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Paul’s Response to His Opponents

3: 4-11

Paul’s response to his opponents DIG: What did it cost Paul to shift the basis of his confidence before ADONAI from his performance and status to Messiah’s grace? What did he gain? In what ways was he superior to the Judaizers? What are the surpassing benefits of knowing Messiah? Who can you share those with this week?

REFLECT: What human qualifications are diverting your trust from God these days: Good looks? Good works? Reputation? Religious traditions? Wealth? How do these attitudes block us from “gaining Messiah?” From allowing the Gospel to spread? From this passage, explain the way a person can be righteous in the sight of ADONAI?

Paul’s past: the accountant, “I have counted” showing new values.

As John MacArthur relates in his commentary on *Philippians*, **Paul’s** autobiographical passage introduces the most dramatic and compelling salvation testimony in the B’rit Chadashah, that of **the apostle Paul**. It is also one of the most significant statements of the doctrine of salvation in the Bible, revealing the internal work of **ADONAI** in a truly repentant and believing sinner. **The apostle** relates what was going on in **his** mind when **he** met the risen **Messiah on the Damascus Road** (see the commentary on **Acts, to see link click Bc - Sha’ul Turns from Murder to the Messiah**). But since **Luke’s** account doesn’t reveal the transformation of **Paul’s** thinking, here, **the apostle himself** provides those details of **the Ruach’s** work in **his** heart.

Having unmasked **the Judaizers** in **3:2** (see **Galatians Ag - Who Were the Judaizers**) and defined believers as **the true circumcision** in **3:3** (see **Bg - Paul’s Opponents**), **Paul** anticipates **the Judaizers’** response. **They** would certainly argue that **the Philippians** did not understand the rich heritage of **Judaism**. But the same couldn’t be true of **the apostle**. **His Jewish** credentials were impeccable, easily equaling or surpassing those of **the Judaizers**. **He** knew

first-hand all that **Judaism** had to offer. Describing **his** life before **his** conversion, **Paul** wrote: **I was advancing in Judaism far beyond many of my contemporaries among my countrymen, being more extremely zealous for my ancestral traditions (Gal 1:14)**. Today we say, “been there . . . done that.”

If anyone could have achieved salvation by self-effort, it would have been **Paul**. **His** impressive credentials enabled **him** to declare: **Even though I certainly have grounds for putting confidence in [human qualifications], if anyone else thinks he has grounds for [them], I have better grounds (3:4 CJB)**. **Paul** didn't make that seemingly prideful statement to boost **his** ego, or to claim spiritual superiority over others. **He** understood the foolishness of boasting, and did so only for the sake of argument. So, as **he** did in the situation in **Corinth** (see the commentary on **Second Corinthians Ca - Foolish Boasting**), **Paul** sets forth **his** own credentials to counter **his** opponents' foolish arguments.

Religious credits that do not impress God (3:5-6): Paul counted seven things that **he** once put in **his** spiritual **profit** column, but now places them in **his** **loss** column (**3:7**). When **he** understood the Gospel of **Messiah**, **he** realized that all of these credentials, achievements, privileges, and rights were worthless. **The apostle** isn't saying that **they** are of no social, cultural, educational, or historical value. Instead, **he's** saying that **they** are of no value as far as salvation goes, and could not save **him** or anyone else.

1. Salvation is not by ritual: Circumcised on the eighth day (3:5a CJB). **Paul** begins with **circumcision** because that was the major issue for **the Judaizers (Acts 15:1 and Galatians 6:12-13)**. **The apostle** went through the defining rite of **Judaism (Genesis 17:10-12 and Leviticus 12:3)** when **he** was **circumcised on the eighth day** after **his** birth.¹³² **ADONAI** originally designated **circumcision** as the sign of **His Covenant** with **Abraham** (see the commentary on **Genesis En - Every Male Who Is Eight Days Old Must be Circumcised**). Although other cultures around **Abraham** practiced **circumcision**,¹³³ within the context of **God's** relationship with **Abraham** and **his descendants**, **circumcision** was to be the tangible demonstration of one belonging to the covenant community. The nature of **circumcision** was intimately connected with the nature of **God's** promise to **Abraham** . . . **offspring**. By making the human organ through which the promise of **offspring** would be fulfilled, **YHVH** reminded **His people** of **His covenant** with **Abraham**.¹³⁴ Yet, **Paul** included **circumcision**, the most essential rite in

Judaism, in **his** spiritual **loss** column. Salvation does not come by any ritual ceremony, whether **Jewish circumcision**, the Roman Catholic mass, infant or adult baptism, or the Protestant observance of **the Lord’s Supper**.

2. Salvation is not by race: By birth belonging to the people of Isra’el (3:5b CJB). In this designation, the emphasis rests on **Paul’s** inclusion within the line of **God’s people**. **The apostle** inherited all the blessings of being a part of **the covenant nation**. Writing to the church in Rome, **Paul** described some of those blessings. **What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision? Yes, there are great benefits! First of all, the Jews were entrusted with the whole revelation of God (Roman 3:1-2).** Nevertheless, mere ethnic descent doesn’t make one a recipient of **the covenant** promises made to **Isra’el**. Receiving the inheritance is based on **faith** in the promises of **ADONAI**. What defines true **Isra’el** is not ethnicity, but **faith** in **the Messiah**; as such, even the Gentiles who believe are grafted into **the people of God** (see the commentary on **Dani’el Dx - The Mystery of the Olive Tree**), **even the Isra’el of God (Galatians 6:16c)**. Having said that, it must be clear that **Paul** is emphasizing **his** physical roots from **the people of Isra’el**. **He** continues to play on the words used by **his opponents, the Judaizers**, and on the ground rules **they** have laid out. **The apostle** claims that **he** measures up every bit as much as **they** do. A modern equivalent could be those who put their confidence in being a descendant of a family with numerous pastors and missionaries as grounds for their standing with **God**.¹³⁵ However, racial heritage, like **circumcision**, is unable to save anyone; no standing with **ADONAI** is **gained** except through **faith**.

3. Salvation is not by rank: From the tribe of Benjamin (3:5c CJB). Now **Paul** narrows the focus even further by identifying the tribe of **his** descent. **The tribe of Benjamin** was one of the most prominent **tribes** in **Isra’el**. **He** was the younger of the two sons born to Jacob’s favorite wife, Rachael, who died in childbirth (**Genesis 35:16-21**). Thinking that his favorite son, Joseph, was dead, **Benjamin** took his place in Jacob’s affections. **He** was also the last of Jacob’s sons to be born, and the only one born in the Promised Land. **Sha’ul, Isra’el’s first king**, was a member of **the tribe of Benjamin** (see the commentary on **the Life of King Sha’ul Bv - Behold, Your King**). When the Promised Land was divided among the twelve tribes, **Jerusalem** was included in **Benjamin’s** territory (**Judges 1:21**). When the United Kingdom split after

Solomon's death, only **Benjamin** and **Judah** remained loyal to the Davidic dynasty. The great leader **Mordecai**, used by **ADONAI** along with **Esther** to save **the Jews** from genocide, was also from **the tribe of Benjamin (Esther 2:5)**. As a result, **the tribe of Benjamin** was one of the most noble in **Isra'el**. By **Paul's** day, many **Jews** no longer knew what tribe **they** belonged to. Intermarriage during the years of exile (see the commentary on [Jeremiah Gu - Seventy Years of Imperial Babylonian Rule](#)) had blurred the **tribal** lines. But **Paul's** family line had remained pure **Benjamite's**. That, again, elevated **him** above some of **the Judaizers**, who probably didn't know **their** tribal descent. But **Paul's** privileged status as a **Benjaminite** did not impress our **Lord** because family status has nothing to do with salvation.

4. Salvation is not by tradition: **Paul** did not personally contribute anything to earn the first three privileges on **his** list, but inherited them from **his** parents. However, the last four are things that he achieved by **himself**. **The apostle's** claim to be a **Hebrew of Hebrews (3:5d NIV)** is best understood as a declaration that as **he** grew to manhood, **Paul** strictly maintained **his** family's traditional heritage. **He** was born in Tarsus, a city in Asia Minor, not in **Isra'el**. But unlike many **Jews** in the Diaspora (dispersion), **Paul** remained firmly committed to the **Hebrew** language (**Acts 21:40**), orthodox traditions, and customs of **his** ancestors. In other words, **he** did not become a Hellenized **Jew (Acts 6:1 and 9:29)**, one who had been assimilated into the Greco-Roman culture. Instead, **he** left Tarsus for **Jerusalem** to be **trained at the feet of** the famous **rabbi Gamaliel in every detail of the Torah of his forefathers (Acts 22:3 and 26:4)**. So tightly did **Paul** cling to **his Jewish** heritage that **he** could confidently declare: **So then, all Jews know my manner of life from my youth up, which, from the beginning was spent among my own nation and at Jerusalem (Acts 26:4)**. So, by every measure possible, **Paul** asserted that **his** identity as a **Jew** was second to none. Yet, after **he** saw the glory of **the Messiah**, **his zeal** for tradition became merely one more item that was transferred from the **gain** to the **loss** column.¹³⁶

5. Salvation is not by religion: In regard to the Torah, a Pharisee (**3:5e CJB**). **Paul** pursued **his Jewish heritage** to the extreme. **He** was so **zealous** for **the Torah** that **he** became a **Pharisee (Acts 26:5)**. To the Sanhedrin (see the commentary on [The Life of Christ Lg - The Great Sanhedrin](#)) **Paul** declared: **Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees (Acts 23:6)**.

Because the term **Pharisee** has taken on a life of its own today, it is important that we try to describe what that term meant during **Paul’s** day. Despite **their** frequent appearance in the Gospels, **the Pharisees** were actually a very small percentage of the Jewish population. The vast majority of **Jews** were unaffiliated with any of the main sects of **Judaism**; they were simply **the people of the Land**. Yet, despite this, **the Pharisees** were, for the most part, held in reasonably high regard by the general population because of **their** scrupulous devotion to both the 613 commandments of the **Torah** and to **the Oral Law** (see **The Life of Christ Ei – The Oral Law**). So when **Paul** identified **himself** as a **Pharisee**, **he** was marking **himself** off as one of the spiritual elites of **Judaism**. For many today, denominational or theological affiliation takes on such importance that it overshadows a person’s fundamental identity as a follower of **Yeshua**. While there is a legitimate place for denominational and theological affiliations in a fallen world, danger lurks when more importance is placed on being Baptist, Presbyterian, reformed, dispensational, charismatic, or something other than being a believer.¹³⁷ **Paul’s** cherished status as a **Pharisee** was but one more item in **his** spiritual **loss** column. Merely being a priest, theological scholar, or member of a devout sect can get you to heaven.

6. Salvation is not by zeal: As further evidence of **his** zeal, **Paul** confessed that **he** had been a **persecutor of the Messianic Community (Philippians 3:6a CJB; Acts 7:58, 8:1-3, 9:1-2 and 13-14; 1 Cor 15:9; Galatians 1:13 and 23; 1 Timothy 1:12-15)**. The **Jews** viewed **zeal** as the supreme religious virtue. It is a two-sided coin; one side is love, the other is hate. To be **zealous** is to love **God** and hate what offends **Him**. **Paul’s** **zealous**, but misguided, love for **ADONAI** caused **him** to hate and persecute **the Messianic community**. After **Stephen’s** martyrdom (see **Acts Ax – The Stoning of Stephen**), **Paul** set out to destroy the **Messianic Community** – entering house after house, he dragged off both men and women and handed them over to be put in prison (**Acts 8:3**). His persecution was so devastatingly effective that the **Messianic** believers in **Jerusalem** who were **preaching the Good News were scattered (Acts 8:4)**. Later, **Paul** still breathing threats and murder against the followers of **Messiah**, went to the high priest and asked for letters from him to the synagogues at **Damascus**, so that if he found any belonging to the **Way**, both men and women, he might bring them bound to **Jerusalem (Acts 9:1-2)**. His persecution was so violent that after **Paul’s** conversion **all**

those hearing him continued to be amazed, and were saying, “Is this not he who in Jerusalem destroyed those who call on [the name of the Lord], and who had come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the Great Sanhedrin (Acts 9:21)? In his defense before Agrippa, Paul was very open about his past (see [Acts Cy - Paul's Witness before Agrippa](#)).

The shame of what he had done stayed with Paul for the rest of his life. In First Corinthians 15:9 he said: For I am the least of the apostles, and not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the Messianic Community of God. To the Galatians he wrote: For you have heard of my former manner of life in Judaism, how I used to persecute the Messianic Community beyond measure and tried to destroy it (Galatians 1:13). And late in his life he confessed to Timothy, “I was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor. Yet, I was shown mercy because I acted ignorantly in unbelief” (First Timothy 1:13).

In terms of zeal, Paul outdid the Judaizers. They only proselytized the Messianic Community; he had persecuted it! His zeal for ADONAI led him to relentlessly, unsparingly, and mercilessly try to stamp out all those who counted Yeshua as their Lord and Savior. Paul was sincere . . . but sincerely wrong! The world is full of people who, like him, are sincere in their religious beliefs. They will make any effort, pay any price, and sacrifice anything in their attempts to please their god. They may pray, fast, live in poverty, abuse themselves, or seek to do good works. But religious zeal guarantees nothing; absolutely nothing. When Paul faced the reality of the risen Messiah, the zealous persecutor of the Messianic Community realized that his misguided zeal was a spiritual killer, and belonged in the spiritual loss column.

7. Salvation is not by legalism: Before his conversion, Paul outwardly conformed to the righteousness demanded by Pharisaic legalism. Those who observed his life would have found his behavior as blameless, which was far more than the Judaizers were (3:6 CJB). He was not blameless, of course (Romans 7:7-11), denying that he was a sinner. But by all outward appearances, Paul was a model Jew who lived by Jewish mitzvot. He was not, however, like Zacharias and Elizabeth who were both righteous before God, observing all the mitzvot and ordinances of ADONAI

blamelessly (Luke 1:6).

Paul seemingly had it all. **He** had undergone the proper rituals, **he** was a member of **God's chosen people**, **he** was from a favored tribe in **Isra'el**, **he** had scrupulously maintained **his** orthodox heritage, **he** was one of the most devout **legalists** in **Judaism**, **he** was **zealous** to the point of murdering Messianic believers, and **he** rigidly conformed to the outward requirements of **Judaism**. **He** seemingly checked all the right boxes. Yet once **he** saw the reality of grace through **faith** in **Yeshua Messiah**, **he** realized the uselessness of Pharisaic **legalism** for salvation and put it in the **loss** column. False religion deceives the mind, and consequently, damns the soul.¹³⁸



Surpassing benefits of knowing Messiah (3:7-11). Using financial language, **Paul counted** seven things that **he** once put in **his** spiritual **profit** column, but now places them in **his loss** column. **The apostle** now **counted five things** that **he** had **gained**. **But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Messiah (3:7 NASB).** **Paul** now carefully crafts the account of **his** transformation to convince **his** readers that **his** choice to renounce **his** confidence in the flesh is the choice **they** too must make in order to know **the Messiah** and **be conformed into His likeness (Romans 12:2 and First Peter 1:14).** Although **Paul's** account reveals **his** personal passion, it also offers a practical way for us to become **like Messiah**. Those of us who follow **Paul**, need to empty ourselves of the religious credits that don't impress **God** and hold on to the benefits of knowing **Messiah: knowledge, righteousness, power, fellowship, and glory.**

This section is one of the most well-known in **Philippians**, and it is easy to see why. The call to treasure **the Master** above all things resonates deep within the soul of every believer. But **knowing the Messiah** through **faith** involves more than mere intellectual ascent (see the commentary on **Hebrews A** - **How Shall We Escape If We Ignore So Great a Salvation**). It means experiencing the power of **Yeshua's** resurrection and the fellowship of **His** sufferings *now* as we await **His** return (see the commentary on **Isaiah Kg** - **The Second Coming of Jesus Christ to Bozrah**). In the meantime, we press on towards that day, **forgetting what lies behind and straining forward toward what lies ahead (3:13)**.¹³⁹

Knowledge: More than that, emphasizes the contrast between the religious credits that do not impress **ADONAI** and the incalculable benefits of **knowing Him**. **Paul** declares: **I count** the religious credits of **verses 5 and 6 to be loss in view of the surpassing value** (more than mere intellectual ascent) **of knowing Messiah Yeshua my Lord**, sovereign **King** over all creation. The verb translated **I have counted** in **verse 7** is in the perfect tense, *indicating a completed action with continuing results in the present*. That same verb translated **I count** here is in the present tense. That indicates the good works that **Paul** had **counted** on to earn **God's** favor, and any that **he** might do in the present or future, are all but **loss**. **For whom I have suffered the loss of all things** which **he** might have sought to earn salvation apart from **Messiah**, and **count them as mere rubbish, so that I may gain Messiah and be found in Him (3:8-9a NASB)**.¹⁴⁰

As F. B. Meyer relates in his commentary *The Epistle to the Philippians*, we may know **Him** personally face to face. **Christ** does not live back in the centuries, not amid the clouds of heaven: **He** is near us, with us, even when we lay down, and acquainted with all our ways. But we cannot know **Him** in this mortal life except through the illumination of **the Spirit of God** . . . and we must know **Christ**, not as a stranger who turns to visit of the night, or as the exalted king of men – there must be an inner **knowledge** as of those whom **He** counts as familiar friends, whom **He** trusts with **His** secrets, who breaks bread with **Him**.

To know **Christ** in the storm of battle; to know **Him in the valley of the shadow of death**; to know **Him** when the sun shines on our faces, or when we are darkened with disappointment and sorrow; to know the sweetness of **His** dealing with the brokenhearted; to know the tenderness of **His** sympathy and the strength of **His right hand** – all this involves the many different experiences on our part, but each of them, like the many facets of a diamond, will reflect the beauty of **His** glory from

every angle.¹⁴¹

Righteousness: Not having any righteousness of my own based upon legalism, but having the righteousness which comes through faith in Messiah – the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of trusting in Him alone (3:9b CJB). As a result of his Damascus Road conversion, Paul realized that **legalistic righteousness** could not save him (see the commentary on [Romans Bz](#) – [Application to Believers in Yeshua](#)). **Righteousness** is our right standing with **ADONAI** and acceptance by **Him**. Repentant sinners have all of **Messiah's righteousness** transferred to their spiritual bank account (the theological word is imputed), becoming just as **righteous** as **He** is, minus **His** deity. In **Second Corinthians 5:21**, Paul declared that **God made [Messiah] who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him**. Paul gladly shed the threadbare robe of his own **righteousness** and stretched out his empty hands to receive the glorious robe of **God's righteousness in Messiah (3:9b)**. This doctrine is the core of the Gospel. On the cross, **ADONAI** judged **Yeshua** as if **He** had personally committed every sin ever committed by every person who ever truly believed. But when a sinner embraces **Yeshua** as **Lord** and trusts only in **His** sacrifice for sin, **God** treats that sinner as if he or she lived **Messiah's** sinless life (**Isaiah 53:2** and **First Peter 2:24**).

Power: Paul had already mentioned the deep, experiential **knowledge** of **Yeshua Messiah** that comes through salvation (**3:8**). Nevertheless, the cry of his heart was **that I may know Him**. That initial saving **knowledge** of the **Master** became the basis of **Paul's** lifelong pursuit of an even deeper **knowledge** of his **Savior**; **that is, to know the power of His resurrection (3:10a NASB)**. He knew there was no **power** in Pharisaic **legalism**. He also knew there was no **power** in his flesh to overcome sin or to serve **ADONAI (Romans 7:18)**. But because he knew the **Messiah** and had **His righteousness** imputed to him, Paul had been given the **Ruach Ha'Kodesh** and the same spiritual **power** that **raised Yeshua from the dead**. We were therefore buried with Him through baptism into death in order that, just as Messiah was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his (**Romans 6:4-5**).

Fellowship: The fourth benefit that salvation brought Paul was **fellowship**. The apostle speaks specifically here of **His sufferings**. As he had just noted, Paul was

conformed to His death at salvation (**3:10b NASB**). But **he** has something else in mind here, a deep partnership and communion with **Messiah** in **suffering**. When **he** met **Messiah**, **Paul gained** a companion to be with **him** in **his suffering**. One who endured far more intense persecution and **suffering** than anyone else who ever lived, all of it underserved.

The deepest moments of spiritual fellowship with the living **Messiah** are times of intense personal **suffering**. **Suffering** drives us to **Him**. **He** is our merciful **High Priest**, a **faithful** friend who feels our pain, and a sympathetic companion who faced all the trials and temptations that we have (**Hebrews 4:15**). Therefore, **He** is uniquely qualified to help us in our trials and **weaknesses**. This wonderful truth led **Paul** to exclaim: **That is why, for Messiah’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong (Second Corinthians 12:10).**

Glory: In order that I might experience the resurrection from the dead (**3:11 Greek**). The final and supreme benefit **Paul** obtained when **he** met **Messiah** was the guarantee of **his** future **resurrection** at **the rapture** (see the commentary on **Revelation By - The Rapture of the Church**), when **he** would share **Messiah’s glory**. What do we **gain** by our union with **Messiah**? **The knowledge** of **Messiah** in our identification with **Him**; **the righteousness** of **Messiah** transferred to our spiritual bank account in justification; the participation in **the sufferings of Messiah**, and the sharing of **His glory** in our **glorification** (see [Ax - Sanctification: Ultimate sanctification or glorification](#)). No wonder **Paul** gladly exchanged the religious credits in **his loss** column for the surpassing benefits of **knowing Messiah**.

Matthew 19 records another man who came to the same crossroads as **Paul** (see [The Life of Christ II - The Rich Young Ruler](#)). In reply to **his** question about how to obtain **eternal life**, **Yeshua** told **him** to obey **the Torah**. In response, **the young man said to Him, “All these things I have kept. What am I still lacking” (Matthew 19:20)?** He too had a spiritual **profit** column filled with self-effort, religious ritual, and works **righteousness**. But unlike **Paul**, **he counted** those things as **gain** and rejected **the Master**, whereas **Paul counted** them as **loss** and **gained** eternity with **Messiah**. Everyone stands at the same crossroads. People can cling to their religious credits and follow **the rich young ruler** thru **the broad gate** that leads to **eternal** destruction (see [The Life of Christ Dw - The Narrow and Wide Gates](#)). Or they can reject them in favor of the surpassing benefits of **knowing the Master**, and follow **Paul** thru **the narrow gate** that

leads to **eternal life** (see **The Life of Christ [Ms](#) - The Eternal Security of the Believer**).¹⁴²

*Dear heavenly **Father**, praise **You** for the relationship that I have with **You**. It is wonderful to know that I am loved by **You**. Your love is always gracious and steadfast. **Your steadfast love, O Lord, extends to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds (Psalms 36:5)**. No amount of works will ever be enough to allow someone to enter **Your** heaven. Thank **You** that **You** can see into the heart and look for **faith, trust** and **belief**. Not deeds, nor circumcision nor anything else when it comes to eligibility for someone to be able to enter into **Your holy** heaven. **Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness' (Matthew 7:21-23). But whoever did receive Him, those trusting in His name, to these He gave the right to become children of God (John 1:12). Thank You for abiding in me and preparing a place for me in heaven (John 14:23 and 3). In Messiah Yeshua's holy Name and the power His resurrection. Amen***