

## Introduction

My question to you this morning is this: Are you completely sure of your salvation? Are you 100% certain that your sins are forgiven, and you're now in a right relationship with God? Are you utterly convinced that you're a true Christian, that on the day you die you'll be safe with the Lord, and later raised to eternal life?

Surely there's not a single person here who doesn't long for this kind of assurance? For without it our days are filled with doubt, fear and turmoil. We'd have to avoid the deep questions of life and instead retreat into worldly obsessions and addictions. We'd miss out on the wonderful peace and hope that the Bible promises can be ours. And so this is such a vitally important question: Are you completely sure of your salvation?

Well I'm here to tell you that we can be sure, 100%. But only if our confidence is rightly placed, only if that which we trust in can actually save us and make us right with God. And that's what Paul's talking about in this next part of his letter to the Philippians. For in these verses he speaks of 2 things.

On the one hand he provides an incredibly serious warning about those who put their confidence in the wrong place. And on the other hand he provides beautiful words of encouragement to those who put their confidence in the right place. As he says in verse 1, they can "Rejoice in the Lord!", they can find Deeper Joy. For as he concludes in verse 11, they are those who can ultimately attain "to the resurrection from the dead."

## Warning to those who put Confidence in the Flesh

So we begin with the warning. In verse 2 Paul writes, "Watch out for those dogs, those evildoers, those mutilators of the flesh." So who's he talking about?

Well the term "dog" is a strong criticism, it's used to describe people you really don't like, who're upsetting you deeply. While it doesn't tell us who they were, it does reveal the intensity of Paul's feelings. Then the term "evildoers" is fairly obvious, it shows that these people were in the wrong, they're sinful. But what's not obvious in English is that the emphasis is on the word "doers". The problem lies specifically in their actions, their deeds. And then the term "mutilators of the flesh" tells us more. This grave warning is about sinful people who are somehow acting wrongly in relation to the physical body.

But then in verse 3 Paul explains further. For he contrasts himself and the Philippians with those he's criticising. And in so doing he reveals their identity. He says, "For it is we who are the circumcision, we who serve God by his Spirit, who boast in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh".

This tells us that the warning has something to do with "circumcision", that's what he means by "mutilators of the flesh". But that seems odd doesn't it? For circumcision was commanded by God as a beautiful sign of his covenant. So why would Paul refer to it as mutilation? Well it's because the group Paul warns about are the Judaizers. The Judaizers were a faction within the church, made up mostly of Jews. And while they didn't deny Jesus, they were teaching that if a Gentile, a non-Jew, wanted to be saved, then they had to follow the Levitical Laws, and in particular males had to be circumcised. Do you see what Paul's getting at? He calls them "mutilators of the flesh",

not because circumcision was wrong, but because they were insisting that it was essential for salvation, that the physical act could somehow make you right with God. In contrast Paul says “it is we who are the circumcision”, the real circumcision. He says, when it comes to salvation, real Christians don’t focus on the outward physical act. After all circumcision’s been superseded by baptism anyway. But real Christians focus on the inner reality, the circumcision of the heart by which true salvation is attained.

Then Paul adds, we “serve God by his Spirit”. The Judaizers depended on their own righteous works while true Christians depend on the work of the Holy Spirit within them. And he says we “boast in Christ Jesus”. The Judaizers gloried in their own achievements while true Christians glory only in what Jesus has achieved.

And then he sums it all up saying, it’s we “who put no confidence in the flesh”. And this really brings it all together. Who’s Paul warning the Philippians about, and warning us about? It’s those who put their confidence in the flesh. He warns of those who put their confidence in themselves, in who they are or what they’ve done or what they’re part of. They are the dogs, the evildoers, the mutilators of the flesh. Because they’re trusting, and teaching others to trust, that they can be saved by obeying the law, or by circumcision, or by other achievements of their own. They say these things can save us, compensate for our sin, make us acceptable to God and open heaven’s door.

But Paul then goes on to use himself as an example. He says if these jokers think you can be saved by your own achievements, well then I must be first in line. In verses 4-6 he says, “it is we ... who put no confidence in the flesh – though I myself have reasons for such confidence. If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.”

What an amazing list of credentials. Paul was top of the class when it came to having undergone the right rituals, and having the right ancestry, and being from the right family, and having the right passion for his culture, and living according to the right rules, and having the right level of zealous enthusiasm, and in fact doing absolutely everything right in a way that must surely please God. So if anyone could have confidence in the flesh, could trust in their own efforts to get right with God, could look to who they are and what they’ve done and what they’re part of in order to be saved, then surely it was Paul.

### Ways that People Today can put their Confidence in the Flesh

But before we go on, I wonder does Paul’s warning still have relevance today? Do we still need to watch out for those who put confidence in the flesh? Well yes we do! And I’d like to think about this on 5 different levels.

First let’s think of the Jews, and I’m talking here about non-Christian Jews. There are still many of them in the world today, about 15 million, with about 1% in Australia. A couple of months ago Peter Brassel invited me to dinner with a number of Jewish families who live right here in Launceston. We wore the kippah, we read the Torah, we participated in their customs. And they were absolutely lovely people, generous in hospitality, devout in belief, and sincere in living for God. But the tragedy is that just like the Judaizers they’re still putting their hope in circumcision, and law keeping, and their ancestry, and the rituals of their religion. They still putting their confidence in the flesh, and that’s what keeps them from the truth. There’s nothing wrong with their practices as such, but the

problem is they put their hope in these things instead of in the one to whom it all points. And so while we may find their traditions quite beautiful, especially with our knowledge of the Old Testament, we must remember that they're lost souls, because they believe they're righteous through the things they do.

Next I want think about the majority of this world who are not Jews or Christians, but hold to one of the plethora of man-made religions. It could be one of the big 3: Buddhism, Hinduism or Islam, or it could be one of the more obscure religions, of which there are estimated to be over 4,300. But do you realise that every one has 2 things in common? First, they all have some version of salvation. Some resemble salvation as we know it, while others are quite different. But one way or another they each have some kind of better life and better future on offer. But second, they all depend on human effort to achieve their version of salvation. I don't have time to go into detail but one way or another every single religion puts confidence in the flesh. And so we need to be warned ourselves, but we also need to warn others. These are not equally valid alternatives to Christianity, these are not just different paths to the same God. No, they are dangerous teachings that lead people away from truth.

Thirdly I want us to think about the growing number of people who claim to have no religion, the secularists, the agnostics, the atheists. Records suggest that they now account for over a billion people in the world today. These individuals claim to have no concept of, no interest in, and no need for salvation. For they say this life is all there is and when you're dead you're dead. But let me ask you a question. How many funerals for non-religious people have you attended or heard of or seen on TV, where it's proclaimed that the deceased is just dead and gone forever? Not many I'd say. For inevitably the mourners comfort themselves with the thought that their loved one is resting in peace, that they're in a better place, participating in their favourite activity like golf or fishing, or that they're looking down and caring for those left behind. As strange as it might sound, non-religious people still long for eternal life. And on what basis do they think their loved one is in that better place? Well it's because they were a good person, a top bloke, someone who never hurt others and was pretty close to perfect. And so as well their own version of eternity, they also have their own version of how it's attained. But it breaks my heart when people are told at a funeral that someone who never gave a thought to God is now in a better place, and all because they were a good person. It breaks my heart because it reinforces that false and dangerous idea and gives even more people confidence in the flesh.

So we've considered Judaism, other religions and those with no religion. But now we come closer to home and consider whether Paul's warning has relevance to the Church of today. Could there still be groups within the boundaries of Christianity who put their confidence in the flesh? Well sadly there are. In fact the biggest Christian denomination in the world, accounting for half of all Christians and over 1.3 billion people is the worst offender. Now I'm not saying this is the understanding of every Roman Catholic. And I'm not saying that Jesus plays no part in their theology either. But the reality is that the official teaching of the Roman Catholic church says that for a person to be ultimately saved, they must do certain things. Central to this is participation in their sacraments, including baptism, mass, confirmation, confession and last rites. Then there's prayers to Mary and the saints, indulgences, penance and eventually purgatory. And so this is a blatant confidence in the flesh.

But they're not the only ones. There are many churches and sects that claim that you need to be a member of their particular group in order to be saved. There are some who claim you need to speak in tongues or be baptised by full immersion in order to be saved. There are some who say you need to meet a certain standard of morality, or level of spirituality, or quota of evangelism, or

generosity of giving, or dedication to service in order to be saved. But whatever it looks like, Paul's message is the same. Watch out, watch out for those who promote a salvation based on who you are, or what you've done, or what you're part of. Watch out for those who rely on any form of confidence in the flesh.

### Ways that We can put our Confidence in the Flesh

But finally we need to look at ourselves. For we've seen just how common it is for people to misplace their trust, to seek their security in themselves and the things they do. But how arrogant we would be if we thought we couldn't fall into the same trap.

So we need to ask ourselves a simple question. When it comes to my own salvation, what am I relying on? Or to put it another way, if you died and stood before the Lord tonight, and he asked why he should let you enter his heaven, what would you say? Would you mention:

- your years of regular church attendance or the denomination you're part of?
- your baptism or profession of faith, your Christian parents or family?
- the amount of money you give or the number of hours you serve?
- your efforts to live a good and upright life, obeying his commands?
- your knowledge of the Bible and theology and doctrine?
- your passion in worship or your commitment to prayer and devotions?
- your superiority to others when it comes to morality, or spirituality?
- the number of people you taught or mentored or converted or disciplined?

If we were tempted to rely on any of these things, we'd be in deep trouble. And do you know why? It's because there's nothing about who we are or what we've done or what we're part of that can contribute even one iota to our salvation. Do you remember what Paul said in our text? After listing all of his impressive credentials, far more than yours and mine combined, do you remember what he said? Verses 7-8, "But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss", "What is more, I consider everything a loss", and then he says "I consider them garbage".

Friends, herein lies the reason for Paul's grave warning. It's human nature to depend on our own merit. We think we're from pretty good stock. We think we've lived a pretty good life. We've been part of the right group, participated in the right rituals, made all the right sacrifices. But Paul reminds us that whatever we think is to our profit is actually loss, for we're only tempted to rely upon it. He reminds us that even our very best efforts are garbage when compared to the perfect holiness of our God. It's not wrong to do these things, they're extremely important. But when it comes to gaining or deserving salvation, they're useless, more than useless, and will never satisfy the Lord. And that's why Paul warns us never to rely on them in any way, to never place our confidence in the flesh.

### Encouragement to those who put their Confidence in Christ

But where then should we place our confidence? Well Paul tells us very clearly. Listen to verses 7-11 as I read them in full. "But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, 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. I want to know Christ – yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection of the dead.”

What encouraging words! There’s a wrong way to seek salvation, but there’s also a right way, and that’s to put your confidence in the Lord Jesus Christ and in him alone. Paul doesn’t care about his own achievements, he has no interest in righteousness that comes from the law. But he cares about Christ, about the surpassing worth of knowing him, about gaining him and being found in him, about having a righteousness which is through faith in him. Paul says that far more important than having the right rituals, ancestry, family, culture, obedience, enthusiasm, or anything else is having a knowledge of and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

And that’s because it’s only in Christ that salvation can be found. It cannot be earned, it cannot be bought, it cannot be merited. But it can only ever be received as a gift of God’s grace, through faith. For he’s the one, the only one who lived a perfect life, not just on the surface, not just when people were looking, not just according to human standards, but a truly holy, righteous and blameless life in the sight of God. And he’s the only one who willingly went to the cross as a perfect sacrifice, unblemished by sin, and thus could take all our sins and failures upon himself.

And that’s why Paul wanted nothing else but to know Christ, to put his hope and trust and faith in him. For by so doing he could join to Christ’s sufferings, and join to Christ’s death, and thereby somehow, by the amazing grace of God, attain to the resurrection of the dead. And thus he put no confidence in the flesh but put his confidence in Christ alone.

## Conclusion

I asked at the beginning if you’re completely sure of your salvation, of your forgiveness, your right standing before God and eternal life? And I just really want you to know that we truly can have that assurance. But only if our confidence is rightly placed. If you in any way put your confidence in the flesh, in who you are, what you’ve done or what you’re part of, then I urge you to hear Paul’s warning. All who rely on themselves will perish.

But if you truly put your confidence in Christ, and him alone, then you will be saved. For Jesus is the way, the truth and the life and no one comes to the Father except through him. You know I just really want you to think about this today. If you’ve realised and confessed your own sinfulness and put your hope and trust in Jesus and his sacrifice on the cross, then you can have full assurance. You can be 100% certain that your sins are washed away, you’re adopted into God’s family, and your passage to heaven is guaranteed.

And if you know that, then you never need to doubt or fear. For you can experience that peace that passes all human understanding, that comfort that’s ours in life and in death, that deep hope in your heart that only God can provide. And as a result, as Paul said in his opening words, we can “rejoice in the Lord!” Do you truly want Deeper Joy in your life? Then stop that futile quest to be good enough, and put your Confidence in Christ. Amen.