

mean “by the Spirit of God,” that is, the power, wisdom, and strength given by the indwelling Spirit of God, enabling the believer to serve others well. As the prophet brought the word of God to Zerubbabel:

Then he said to me, “This is the word of the LORD to Zerubbabel saying, ‘Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,’ says the LORD of hosts. (Zech 4:6)

...and glory in Messiah Yeshua – The Greek word (*καυχάομαι, kauxaomai*), translated by the NASB as “glory,” can also carry the sense of “boast.” To “glory” or “boast” in the Lord is to give Him credit for all that is good in our lives, including the sustaining power He gives to enable His children to persevere even through the difficult times encountered in this fallen world. Surely this ought to become the very goal of our lives, to glory in the goodness of Yeshua and to let others know of His greatness. We are thus reminded that “Messiah” means “the anointed One,” emphasizing His power and sovereign control, while “Yeshua” emphasizes that He is the One Who saves, both now and for eternity.

...and put no confidence in the flesh, – This is a fitting conclusion to the previous verses, for it summarizes what a life given over to the worship and praise of Yeshua should be. The life of the believer in Yeshua is not based upon one’s ethnic status nor one’s own privileges that such a status might afford a person in the worldly circles of man’s religions. But rather the life of a true believer in Yeshua is marked by knowing and living out the truth, confessing that “all that I am and all I hope to be is dependent upon God’s grace and promises.” For it is by His strength that we live and move, and have our being.

...for in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we also are His children.’ (Acts 17:28)

4 although I myself might have confidence even in the flesh. If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more:

Having stated in the previous verse that those who are true followers of Yeshua and who have been granted saving faith in Him, “put no confidence in the flesh,” Paul now uses his own Jewish pedigree to show that if “confidence in the flesh” (*ἐν σαρκὶ πεποιθότες*) was actually the means of gaining favor with God, then he would surely be one who

would qualify with top credentials. Thus we are to understand that by the phrase “confidence in the flesh” Paul is primarily referring to his own Jewish ethnicity along with his former life of diligence to be seen within the Jewish community as fully dedicated to Jewish law, culture, and customs.

It seems clear, then, that he is addressing the common thinking among religious Jews of his day, that “being a good Jew” was in fact the means by which a person gained on-going favor with God. For the person of Jewish ancestry, this meant living in accordance with established Jewish customs and halachah. For the non-Jew, this meant undergoing the rabbinically created proselyte ritual and adopting the halachah of the Jewish sect within which the proselyte was a member. Indeed, the very creation of a “ritual” by which a Gentile could gain “Jewish status” was based upon the notion that obtaining “Jewish status” was the very grounds upon which favor with God was obtained.

But in the previous verse, Paul has already stated that “we are the true circumcision,” and by using the plural “we,” he is referring to all who have come to faith in Yeshua, whether Jew or Gentile. This emphasizes that the true entrance into the eternal people of God was not by physical birth nor by a man-made ritual, but by being born again through faith in Yeshua and the redemptive work He has procured for all who believe in Him. Salvation by faith in God’s Messiah and His redemptive work is therefore the very basis of the Abrahamic covenant of promise: “in your seed all the nations of the earth will be blessed” (Gen 22:18).

...*I myself might have confidence even in the flesh.* – Addressing this common teaching among the Jewish teachers of his day, that sterling Jewish identity and practice were the means of gaining favor with God, Paul now offers to his readers his own pedigree as offering the highest credentials for acceptance by God. He even goes one step further and establishes the fact that if truly impeccable Jewish credentials and practice were the means of gaining God’s favor, then he himself held the key to unlock God’s acceptance.

He uses the word *πεποίθησις* (*pepoithēsis*) which is found only in the Pauline epistles in the Apostolic Scriptures (2Cor. 1:15; 3:4; 8:22; 10:2; Eph 3:12; Phil 3:4) and carries the sense of

a state of certainty about something, to the extent of placing reliance on it; assurance about an outcome, confidence.”¹

1 BDAG, “πεποίθησις,” p. 796.

...*If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more* – Here Paul will compare what was being taught by those who were teaching “Jewish identity” as the means of gaining favor with God with the scriptural teaching of acceptance by God through faith in His Messiah, Yeshua. But this in itself highlights the truth that genuine confidence in being accepted by God is surely a reality, for, as we shall see, after Paul describes his impeccable Jewish credentials and proclaims them to be insufficient, he goes on in the subsequent context to show that saving faith in Yeshua enables the believer to know with certainty that he or she is fully received by God and will be saved eternally by His almighty power.

It also emphasizes two more important truths. First, that no one will be able to satisfy God’s standard of righteousness through their own station in life nor through their own efforts at pleasing Him whether Jew or non-Jew. But secondly, Paul is not in any way diminishing the truth that God has chosen Israel as His chosen people and that He maintains His covenant promises to the nation of Israel. His primary point, however, is that Jewish identity does not procure eternal salvation for anyone. Indeed, only faith in God’s Messiah, Yeshua, procures right-standing before God and the promise of eternal life with Him. And Paul now presents his own sterling credentials as proof of this.

5–6 circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless.

There seems to be a clear structural pattern to the seven qualifications Paul lists. If we take “circumcision” as a primary element in the listing, then the remaining six are in two groups of three, each group ending with a climax.

of the nation of Israel
of the tribe of Benjamin
a Hebrew of Hebrews

as to the Law, a Pharisee
as to zeal, a persecutor of the church
as to righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless.

Thus, “Hebrew of Hebrews” and “found blameless” mark the “top rung” of “true Jewish identity.”

...circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, – The Torah makes it clear that a male child is to be circumcised on the eighth day.

Speak to the sons of Israel, saying: ‘When a woman gives birth and bears a male child, then she shall be unclean for seven days, as in the days of her menstruation she shall be unclean. On the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised. (Lev 12:2–3)

However, there is nothing in the Torah that teaches that if one is unable to circumcise a male child on the eighth day, that child will be cut off from his people. Indeed, during the wilderness wanderings, many of the Israelite males were not circumcised since to do so during a time of difficult traveling may have brought special hardships and even posed the possibility of the child dying. Therefore we read in Josh 5:1–9 of those males who were born during the forty years of the wilderness wanderings and who were circumcised before entering the promised Land and the Lord proclaimed to Joshua:

“Today I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you.”
So the name of that place is called Gilgal to this day. (Josh 5:9)

Yet in the Pseudepigraphic book of Jubilees, dated just prior to 100 BC,¹ we read:

And anyone who is born whose own flesh is not circumcised on the eighth day is not from the sons of the covenant which the Lord made for Abraham since (he is) from the children of destruction.²

It seems quite clear, then, that some in Paul’s day were teaching that failure to be circumcised on the eighth day meant that person has been cut off from the covenant people of Israel without any means to regain a covenant standing. Given this reality, Paul emphasizes his “eighth day” circumcision as fulfilling what a prevailing teaching in his day required.

...of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, – Paul does not use the Greek *λαός* (*laos*), “people,” i.e., “of the people of Israel,” for this would include proselytes in the minds of religious leaders. Rather Paul uses the Greek *γένος* (*genos*), “family, people group, ancestry” to emphasize

1 See Charlesworth, James H., editor. *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (Doubleday, 1985), 2.43.

2 *Ibid.*, 2:87.

his true “Jewishness” as a matter of his very birth and being.

Moreover, when he emphasizes “of the tribe of Benjamin,”¹ he is pointing to the fact that his ancestral heritage has been maintained throughout the millennia, for it is only as the family passed this information on from one generation to the next that it would have been known by Paul. Further, Benjamin was the only son of Jacob born in the holy land (Gen 35:16–18), which likewise may have emphasized an enduring and strong attachment to the Land.

...*a Hebrew of Hebrews* – This would seem to indicate that both his father and mother were bloodline Israelites. He was a “Hebrew, the son of Hebrew parents.” But this designation may also disclose the fact that Paul identified himself as coming from a family that avoided the assimilating influence of the Greco-roman culture and thus spoke Hebrew or Aramaic as their primary language. We know that when God encountered Paul on the Damascus road, He spoke to him in Hebrew or Aramaic.

And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew dialect (Εβραϊδι διαλέκτω), ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.’ (Acts 26:14)

Likewise, we see Paul twice addressing a hostile Jerusalem crowd impromptu in Hebrew or Aramaic (Acts 21:40; 22:2). Thus, even his “mother-tongue” gave proof that he had not assimilated to the Greco-roman culture in which he lived but remained in every way an “Israelite.”

...*as to the Law, a Pharisee* – The party of the Pharisees were known for their “keeping the law” in even the most minute detail. According to F. F. Bruce, the Pharisees were the spiritual heirs of the Hasidaeans.

The Pharisees, who first appear in history late in the second century B.C., seem to have been the spiritual heirs of the Hasidaeans or pious groups who played a noble part in defense of their ancestral religion when Antiochus Epiphanes (175–164 B.C.) set himself to abolish it (cf. 1 Macc. 2:42; 7:14; 2 Macc. 14:6).²

Moreover, the Pharisees were known for separating themselves from anything that would convey ethical or ceremonial impurity. And

1 Cf. Rom 11:1.

2 F. F. Bruce, *Philippians* in *UTB Commentary* (Baker, 2000), p. 109.

according to Luke, Paul was trained under Gamaliel, the leading Pharisee of his day. He records Paul as stating:

I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated under Gamaliel, strictly according to the law of our fathers, being zealous for God just as you all are today. (Acts 22:3)

... *as to zeal, a persecutor of the church* – In persecuting the “people of the way,” those who had confessed Yeshua to be the true Messiah, the Son of God, the eternal One incarnate in human flesh, Paul had shown himself to be extremely zealous for the Pharisaic traditions by leading the charge against the believers in Yeshua with the hopes of destroying the sect altogether. In Galatians he describes the measure of his zeal in persecuting the believers:

For you have heard of my former manner of life in Judaism, how I used to persecute the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it; and I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my countrymen, being more extremely zealous for my ancestral traditions. (Gal 1:13–14)

Thus, no one could question his previous life of zeal for that which gave definition to the Pharisees, who believed that their fidelity to Jewish traditions and laws secured their rightful place before God and guaranteed His blessings upon them.

...*as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless.* – Here we see Paul using the language he would have used before coming to faith in Yeshua, for he is recalling his perspective with regard to the “law” at that time. We could therefore understand his words this way: “as to legalistic righteousness, I was known for being faultless.” In the following verses, Paul makes it clear that what he formerly considered to be the means by which a person stands righteous in God’s eyes he now repudiates. But here in our text, he is listing all of the important things that would have qualified him as “righteous” in the eyes of the most zealous Pharisees.

His point is obvious: If anyone could have expected to be received by God as righteous on the basis of religious observance and compliance, Paul would have been that person. Clearly his ultimate point will be that if he would be dismissed by the Almighty as unworthy to be called “righteous,” surely no one would be able to claim “right standing

with God” on the basis of their religious acumen and fervor.

7 But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Messiah.

One could imagine, after hearing the full description of Paul’s zeal and commitment to his former religious commitment, that he might still be somewhat proud of his past diligence and religious observance to Pharisaic requirements. But such a notion is swept away by his words in our verse.

But whatever things were gain to me – Before God’s grace descends upon one He has chosen for Himself, all manner of things which feed the sinful nature and pride are valued and sought after. This is especially true in those instances where humanly focused “religion” is that for which a person strives. Paul was considered a “model Pharisee” and one that others would seek to emulate. From the perspective of fallen humanity, Paul would have been lauded by his peers for his advancements in their religion, and he no doubt prided himself on having attained such a high position in the eyes of others.

But when God grants the gift of faith, He opens the eyes of our understanding to know what pleases Him and what is contrary to His grace, mercy, and holiness. Thus Paul solemnly confesses that what had been the very basis of his own pride he now recognizes to be of no value, and even worse, of that which had kept him from seeing the truth about Yeshua as the Son of God, the Messiah, sent by the Father to procure eternal redemption for all who have been given to Him. In this Paul recognized that all those things which he considered to increase his value in God’s eyes were, in fact, keeping him from the truth of God and were actually scorning the very One he thought he was serving.

Calvin notes that when a person believes their own “righteousness” is sufficient to be pleasing to God, this blinds the person to the truth of the gospel which proclaims an imputed righteousness on the basis of faith in Yeshua.

Those things, accordingly, which had been gain to Paul when he was as yet blind, or rather had imposed upon him under an appearance of gain, he acknowledges to have been loss to him, when he has been enlightened. Why loss? Because they were hindrances in the way of his coming to Christ. What is more hurtful than anything that keeps us back from drawing near to Christ? Now he speaks chiefly of his own righteousness, for we are not received by Christ, except as naked and

emptied of our own righteousness. Paul, accordingly, acknowledges that nothing was so injurious to him as his own righteousness, inasmuch as he was by means of it shut out from Christ.¹

1 Calvin, *Philippians*, pp. 93-94.