

V. Philippians: *Rejoicing in the Advancement of the Gospel*
“Knowing Christ”
Philippians 3:1–11
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The Scripture reading comes from Philippians 3. This is God’s Word. Philippians 3:1-11 says [1] *Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you.*

[2] *Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh.* [3] *For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh—* [4] *though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: [5] circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; [6] as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. [7] But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. [8] Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ [9] and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— [10] that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, [11] that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.*

This is one of the most magnificent passages that the Apostle Paul, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, ever penned and bequeathed to the church. It is a passage that one scholar describes as quintessential Paul and while we must analyze it, it would be a tragedy if its splendor were lost in analysis. So, let me exhort you even before I begin to go back and simply reread this passage this week and let the Spirit minister to you through one of the most eloquent and personal expressions of what it means to be a Christian.

The essence of this passage, which culminates in Paul's stirring proclamation that he counts everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ, is also captured in Jesus's own teachings in parables. For example, Jesus likens the Kingdom of heaven to a treasure in Matthew 13:44, which says [44] *The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.* But one of the most helpful illustrations of this same principle and in many ways of our passage, is actually found in the Old Testament in that favorite book of the Bible called Ruth.

At the very end of that story in Ruth, Boaz approaches Naomi's closest kinsman Redeemer, and informs him that Naomi has returned from Moab and is selling her parcel of land. Then he challenges the kinsman in the presence of the town elders to fulfill his duty by purchasing this land. The kinsman initially replies, ‘I will redeem it’ but then Boaz points out that the day you buy the field from the hand of Naomi, you also acquire Ruth, the Moabite, the widow of the dead, in order to perpetuate the name of the dead in his inheritance. Then, upon realizing the true cost of this land, the kinsman balks on his initial offer and says, ‘I cannot redeem it, lest I impair my own inheritance. Take my right of redemption yourself, for I cannot redeem it.’

I would argue that the high point of the romantic drama in the love story of Ruth is not found in Ruth 3 when Ruth and Boaz engage in that daring midnight tryst but it is actually the declaration that Boaz says in response, when he says “You are witnesses this day that I have bought all that belong to Elimelech and also Ruth, I have bought to be my wife.” In that moment, just as the man in Jesus's parable went and sold all that he had in order to purchase the field, not because of the value of the field, but because of the treasure that was hidden inside, so too, Boaz is willing to risk the very thing that the other kinsman was not, namely his inheritance. In a sense, you could say that Boaz is willing to risk everything not to purchase not the parcel of land, but the inestimable treasure that was hidden in plain sight, namely Ruth.

I'll return to this illustration at the very end but if you've understood it now, you have understood the essence of our passage in Philippians 3. There are three points in this study for you but to be more precise, I have one main point with two sub points. The main idea of this passage is repeatedly clear which is, put no confidence in the flesh and to illustrate what exactly that looks like, Paul provides an example from his own personal experience. The first sub point is the worthlessness of Paul's past pedigree and performance, and the second sub point is the surpassing worth of Paul's present pursuit.

Philippians 3:1a says *[1a] Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord.* Paul begins this passage with an exhortation that has become very familiar to us in the book of Philippians which is “Rejoice.” Our pastors very sagely have titled our series in this letter, Rejoicing in the Advancement of the Gospel and as we've already seen, rejoicing in the advancement of the Gospel necessarily entails rejoicing in the midst of difficult circumstances. Because to state the obvious, the light of the Gospel, cannot advance in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation without encountering hostility and opposition. So in Philippians 1, Paul says, ‘I rejoice in the midst of imprisonment and affliction.’ In Philippians 2, he says, ‘I am glad and rejoice in the midst of looming execution’ and so also the Philippians are to be glad and rejoice in the midst of their impoverishment and persecution.

Now at the beginning of Philippians 3, Paul, once again repeats this imperative ‘rejoice’ and it comes as no surprise to us that it is once again in the midst of difficulties. But this time it is in the midst of attacks that may come from false teachers. This is what Paul is pointing forward to when he says ‘to write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you.’ What he's alluding to there is warnings he must have given the Philippians on prior occasions to watch out for these false teachers who would come as wolves dressed in sheep's clothing, feigning allegiance to Jesus, only to then offer worthless excrement in exchange for the treasure of the Gospel. Paul's warning against putting confidence in the flesh is prompted by this threat of false teachers who would tempt them to do that very thing.

Based on their description in Philippians 3:2, we can discern that they were Judaizers, that is Jewish Christians, or at least Jews who loosely identified themselves as Christians, who insisted that Gentile Christians needed to submit to the Mosaic Law in order to truly be enfolded into the covenant community of God. In particular, they emphasized the necessity of circumcision. So, anticipating that the Philippians had not seen the last of these Judaizers, Paul issues this warning, that is at the same time an incredibly scathing condemnation of what these Judaizers promoted. Philippians 3:2 says *[2] Look out (Watch out) for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh.*

Make no mistake about it, this is deliberately derogatory derisive speech but Paul is not insulting them for the sake of insult. These are carefully chosen terms that are intended to achieve intense irony. Watch out for the dogs. Dr. Joel Beeke points out in the ancient world,

dogs were pariahs and scavengers generally detested by the Greco-Roman society. More importantly for us, dogs were considered unclean animals by the Jews, since they would rummage through the garbage and feed upon carcasses. As one might expect then the Jews sometimes used this term to refer to Gentiles, hence the irony. In Paul referring to these Judaizers as dogs, the very ones who insisted on maintaining certain rituals and laws, especially the ones that pertain to purity, they are in fact the ones who are unclean. To put it more simply by calling them dogs Paul is saying that they are in fact the Gentiles.

Then he says ‘Watch out for the evil doers.’ Once again, Paul takes aim at what the Judaizers held on to as their source of confidence and exposes it rather as their source of folly. These Judaizers would have taken great pride not only in their own conformity to the law, but in their zealous attempts to convert or persuade Gentiles to do the same. This was their version of ministry and missionary activity, and they would have considered this labor a form of good works. But by making Gentiles submit to the law as a necessary requirement of salvation, they are in fact causing them to reject the righteousness that comes from God. So Paul takes aim at their works and describes it instead as a ministry in service of Satan and in opposition to God.

This leads us to perhaps the most biting of them all; ‘Watch out for those who mutilate the flesh.’ You should know that the word for mutilate in the original Greek is *katatomé* and the word for circumcision is *peritomé*. I point that out for you only so that you can hear that those two terms rhyme. In fact, Paul explicitly mentions circumcision in the very next verse, Philippians 3:3 and that makes it evident for us that Paul is here intending a word play. As already mentioned, circumcision was the prominent feature of this Judaizers false gospel and by insisting upon this ritual, Paul is arguing that their practice of circumcision is actually a form of mutilation. Mutilation was a common practice in pagan religion, and Israel's priests were prohibited from serving God by cutting themselves. Those who did were cut off from the people of God and again, you've caught the irony, haven't you? Their circumcision is mutilation. The very sign that they think includes them is actually the sign that excludes them from true Israel.

Paul explains why their circumcision serves to exclude rather than includes them in Philippians 3:3 which says **[3] For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh.** We of course know that while God Himself instituted circumcision with Abraham in Genesis 17, it was never intended to say, that was never its design. From the beginning circumcision was but an outward sign of the inward reality of the circumcision of the heart. This is what Paul means when he says, for we are the circumcision. We who have believed in Christ have undergone a surgical operation in our hearts by the power of the Spirit thus we are those who worship by the Spirit and what follows then are defining characteristics of the spiritually circumcised community of Christ. We are those who glory in Christ Jesus. That is better translated as we are those who boast in Christ. Or let me put that differently still; we are those who put our confidence in Christ. You see, then, how this is basically the inverse of the following injunction – put no confidence in the flesh. Then in Philippians 3:4, Paul repeats that phrase two more times; confidence in the flesh.

So, Paul states the main idea of our passage four times in two verses. In effect, Paul has now summarized what these Judaizers were promoting with this phrase putting; confidence in the flesh. This was the essence of their error. So, Paul is now moving beyond the particulars and stating the broader principle. You may never be tempted to get circumcised, especially if you're an adult male, but you will be tempted to put your confidence in the flesh so that this warning stands not just for the Philippians and not just in the first century, but it stands for the Church of Christ today.

Here's the warning that you need to hear loud and clear from Philippians 3; Those who put their confidence in the flesh are excluded from the true community of God. Starting in Philippians 3:4 through 11, we now see why this issue mattered so much for the Apostle Paul. For him this was an intensely personal matter and we learned the harshness of Philippians 3:2 wasn't so much directed at his opponents as it was against his former self as he now turns to his past and finds himself repulsed at the man that he was prior to coming to Christ. In Philippians 3:4-6 Paul lists seven reasons why he, above anyone else has confidence in the flesh. In this list, notice that the first four pertain to Paul's pedigree, privileges that he inherited, and the last three pertain to his performance, his personal achievements.

Hence our first sub point, Paul's past pedigree and performance. Here's what putting confidence in the flesh looked like for Paul. According to Philippians 3:5, Paul was circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews. Each of those four privileges sets Paul apart from a larger group and sets Paul within a more exclusive group of God's people. He was circumcised on the eighth day. In other words, from birth, Paul was set apart from the Gentile world. He was of the people of Israel. So, he is set apart from the proselytes, from the non-Jews who may have converted into Judaism.

He was of the tribe of Benjamin so not just a Jew by blood, but of a favored tribe. Benjamin, of course, was a favorite son. Benjamin gave Israel her first king. Benjamin was allotted the city of Jerusalem and therefore the Temple of God. Benjamin was the sole tribe that stood by Judah when the kingdom split. Benjamin, together with Judah, formed the core of the returned exiles who also restored Jerusalem. Paul is of this tribe of Benjamin, and I think it would be an educated guess to suggest that Paul most likely could have traced his lineage to some of those returned exiles.

Last but not least, he's a Hebrew of Hebrews. The term Hebrew gets at something even more specific than race and tribe. During Paul's day, Jews would have used this term Hebrew to denote someone who was able to speak the Hebrew language and that in turn was an indication that that person had been raised within Jewish customs and culture, that he had not been Hellenized, that he had not assimilated into the surrounding Greco-Roman culture. As we see in the Book of Acts, though born in Tarsus, Paul was taught by Gamaliel, who, by the way, was a famed Jewish rabbi whose name appears several times, even outside of the Bible. Apparently, Paul's parents had arranged for him to live in Jerusalem, learn under Gamaliel tutelage from his early childhood years. It is fully expected then, that not only did Paul possess an unparalleled pedigree, but that this resulted in unparalleled performance.

As to the law he was a Pharisee. We may have a negative view of the Pharisees, especially in light of the Gospels, but historically speaking, the Pharisees enjoyed a very positive reputation amongst the Jewish populace. Of all the sects of Judaism, they were considered to have been one of, if not the most pious group of Jews. As to zeal, Paul was a persecutor of the church. Persecution may be an odd thing to boast about, even from the perspective of a Pharisee, but the point is the sincerity and the intensity of Paul's prior religious commitments manifested in zealous persecution. Then Paul says about himself, as to righteousness under the law, blameless. Gordon Fee has given the most concise paraphrase of what this means. Blamelessness under the law refers to Torah observance understood as observable conduct. This is not an ironic self-description. Paul can actually claim with a clear conscience that as far as observable conduct was concerned, he was without fault, blameless. Now that's what putting confidence in the flesh looked like for Paul.

What does it look like for you? Notice in Philippians 3:7-8 Paul once again broadens the scope of what putting confidence in the flesh entails. It doesn't just entail the seven privileges and achievements that Paul listed, but as he says, [7] *But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ.* [8] *Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ.* In other words, in comprehensive fashion, he broadens the scope of the application of this passage to include everything and anything that you might possibly be tempted to boast in other than Christ, whatever that might be. It is not simply a matter of indifference, but it is antithetical to the Christian faith. Paul is basically saying 'To repeat myself is no trouble to me and is safe for you.' Those who put their confidence in the flesh will be excluded from the true community of Christ.

So, wrestle with me here. Look honestly into your own heart. Ask yourself, 'Is there anything that you're holding on to in this way?' To help you think through this a little bit let me ask you a related question. What is it that gives you status, prestige and honor? What is the basis of your worth? I consider it cliché when preachers quote the dictionary but I'd like to do that very thing because in this case, at least, I think it is quite helpful. The definition of the word *worth* according to Merriam-Webster, is the value of something measured by its qualities or by the esteem in which it is held. The reason why that's a helpful definition is because it illuminates two corollaries to this concept of worth.

First, it illuminates the fact that when it comes to this question of worth, there is at every point some kind of evaluation or judgment that is being made as to what qualities count, as to what qualities contribute towards value. I'm the singles ministry pastor here at Briarwood, so I work closely with young adults and a very common counseling issue that surfaces in my conversations is that many young adults struggled to get their careers off the ground, understandably. They're either unemployed or underemployed, and this oftentimes affects their self-esteem. Another word for that is self-worth. To psychologize a bit, this is what is taking place in their minds; in their judgment, something like their job and not just having a job, but even having a particular kind of job contributes towards what makes them as an individual valuable.

Here's the second corollary that's illuminated in that definition. To repeated again; worth is the value of something measured by the esteem in which it is held. Which then begs the question, the esteem in which a person is held by whom? This question of what gives you status or prestige or honor or worth is inseparable from the question of whose opinion matters and for someone with a low self-esteem as a consequence of a low paying job, the issue is not just a faulty understanding of what qualities count, but also a faulty understanding of whose judgment counts. To put that more bluntly, God's judgment of what counts as Paul will say in Philippians 4:8 of *what is true, what is honorable, what is pure, what is just, what is lovely, what is commendable, what is excellent, what is worthy of praise* matters very little and the world's evaluation of those very same things matters much.

Here's how all of this relates to the temptation of putting confidence in the flesh. When you stand before God on the Day of Judgment and He asks you, 'Why should I let you in? Why do you think you are saved?' Another way to frame that same question would be like this; What makes you worthy? And whether you say 'Because I was circumcised or because I'm a Hebrew of Hebrews or because I had a prestigious job,' what all of those things have in common is that they're all reflections of what you have judged to bestow value and to bestow worse.

So, let me ask you again, what is the basis of your worth? I'm not asking you whether you know the correct answer to that. I know that all of you know that the answer is Christ. I'm asking you in your heart of hearts and the way that this plays out in your life and the way that you think about yourself and the way that you think about others, what is the basis of your worth? Is it your job? Are you a doctor, a lawyer or politician? Is it your wealth, your net worth, your income bracket, your material possessions? Is it your resume, your academic background, your degrees and titles, your accomplishments and accolades? Your position at work, your end of your performance? Is it your power and fame, your sphere of influence, your social network, the number of important people who know your name? Is it your family, your marital status, the number of children you've raised, the number of children who are saved? Is it your religious affiliations and accomplishments? Are you a Protestant, an evangelical, a Reformed Presbyterian, a son or daughter of Briarwood? Is it how much you tithe, how much you serve, how many people you've evangelized, or even is it your office? Are you a deacon or an elder or a pastor? To the latter, I would say yes, I am and to the question of whether that affects my sense of self-worth, I would confess. 'Yes, it does.'

In your own eyes and in your own estimation, what makes you worthy to stand before God Almighty? Might it be that you have not yet counted everything as rubbish for the surpassing worth of knowing Christ? 'As to righteousness under the law,' Paul writes that he was blameless, but as he also writes in Galatians 3:21, the law did not have power to give life, and by the law no one will be justified and in Romans 8:3 he says, but what the law could not accomplish God accomplished by the sending of His Son, Jesus Christ. This is virtually what Paul expresses in Philippians 3:7-11.

We have now come to our final point, and that's Paul's present pursuit. This is beautiful. It is powerful and it is transformational. Philippians 3:7-11 says [7] *But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. [8] Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ [9] and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— [10] that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, [11] that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. (29:31)*

It is tempting for me to break apart this passage and to dwell, especially upon Philippians 3:9, where we have a succinct summary of Paul's doctrine of justification, as well as his experience of sanctification in Philippians 3:10 and his hope of glorification in Philippians 3:11. But for me to do so, I fear would detract from the more fundamental reality that Paul is so poignantly proclaiming in our passage. This may sound heretical to you, especially to your Presbyterian ears, but there is a more foundational way to conceive of your salvation than even through the lens of justification and that is expressed supremely in Philippians 3:8. In the simplest of terms, this verse is what it means to be saved. This is what it means to be a Christian. It means to know Christ.

I found myself surprised this past week when I discovered that Philippians 3:8 is the only place in the Pauline Epistles where this phrase occurs, *knowing Christ*. Paul speaks elsewhere of knowing God, but nowhere else does he speak of knowing Christ, but of course, that is the theological point. He has substituted the word God with the word Christ and this makes perfect sense within the progression of this letter, because in just the previous chapter, Philippians 2, Paul had pointed out that God had bestowed upon Jesus the name that is above every name, that

being Lord, the proper name of God, if you will, in the Old Testament. So, we ought to understand these two phrases in parallel – knowing God and knowing Christ.

To know God, is of paramount importance in the Old Testament and the Hebrew concept of knowledge does not just refer to intellectual capacity, but also to relational intimacy of communion and union with a Person. To know God means to know Him as a Savior. To know God means to know Him as your King, to know Him as your Judge. It means to know Him as a Shepherd, to know Him as a Father, to know Him as a Husband, to know Him as a Lover, to know Him as a Friend. Knowledge underscores a personal encounter and a personal experience with the personal God.

I was even more surprised this past week when I discovered that Philippians 3:8 is also the only instance in which Paul refers to Christ as *Christ Jesus, my Lord*. Paul refers to Christ as the Lord and very frequently as our Lord but this is the only instance in which he uses the first-person singular pronoun *my* to describe who this Lord is. He is not just Yahweh; He is not just the transcendent God of the universe. He's not even just the Lord of the church. He is my Lord. This is what it means to know Him – that He is mine and I am His. This knowledge is the controlling lens of Paul's outlook in all of life, not least of which includes his sufferings.

Notice that Paul repeats this surpassing knowledge in Philippians 3:10 which says *[10] that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death...* Suffer with me through just a little bit of grammatical analysis here because it makes all the difference. This verse might be more woodenly translated like this; that I may know Him and that I may know the power of His resurrection and that I may know the fellowship of His sufferings. Grammatically speaking, in the original Greek, there are three objects to the one verb *to know*. The first object is Him, as in Christ, but the second and third objects further elaborate upon what it means to know Christ. It means to know Him both in His power as well as in His sufferings.

To return to the beginning exhortation, the reason why Paul can rejoice in the Lord in the midst of extreme difficulties is not just because those sufferings are light and momentary. It's not just because in glory he will never suffer again, but he can rejoice because those very sufferings here and now allow him to gain an even deeper and more intimate knowledge of Christ's. Make this your attitude about suffering that when you suffer, it is an opportunity for you to know Jesus better. In other words, make this your attitude about suffering; to count it all joy.

We've come to the end of our time and so now I want to revisit the illustration I gave from the Book of Ruth. Just as Paul counts everything as loss for the surpassing worth of knowing Christ, you could also say that Boaz counted everything as loss for the surpassing worth of knowing Ruth. You will notice that that analogy does not quite line up and that's because the story of Ruth is not meant to be an illustration of what Paul has done for Christ but it is an illustration of what Christ has done for Paul and not just Paul, but for you and I and for the church – His bride. As a matter of fact, this is not lost in our very own passage.

If you were to read through the book of Philippians in one sitting and not waiting a week or two in between each passage, then you would have more easily noticed the many verbal parallels between our passage here in Philippians 3:1-11 and the previous passage in Philippians 2:5-11. In fact, the parallels are too many for this to be a coincidence. It is clear that Paul has the Christ hymn in the back of his mind as he is writing about his own experience. Philippians 2:5-11 says *[5] Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, [6] who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, [7] but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. [8] And being found*

in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. [9] Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, [10] so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, [11] and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

In Philippians 2:6 just as Christ did not count equality with God as a thing to be grasped, so too Paul counts everything as loss for knowing Christ. In Philippians 2:7 just as Christ took on the form of a servant, though he was in the form of God, so too Paul makes it his aim to be transformed (original word used in the Greek) into the image of Christ. In Philippians 2:8 just as Christ was found in human form so too Paul's desire is to be found in Him again and just as Christ humbled Himself to the point of death so too Paul seeks to become like Christ in his death. Last but not least, in Philippians 2:9-11, just as Christ was therefore given the name above every name that is Lord so too Paul's greatest reward is simply that he can call Christ Jesus, my Lord.

The reason why Paul is so willing and so eager to count all things as rubbish in order to know Christ, is because that's what Christ did for him. In other words, when Christ emptied Himself, was born in the likeness of men, humbled Himself and obeyed to the point of death, even death on the cross, what did Christ do at every point of the way? I will put it this way; Christ evaluated everything that He could possibly gain, and He counted all of it as loss, as rubbish for the surpassing worth of knowing you, for the surpassing worth of knowing me. What was it that made Jesus so worth it for the Apostle Paul? Why did Paul love his Savior so? It is because He first loved me. Church, if there is one thing that you walk away with from this study I hope it is this life takeaway; it is not so much the importance of you knowing Christ, but it is the grace of Christ knowing you.

I'd like to close with an excerpt from J. I. Packer's book, Knowing God;
What matters supremely, therefore, is not, in the last analysis, the fact that I know God, but the larger fact which underlies it—the fact that He knows me.
I am graven on the palms of His hands [Isa. 49:16].
I am never out of His mind.
All my knowledge of Him depends on His sustained initiative in knowing me.
I know Him because He first knew me, and continues to know me.
He knows me as a friend, One who loves me; and there is no moment when His eye is off me, or His attention distracted from me, and no moment, therefore, when His care falters.
This is momentous knowledge.

Let's pray.

Prayer:

What grace is this O God that You who had perfect unity and the Triune Godhead, would not count even equality with God a thing to be grasped, but that You would empty Yourself, take on the form of a man, You would humble Yourself and be obedient even to the point of death. What grace is this O God that You would cast everything aside because You so desired to gain us? Father, impress upon our hearts just the reality of this love and may we never let You go. We pray all of these things in the strong name of Jesus Christ, Amen.