”), to adhere to all the good things the Law, the Torah, prescribed—especially the dietary laws and Sabbath requirements. It is especially important for men to bear in their bodies the physical mark of the covenant people of God, circumcision. When all these things are in place, Gentile believers are fit to stand alongside Jewish believers in the service of a holy God. The tellers of this version (loosely called “Judaizers”) say, in effect, “Let us be the models you follow.” But Paul has heard, has become part of, a story so different and so powerful that it has given him a new vocabulary to talk about God, about the covenant, about doing good, and even about himself.

If labels count (and they seem always to make their way into arguments), then we have to switch some around: Gentiles aren’t the “dogs”; the “perverters of the gospel” (Gal 1:7) are. In insisting on obedience to the Torah, they are not doing good deeds, but bad ones! In demanding circumcision for Gentile Christians, they are not bestowing on them a mark of identification with the holy people, but instead are just mutilating them (Gal 5:12)! In fact, “*We are the circumcision, namely those who serve by the Spirit of God and boast in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh*” (Phil 3:3). It’s all right to include Gentiles in the story of Israel, as long as we redefine the terms in light of the story of Jesus. In the new version, “we,” both Jew and Gentile alike, “*are the circumcision*” (because our *hearts* have been circumcised—Deut 30:6). We do not worry about whether we are fit to present ourselves for service to God at the temple as properly circumcised males; it is the Spirit of God that marks us for service. The “opponents” (Phil 1:28) want to draw us into another story, one that talks about circumcision and boasting and having confidence in the flesh. But we refuse to play that game. We just want to tell the story of Christ.

That is, if they’ll let us. Trouble is, someone is always trying to draw us into a boasting competition, aren’t they, Paul? (2 Cor 11:21–31). Paul never understands us better than when he tells us what he *could* boast about if he really wanted to! That is, *if* having the physical marks of the

covenant people and keeping the Torah *were* essential to being accepted by God, Paul could tell *that* story: “. . . *though I myself have confidence even in the flesh. If anyone else thinks to have confidence in the flesh, I have more*” (Phil 3:4). You want stories about how great it is to be a member of the covenant people? Fine; I can play that game (Phil 3:5–6): “*circumcised the eighth day*” (if circumcision confers any standing with God, I’ve got standing); “*of the people of Israel*” (if the people of Israel are the true people of God, I’ve been such since birth). Not impressed? Try this: “*of the tribe of Benjamin*” (the tribe of origin of Israel’s first king, and namesake of me, Saul of Tarsus); “*a Hebrew of Hebrews*” (not a proselyte or a son of a mixed marriage). Want more? What about stories of personal achievement? “*With respect to the law, a Pharisee*” (if Torah observance is important, I joined myself to a sect extremely zealous for the Torah); “*with respect to zeal, persecuting the church*” (indeed, so zealous for the Torah that I tried to destroy the church); “*with respect to righteousness in the law, faultless*” (scrupulous about the Sabbath, the food laws, ritual purity, the sacred calendar, all such matters as the “opponents” are so concerned about).

Why does this section so trouble me? Is it because I too can tumble to this game? We all have more than one way of giving account of ourselves. Jockeying for advantage? “Fourth generation preacher”; or, “When I was working on my Ph.D. at . . .”; or, “Church grew from 165 to 3,000 in ten years!” How can we know when it matters to tell one story rather than another about ourselves? Paul doesn’t shy away from the language of “profit and loss” or “advantage and disadvantage” in telling his story. He cannot and does not renounce his birth heritage and, in some situations, he gladly points to its advantages (Rom 3:1–2; 9:1–5; 11:1–2). But when it comes to the matter of how the Philippians can be in right relationship with God and “approve what is excellent” and be “filled with the fruit of righteousness through Jesus Christ” (Phil 1:10–11) and conduct their lives “in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ” (Phil 1:27), then a different story is called for. It is a matter of getting our stories straight. In fact, it is a matter of learning to tell the story of Christ.

*However, whatever things were to me a gain, I have come to consider a loss because of Christ* (Phil 3:7). So simply does Paul cross the great divide in his autobiography. Just eleven words (in Greek), and yet

## *The story of Paul in Christ is really the story of Christ in Paul.*

they mark a turning so consequential, so utterly transforming, that it has quite literally changed the course of history. It is as though the ledger of Paul's life, with its "profit" and "loss" columns, has had the headings transposed! It surely cannot be that the past does not matter anymore. It is not that his Jewish heritage, his upbringing, his years of hard study of Scripture do not mean anything anymore. It is just that his life has been caught up in a new story that judges all experiences and values by a new standard: not a system, nor a philosophy, nor even a religion, but a person—Jesus Christ. Eleven words and a full stop. It is our last place to breathe for a while. Paul won't stop again for seventy-nine words, words that rush out in such a torrent that they sweep us up in the same story. But then, that's what Paul intended.

*I*ndeed, I consider all things to be loss because of the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things, and consider them excrement [in the Greek, a vulgarity meaning either "excrement" or "street garbage"], in order that I might gain Christ (Phil 3:8). All things, Paul? Your birth, your status, your achievements? Your blameless adherence to Torah? Your Roman citizenship? Your education? It's one thing to say what you "consider to be loss," but quite another to say, "I have lost all things." Is this just a rhetorical flourish, Paul, or have you lost some friends? Do they talk about you in synagogue? Did your family disown you? How does it feel to be a nobody when you used to be a somebody, a student of the famous Gamaliel? How is it that "knowing God," a theme dear to the Old Testament (Hos 6:6; Jer 31:34), has been translated into "knowing Christ"? And how could you have come to know him as *Lord* (a term previously reserved for the one God of Israel) and to value that relationship so highly as to regard everything else as nothing but a pile of excrement in comparison?

Here we probe the margins of a story never fully told in any of Paul's letters, but narrated three times in the book of Acts (9:1–29; 22:3–21; 26:9–20). We may never be able to nail down the details of the "Damascus road" experi-

ence, but it is hard not to believe that something of Paul's understanding of God's grace grew out of that episode. If the risen Christ had spoken to Paul, then the church's claims that Jesus was alive were true. And if an executed man had been raised by God, then he must not have been cursed, as the crucified were assumed to be (Deut 21:23). And if Paul could be received by God by "calling on the name of the Lord" and having his sins washed away in the act of baptism (Acts 22:16), then the Torah could no longer be the key to a right relationship with God. Old things were passing away, and new things were happening (2 Cor 5:16–17). When did this dawning turn to day for Paul? How long was it before he realized that the "light of the knowledge of the glory of God" was shining "in the face of Christ"? (2 Cor 4:6). When did he realize that the "gain" of Christ outweighed the "loss" of everything else?

*A*nd be found in him, not having my own righteousness that comes from the law, but that which is through the faithfulness of Christ [or through faith in Christ], the righteousness from God on the basis of faith (Phil 3:9). Imperceptibly, the story of Paul the Pharisee is being transmuted into the story of Christ. Nothing looks the same any more. The law looks different now; it looks like a failed means to achieve status with God so as to be recognized as righteous. Circumcision looks like an attempt to "put confidence in the flesh." Who can appreciate what an immense labor of thought enabled such a reappraisal of Torah? How often did Paul read and re-read cherished texts? How intense were his inner wrestlings, how anguished his questioning about the story of his life "B.C."? However it happened, Paul came to understand that to be "found in Christ" meant that his relationship with God had been secured by the faithful act of Jesus, "who humbled himself and became obedient to death, even death on a cross" (Phil 2:8). Confidence (faith, trust) in Christ replaced "confidence in the flesh" as a means of being made acceptable to God.

Is this what Paul means by "knowing Christ Jesus my Lord" (Phil 3:8)? Yes, but far more than this: "*to know him and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of*

*his sufferings.*” We go deeper down and farther in. The story of Paul in Christ is really the story of Christ in Paul. Why is it that chapter 3 begins to look like chapter 2 all over again? Or is that just the point?—that the Philippians need to hear “the old, old story” again, because there is a competing story at work in the community, a story producing “selfishness” and “conceit” (Phil 2:3), a story told by the “enemies of the cross of Christ” (Phil 3:18)? And why do you and I need to hear this same old story over and over again? Is it because it is inconceivable that our “manner of life” could possibly “be worthy of the gospel of Christ” (Phil 1:27) if there is no cross in that life? If we follow Paul down this road, we do so with fear and trembling. “The power of his resurrection” is the greatest of good news. If Jesus has been raised from the dead, then the beginning of the end has already come, when *all* the faithful will be raised by God. But the end is not yet, and meanwhile the faithful are being abused for their faith. Could it be that all such suffering for the faith is really taking a share of the sufferings of Christ? This is not a rare or random idea in Paul. Oh, no! It goes to the very heart of his understanding of the nature of Christian discipleship; that is, it is a very ordinary thing for very ordinary followers of Christ to share in the sufferings of Christ (1 Thess 1:6; 2 Cor 1:5; 4:7–18; Rom 8:17). But what transcends human understanding is the conviction that such suffering is to be regarded as a grace God bestows upon the faithful: “To you it has been *granted [echaristhe, “freely given”]* for the sake of Christ not only to believe in him but also to suffer for his sake” (Phil 1:29).

**B**eing conformed to his death” (Phil 3:10). This is the “hammer that breaks the rock in pieces” (Jer 23:29), that shatters all illusions about following Jesus. “*This way of thinking have among yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus*” (Phil 2:5). He had a *form* (like God) but took another *form* (a slave) and, *being found* in human likeness, was obedient to death (Phil 2:7–8). All by way of reminder that this is the only story worth calling a “gospel.” It is the story of the complete and consistent obedience of Jesus to God the Father. It meant something like this: Whenever he came to a crossroads in his life where the alternatives were clearly laid out—this way is the will of God, but may be costly; this way is the way of self-protection, and is easy—whenever he came to such a crossroads (“Turn these stones into bread!” “Be our king!”), he always turned toward God. Eventually, this way led to the

cross. The intersection of Paul’s life with this story meant that he could be *found* in Christ, but only if he were willing to be *formed* anew, in fact, to be *conformed to his death*.

An intersection is a crossing. Not two stories, but three come together here: the story of Jesus, the story of Paul, and the story of the Philippians. My story makes it four. To be *conformed to his death* is to live a cruciform life. When we get our stories straight, they can be measured by the extent of our costly obedience to the will of the Father. That means, at the very least, such humble obedience to God that no self-seeking, ego-driven, status-oriented person can possibly be said to have a “manner of life worthy of the gospel of Christ” (Phil 1:27).

*If somehow I might attain to the resurrection from the dead” (Phil 3:11).* There is in this qualification no doubt about God. There is in it no doubt about the power of the resurrection already at work in Paul. The “if somehow” is a pointer to what comes in the next section of the letter (Phil 3:12–14). It means there is no triumphalism in following Jesus. It is a crosswalk that we are in. We do not get to the other side until we get to The Other Side: “Not that I have already obtained this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on” (Phil 3:12).

Do we?

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