

Knowing Christmas

Philippians 3:7-11

"I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord"

Introduction: "O God, you are my God; **earnestly I seek you**; my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water. So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory. **Because your steadfast love is better than life**, my lips will praise you. So I will bless you as long as I live; in your name I will lift up my hands." (Psalm 63:1-4)

There is a monumental difference between knowing *about* something or someone and truly knowing them. It's the difference between general knowledge and the face to face kind. It's the difference between knowing the facts about your childhood idols to hanging out at their house as a friend. It is the difference between going out on a date with someone and walking through life in marriage with them. Why is this differentiation so important, especially as we consider our relationship with Christ at Christmastime?

It's the fact that being a Christian is far more than a reality of salvation or a new moral ethic, though these two are incredible freedoms we enjoy in Christ. Being a born again believer has everything to do with **knowing Jesus Christ as our Savior and Lord**. This is why David could write the Psalms the way that he did in the OT: his passion and life was about pursuing God in a personal, intimate way. He could say things like "My soul will be satisfied as with fat and rich food and my mouth will praise you with joyful lips, **when i remember you upon my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night; for you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I will sing for joy. My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me.**" This is not the heart of a man who check's boxes, who sees God as a distant decision maker, or who separates a life of worship into compartments. This is a man who sees God as the goal of life, and a relationship with God as the most valuable pursuit.

As we come to this most pivotal passage in Philippians, we are confronted with the reality of the source of our joy, the power behind our sacrifice and service, and the secret to contentment, unity, humility, and hope in this life: it is **the radical transformation that comes when we move from knowing about Jesus to knowing Him, having a intimate, personal, and ongoing relationship with Him**. I believe this is one of the most misunderstood realities of our Christian life, which comes out of a low view of God and a high view of self. We think God works for us, that He needs our pithy works, and that we somehow can fool Him by acting a certain way on certain occasions. The reality is this: Jesus came so that we can have a restored relationship with God in Him, and He allows us to gain, know, and attain Him not only in this life, but for eternity to come. Everything else falls short. We want to be able to cry out like David: *earnestly I seek Christ, my soul thirsts for you.*" This is the essence of what Paul presents as the counter to those who taught a works based, legalistic view of salvation.

Gaining Christ By Losing Everything Else (7-9)

"But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. 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 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 that depends on faith ---"

Loss leads to a full knowledge of Christ

Last week we looked at how Paul dealt with false teaching that faced the church at Philippi. There were those who were teaching that unless you had an external sign done to you (in this case circumcision), you could not be a true follower of Christ. This took salvation out of the realm of faith and into the category of works, which by definition makes it a false gospel. Paul used his own **testimony** to counter them, showing all that he had been born into and had done (3:4-6) which far exceeded the external qualifications of any known individual. Yet, in looking at all that he had done, he realized that **NONE OF THAT SAVED HIM**, and in fact only brought him further away from Christ. It was not until Jesus Himself called Paul (see Acts 9:1-19; 26:12-27) that he saw the truth and His heart was circumcised (Colossians 2:11-12).

In Paul's life before following Jesus he was both learned and passionate, meaning he studied Scripture and sought to follow it. We know that he had a knowledge of Jesus, enough to seek to shut down the teaching of the gospel his followers were espousing. For Paul, salvation was not about spiritual bankruptcy, reaching out for a Savior to save him out of his depraved pit, but rather another notch on his self-righteous resume. In other words, he believed he deserved to be accepted by God because of how good he was. In essence, salvation and all of Paul's religious effort was about **him**. This is how religion works.

But notice that when Jesus opened Paul's heart by blinding his eyes, his transformation was one of **reliance and pursuit**. Now his goal was to **gain Christ**, to be **found in Him**. This is a far cry from self-reliance that focuses on attaining personal goals, and rather his hope in life was simply to gain the Person, Jesus Christ. It was no longer about doing **things FOR GOD**, but rather *gaining God Himself*. This is the distinct difference between religion and reconciliation. One seeks to gain acceptance on the basis of works done, the other desperately wants to know the One who accepts him based on divine accomplishment.

One of the most profound verses or phrases in all of Scripture is uttered by Paul at this point: ***because of the surpassing worth of KNOWING CHRIST JESUS MY LORD***. Let's unpack this phrase a little bit.

Names matter - Notice the worth of **whom** he wanted to know: **Christ** - Messiah, the anointed One of God who was a messenger or prophet. This was the messianic title for Jesus; **Jesus** - Savior, emphasizing His role as believers' great High Priest who was God with us; **Lord** - He is the sovereign king over all creation, the creator and sustainer of the universe whom all will bow down to one day. Paul recognized that the One he desired to know was all of this completely, and that the **Lordship of Jesus** was not some scary, distant, duty-filled proposition, but gave the personal pronoun "MY" in front of Lord. The relationship with Jesus Christ is not distant, nor is it narrow, but rather it means there is a recognition of ALL of who He is. To leave any part out would miss who He is.

Knowing is different than knowing about - For Paul, not only was Jesus of utmost importance, but KNOWING Him was of surpassing value. The word "know" here is not one of intellectual or mental attainment, but one that refers to a **personal or experiential relationship**. This idea was used in the Old Testament as "living in a close relationship with someone, such a relationship to cause what may be called *communion, one of close personal relationship*."¹ ***Paul's new passion in life was to KNOW JESUS in a full, complete, and whole way. This is divine privilege where the God of this universe lets us into His presence not only to worship Him (which would have been enough), but also to know Him intimately and personally.***

¹ Peter T. Obrien, "The Epistle of Philippians, NIGTC", p. 388

What does it mean or look like to know Christ that way? The rest of this passage explains that, but its also important to look at this through the lens of normal relationships rather than some mystical, ethereal, subjective experience. God created us as relational beings and gave us close friendships to reflect His divine nature. In fact, even our marriages reveal the love Christ has for His bride. Think about how experiential knowledge is gained in marriage:

Time spent - Listening -- purposeful pursuit -- seeking forgiveness -- serving (whether they see it or not) ---- sacrificing for ---- being honest with ---- delighting in ---- a choice to love

These are the marks of someone I'm married to, rather than someone I have knowledge about. Two things stand out with this list: **1)** Without these expressions in an ongoing way, relationship will fade. Neglecting these components will lead to a lack of intimacy and experiential knowledge. **2)** Each of these can be expressed differently within the context of relationship. In other words, every marriage will play these things out differently, just like we do in our relationship with Christ. We are not bound to the form of these, but are rather free to pursue to know Christ within the parameters of how He crafted us uniquely.

God has made us to know Him. He does that through Jesus and His accomplishment on the cross:

For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness', has shown in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."

2 Corinthians 4:6

What David passionately pursued as King we pursue in and because of Jesus. But how do we do it?

Loss leads to a true righteousness

Viewing all things as loss - We took a look last week that Paul considered everything he did to earn salvation before Christ saved Him as loss. Now he says that **everything** is loss in terms of gaining Christ. Notice that he was not doing this by **comparison**: the stuff before was good, but Christ is better! No, it was no comparison. That is why he could call all things rubbish, or excrement, for the sake of gaining Christ. The word for rubbish meant either human waste or that type of trash that would have been thrown out to the wild dogs. This is both strong language to how Paul felt, but also another shot at the false teachers he already called dogs. This meant anything that would cause him to trust himself, any form of self-righteousness, or anything that he'd value more than Christ were now loss to him, so that he could truly say, **"To live is Christ, to die is gain."** When God opened Paul's eyes to salvation, *his response in faith was to look to Christ for all things, and proactively view anything else as subordinate to Him.*

Spiritual Bankruptcy - The reversal of righteousness in order to know Christ came when Paul stopped trying to earn a right standing with God through his own righteousness. He realized that any attempt on his own merit simply fell short and left him hopeless for eternity and left out in relation to God. What he realized was that true righteousness had to come from **outside of us, a foreign righteousness that comes ONLY by faith in Christ.**

"For our sake he made Him to be sin, who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God." 2 Cor. 5:21

In other words, what had to happen to Paul is what has to happen to anyone who would come to Christ. We cannot gain Christ and keep our own way. We cannot be found in Christ without losing our own life. We cannot know Christ truly and hold onto our own righteousness. We are saved by grace through faith, and that faith causes us to realize we are the ones who are in the way of salvation, no one else. We must get to the end of ourselves, cease our striving, and yield ourselves completely to Christ. When this happens, we no longer stop looking to ourselves, we actually gain HIS RIGHTEOUSNESS so we can live differently. Some have questioned this kind of yielding as necessary for salvation since no one can yield perfectly. However, it is clear that **loss** of everything we clung to before is necessary as God continues to change us each day to be more like Christ.

Knowing Christ By Embracing His Life (and death) (10)

*that I **may know Him** and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like Him in death..*

Knowing Him through His resurrection

Paul furthers his discussion of knowing Christ by giving concrete means by which we actually do it. If knowing Christ is the goal, the means are to know Him through His resurrection and fellowship with His suffering. What does it mean to know the power of Christ's resurrection?

Power over sin -

*"Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? We were buried, therefore, with him by baptism into death, in order that, just **as Christ was raised from the dead** by the glory of the Father, **we too might walk in newness of life**. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be **enslaved to sin**. **For one who has died has been set free from sin.**" Romans 6:3-7*

Power of hope -

*"For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you. Since we have the same spirit of faith according to what has been written, 'I believed, and so I spoke,' we also believe and so we speak, **knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence...So we do not lose heart**. Though the outer self is wasting away our inner self is being renewed day by day." 2 Cor. 4:11-14, 16*

The false teachers looked backward where faith in Christ looks forward. The power of the resurrection is connected to the fact that Jesus Himself was raised from the dead. If He was raised by the power of God, and was the firstfruits, it signals our surety of resurrection. So we do not lose heart, regardless of the fact that we are wasting away, either from suffering or the effects of sin and brokenness.

Knowing Him through Fellowship in suffering

"Without the power inherent in Christ's resurrection, present suffering, even for Christ's sake, is meaningless." Gordon Fee

What suffering we face:

"And apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches." 2 Cor. 12:28

So often we equate suffering with physical pain and discomfort, and we are right to do so. Our union with Christ will absolutely lead to persecution, rejection, and potentially a loss of life or pain. But perhaps more likely we face the type of suffering that Paul and Jesus faced: **rejection, pain from those who refuse the gospel, and believers who struggle in their sin and circumstances.** Its why Paul equated this type of pressure with physical suffering. Its why Jesus wept over Jerusalem when the people rejected Him the last time. When we truly love people, we share in the suffering with Paul and Jesus when facing the pain of the hardness of man's heart. Which also means the way to stay away from this type of suffering is to stay away from people, or at least truly loving people.

How we face suffering: Because we have been empowered by Christ through the resurrection, we now know that suffering is **transformed into intimate fellowship with Christ.** It means that suffering is a means of joy, even though it is not enjoyable, but it is evidence of our relationship with our Lord. So we face suffering with joy because it both confirms and enlivens our intimate knowledge of Christ.

Attaining Christ by Hoping in the Resurrection (11)

that by any means possible i may attain the resurrection from the dead."

²*"Resurrection only applies to those who have first experienced death. Christian life is cruciform in character. God's people even as they live presently through the power made available through Christ's resurrection, are as their LORD forever."*

For Paul, resurrection meant Christ. But notice that he said, "by any means possible" or "if somehow". This was not an expression of doubt but rather humility. His recognition of spiritual bankruptcy did not end after He was declared righteous, but continued to view himself as a product of God's grace alone (1 Cor. 15:8-10). This is what we need to adopt, since sometimes we can forget that apart from God's grace, we are nothing, deserving judgment. But also by God's grace, we have been given access to Christ, to know Him, not just now, but into eternity. This is exactly how Jesus defined eternal life:

"And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent." John 17:3

Is this how we approach our life as a Christian? Do we see ourselves as dead to our sin and alive to Christ? Do we resonate with David who revealed the passion of his heart was to know God? The roadblock to knowing Christ is *always* ourselves, when we are unwilling to yield everything to Christ, to consider all things as loss for the sake of gaining Christ.

What do we gain when we lose everything? We gain Christ. He is our greatest joy, both at Christmas now and for eternity. This is the greatest gift.

² Gordon Fee, "Paul's Letter to the Philippians, NICNT", p. 333.