

## ***Christ Above All***

Our Scripture reading is Philippians 3:1-11. Paul writes to encourage these believers who are facing persecution from the Roman outsiders, but who are also threatened by division from insiders, who are striving for influence “out of selfish ambition or vain conceit” (Philippians 2:3). As Paul issues his warning against divisive legalists, he relates his testimony about knowing Christ.

### **Philippians 3:1-11**

*3 Finally, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is not troublesome to me, and for you it is a source of steadfastness.*

*2 Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of those who mutilate the flesh! 3 For it is we who are the circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and boast in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh— 4 even though I, too, have reason for confidence in the flesh.*

*If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: 5 circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born 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 Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. 8 More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard 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 one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. 10 I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, 11 if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.*

Until the risen Christ invaded his life on the Damascus Road. Paul said that he once was religious, but was lost. He now has found Christ, and realizes how wrong he was. One can be a Christian by name and still be lost. One could even be a member of Dale Heights, or a life-long pastor with seminary degrees, and still be lost. Paul says that regardless of your adherence to a creed, religion, or tradition, you are lost unless you know Christ. And Paul says there are degrees with which we can know Christ, which is the measure of our joy and purpose in life.

Paul reminds the Philippians of his theme of joy, even as he writes from the less than ideal circumstances of his imprisonment in Rome. Once again, Paul calls the church to joy, and commands that they rejoice in the Lord. Happiness is dependent on pleasant and fortuitous circumstances. Joy is the peace and sense of wellbeing Christ gives through knowing and trusting him and him alone. Paul knows that only the one who trusts Christ above all can know the joy that

Christ alone gives. So, he writes to safeguard their joy (v.1) by issuing an important reminder (vv. 2-6).

Paul moves quickly to mention some threatening joy-robbers. These legalists were gaining a hearing in the church at Philippi and elsewhere. They, like many heresies even today, gave lip service to the Gospel of Christ, yet present a fatally flawed message of salvation. They admitted that Christ died and rose again, and that one must believe in him. Yet, they added the requirement that to become a Christian one must first observe all the requirements of the Old Testament law and Torah.

True saving faith is characterized by heartfelt worship "in the Spirit of God" (v. 3). And true believers glory not in human or religious achievements, but in Christ Jesus alone, who is the only source of our salvation. Paul had reason to boast about his religious pedigree, which he describes in some detail (e.g. Galatians 2) If being right with God had anything at all to do with being religious, then Paul had it made. Paul had all the advantages of good birth and breeding, but realized this had not resulted in spiritual transformation.

Those of us who were blessed with an upbringing by responsible Christian parents owe a special debt of gratitude to them and to God. I think of the many who have little opportunity for hearing the Gospel, and who don't have a fraction of the advantages some of us have enjoyed, such as a biblical and Christian education, a heritage of faithful church attendance, where we were taught Scriptures and hymns and Bible stories. I received all my higher education in Christian institutions, and was surrounded all my life by positive role models and those who loved, nurtured and encouraged me in the faith.

Paul would say, religious training and church-connected advantages are well and good, but are not enough in themselves. Some of you may have been baptized as a child of the covenant, and were consecrated into a covenant family. But you also realize that you must confirm that covenant by your own testimony of faith in Christ. And all of us, regardless of our advantages, must "work out our salvation with fear and trembling" (2:12).

The dangerous thing about appearances is not that we deceive God, or even that we mislead others, but that we can deceive ourselves into thinking that because we have a familiarity with things divine we are right with God. The Judaizers were relying on the mere appearance of religious ritual, including circumcision.

The ordinances/sacraments of the church are intended to be signs and reminders of spiritual truth. Anything can become idolatrous. Even Communion, can be taken with "uncircumcised hearts," hearts and lives unchanged by God's grace. Our basis of assurance is grace, currently at work to keep us in fellowship with God. We have assurance as long as we confess Jesus is Lord, and as long

as the virtues of godliness abound in us. Without passing Scriptural tests for assurance, all rituals are merely presumptuous.

My first wife, Nancy, who died with Alzheimer's in 2015, taught public elementary school music, and throughout her career had some memorable students. One of these was Jason Ledbetter, a husky, hyperactive 9-year-old grandson of a locally well-known Pentecostal evangelist and Gospel singer. Jason was a constant source of disruption to the class and hence a challenge to Nancy's patience and ability to control. One day, when Nancy was routinely correcting young Jason, he was wearing a tee-shirt that proudly displayed an evangelical slogan, such as "I'm a child of God, and member of 'Such and So' Church." Nancy sought to correct him with a sense of shame, calling his attention to the saying on his shirt. The warning didn't even slow him down, as he replied, "O, that's my *church* shirt!" Often our evangelical symbols, talk and even experiences are just like Jason's "church shirt." We don them when convenient and don't intend for them to affect our lives.

As a Pharisee, Paul had a great list of religious achievements, his accomplishments "in the flesh," by human attainment. Yet, he came to see they were a part of his self-righteousness. He achieved with great zeal, and because of his zeal, even became a persecutor of the church. He thought that by his persecuting this cult of "followers of the way," he was in fact serving God.

But something happened to Paul, when he was at the very zenith of his religious attainment. On the way to Damascus, to persecute the church, he met the Lord, or rather, the Lord Jesus met him. For the first time, Paul realized all his religion was empty self-righteousness. All he had ever done to try to obtain God's favor amounted to zero. For Paul, knowing Christ began, not as a result of his arduous religious devotion and activity, but when Christ, the risen Lord interrupted his life on the Damascus Road (Acts 9:1-19). For the first time, Paul saw himself for the lost sinner he was. Being blinded by the holy glory of Christ, Paul saw through the superficiality of his self-righteousness. He, for the first time, cast himself upon the mercy of God, and submitted to the lordship of the one whom he had persecuted before.

To Paul, salvation is a matter of simply knowing Christ. What a crucial difference there is between knowing about God and knowing God, that is, knowing God through faith in the Lord Jesus. Before his conversion, Paul (then Saul of Tarsus) knew a lot about God, having studied under the esteemed Gamaliel and being an arduous student of the Torah. But he didn't know God personally.

That relationship is entered at the rebirth experience, but doesn't end or even culminate there. The initial salvation experience is just the beginning of a lifetime and an eternity of progressively knowing God. In fact, one of the evidences of saving grace is this growing desire to know Christ in an ever-deepening relationship.

This was what someone called “The Great Exchange.” Paul exchanged his righteousness, which was not good enough to get him beyond hell, for the perfect righteousness of Christ, which was more than sufficient to get him to heaven. He realized that Christ alone was perfectly righteous, and received him as Lord. His new righteousness was received by faith alone, and not by Paul’s religious good works. Paul from that moment on passionately resisted any compromise to the doctrine of salvation by grace alone. This is why he called the legalistic Judaizers, “dogs,” because they were scavengers who prowled around the church, stealing the hearts of those Paul had won to Christ through the pure gospel of saving grace. Paul, throughout his ministry, resisted anyone’s adding to Christ as our means of salvation.

This is what is so dangerously insidious about cults—their proximity and similarity to the truth of the Gospel. These all claim to be Christian religions and offer “a way” of salvation, and extol the virtues of Jesus. But they don’t think of Christ as the eternal Son of God, equal with the Father and the only way to salvation. For extra-biblical cults, it’s always “Christ plus something else equals salvation.” For Paul, something else is “garbage,” or worse. Paul knew that faith in Christ alone was the only way to a relationship with God and the gift of eternal life.

Paul valued Christ and demonstrated this valuing in his desire to know Christ better, by growing in Christ. He understood the Christian life in terms of the present tense, and wanted to “keep on knowing Christ and his power better and deeper, and keep on sharing in his sufferings, and keep on conforming to the likeness of his death and resurrection.”

A theologian from Europe, after visiting churches in America, assessed that American Christianity is 3,000 miles wide, but about a half inch deep. He sensed a shallowness and superficiality about our Christianity. We know how to market religion, and even how to add church members, but we often do very little in growing deeper in our understanding of and relationship with Christ Jesus.

Paul said he considered and treated as rubbish whatever was a substitute for knowing Christ. God is more interested in our seeking and enjoying him than we are, and will allow events and circumstances that will wean us away from anything that competes with our knowing and seeking after him. The “everything” in verse 8 includes not just our self-righteousness, but can be even the good things in our lives that keep us from delighting in and seeking after Christ above all. I came to see that my “success in ministry” had become a hindrance to my seeking Christ above all. Others have come to see personal ambitions needed to be jettisoned for the sake of seeking and deeply knowing Christ.

Think of the analogy given by the experience of Paul when he was on board ship in a storm, facing imminent shipwreck (Acts 27). In order to save their lives,

knowing the ship was headed for disaster, the passengers began to jettison all unnecessary cargo. That's what Paul was doing. He was throwing overboard from his life all that was keeping him from knowing and focusing on Christ.

Paul wanted an ever-increasing fellowship ("koinonia") with Christ, the essence of a personal relationship, made possible by the indwelling Holy Spirit. Paul's desire was to experience a spiritual and moral resurrection, that he might be lifted to a higher plane in his quest for godliness. He wanted to experience a resurrection from spiritual death, even while in his body. The power that saves us is the power of the Holy Spirit, who continues to transform us. This is the same power that raised Jesus from the dead (Eph. 1:19-20).

Paul knew that living in the power of the resurrection was inseparable from the fellowship of sharing in Christ's sufferings (v. 10). Our text is nothing less than a call to share in Christ's cruciform life, of death to self and saying "yes" to Christ. It's the life of trusting that Christ, who leads us to die to self and to rely on his grace and power alone, will in his time lift us up. It means we submit to the way of suffering for the sake of righteousness and trust that he will finally and fully deliver and vindicate us.

Likely you've heard the story of Joni Eareckson Tada, who became a paraplegic as a young woman, and has now for decades given a radiant testimony of her faith and hope through her numerous books and messages of encouragement. This past week I read the following quote from her:

*"...I sure hope I can bring this wheelchair to heaven. Now, I know that's not theologically correct. But I hope to bring it and put it in a little corner of heaven, and then in my new, perfect, glorified body, standing on grateful glorified legs, I'll stand next to my Savior, holding his nail-pierced hands. I'll say, "Thank you, Jesus," and he will know that I mean it, because he knows me. He'll recognize me from the fellowship we're now sharing in his sufferings. And I will say, "Jesus, do you see that wheelchair? You were right when you said that in this world we would have trouble, because that thing was a lot of trouble. But the weaker I was in that thing, the harder I leaned on you. And the harder I leaned on you, the stronger I discovered you to be. It never would have happened had you not given me the bruising of the blessing of that wheelchair."*

God uses suffering to shape us and discipline us and to wean us away from the fallen world. God is leading us, through even the bad things that happen to us, to the place where we say with Joni, Thank you, Jesus! Christ alone matters.