

I WANT TO KNOW CHRIST (The Gospel in Life)

Philippians 3:7-14

Key Verse: 3:10

“I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death...”

Happy (early) Easter! At this conference, we have had portrayed vividly, before our eyes, the gospel of Jesus’ death and resurrection, which sets us free in every way from the power that sin, condemnation and fear have held over our lives. We were reminded of the importance of taking our stand on the gospel. Today, as we prepare to return to our homes, we want to think about how we can apply the gospel in our lives—to our life goals and daily attitude. For this, we see as an example the personal attitude of a great servant of the gospel, Apostle Paul. Let’s pray that with God’s help we may equip ourselves in the gospel to live more victorious lives than before. This message has two parts.

I. The worth of knowing Christ (7-11)

The book of Philippians, from which today’s passage is taken, is a letter written by Paul the Apostle to the Christian Church in the Greek city of Philippi. It is known to be one of the most positive and encouraging books in the Bible. Several times throughout this short book, Paul tells his readers to **“rejoice in the Lord”**. Remarkably, Paul wrote this positive, encouraging letter while he himself was in a Roman prison. How could Paul be so positive and joyful in such a gloomy situation?

Of course, it’s because of the gospel. Paul could have joy even in prison because the gospel had completely changed Paul’s value system. In his former life, as he tells us, Paul had invested all his effort into achieving righteousness through the Jewish religion, and in that system, he had risen to a high level at a young age. He lived an achievement-focused life, and he seemingly gained great success from it. But since he had met Jesus Christ, and begun to seek a righteousness from God through the blood of Jesus, all those previous efforts became of no benefit to Paul. The Jewish religious leaders he had formerly worked so hard to please were now persecuting him—that’s how he wound up in the prison.

Sitting in a Roman prison cell, reflecting on his former achievements and all he had lost, Paul might have been overwhelmed with self-pity. But he was not. Verse 7 shows us how he thought about those past things. **“But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ.”**

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This language of counting something as a loss makes me think about business and its accounting and bookkeeping practices. Sometimes in the news you hear about a company that writes off an x million or hundred million dollar loss. When you write something down a loss, it means you stop trying to recover value from it. That money is gone, and you're not getting it back, so you just admit that it's gone and move on. That is what Paul did in regard to his former life. Paul counted his former gains as a loss because in Christ he had found a life pursuit so rewarding that it made all he could gain or lose before look like small potatoes.

So then, what was Paul hoping to gain in the gospel? Look at verse 8. **“What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ...”** Paul says that knowing Christ was a thing of surpassing worth. Surpassing worth! What Paul hoped to gain that outweighed all his losses was the knowledge of Christ. In the gospel, Paul's value system was changed to place all value in Christ himself. Paul could write off all his former glories as a loss because knowing Christ was of such great worth that that all those other things, by comparison, were garbage.

At this conference, we have seen the gospel of what Jesus did for us. By his death on the cross, he took our place, paying the penalty for our sin, to set us free. Then, on the third day he rose, showing us our inheritance of eternal life in the resurrection body. This gospel displays the surpassing worth of Jesus Christ. Through his death on the cross for our sins and resurrection, Christ becomes of infinite worth to us. When we really understand the gospel, we can only agree with Paul that the most worthy life goal is to know Christ himself.

So what does it mean to know Christ? How do we go about it? To know Christ is not the same thing as knowing some facts or having some skill, such as when we know Calculus or know Kung-Fu. Christ is a person, and to know a person is, of course, personal. Paul points to the personal nature of knowing Christ when he mentions **“the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.”** To Paul, Christ was not just *the* Lord but *my* Lord. In verse 9, Paul refers again to this goal as **“gaining Christ and being found in him.”** So the result of this knowledge is actually personal union, in which a person can be said to be in Christ. This relationship is what Paul considered so wonderful that all human achievements were rubbish by comparison. When Paul had this, he was free from all need to pursue his own righteousness. The hope of gaining this is indeed good news.

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How can we come to know Jesus our Lord this way? When a person is physically present, we can get to know them by talking to them and listening to their responses, by spending time with them and seeing how they act in various situations. We can't know Christ in exactly that way, because he is not physically present. Some have tried to know Christ through hiding themselves from the world and just studying or meditating all the time. But I don't think that's the root of how we should apply the gospel. The real basis of how we know Christ is surprisingly simple. It's stated in verse 9. Look at it again: **“and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.”** Did you catch what the basis of knowing Christ is? The basis of knowing Christ is faith. Faith is what makes Christ and what he has done for us real to us personally. Without faith, we cannot know Christ any better than as a historical character in a book. But with faith, Christ is very near, and very knowable.

With faith, we can come to know Christ better through every experience of life. In verse 10, Paul talks about this kind of *experiential* knowledge. Let's read verse 10. **“I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death...”** Here, Paul is using the language of strong desire. “I want!” When Paul began to follow Jesus, it wasn't that he stopped having any kind of desires. If anything, it made his desire even stronger. Paul was moved by a burning inward desire to know Christ. And the way he sought to know Christ was through participating in what Christ participated in. In this way he would become like Christ, and the result would be Christ's power working in his own life.

We all like the word “power”. If you go to the Christian bookstore, you can see how many inspirational books have “power” in the title of them. We want to live powerful lives. However, Paul says that this power would come mainly through participating in sufferings. We may not like to hear that part so much. Our natural response is simply to avoid suffering at all costs. But the gospel should give us a different attitude toward suffering. Christ was the **“man of sorrows and familiar with suffering”**. Christ suffered loneliness, rejection, abandonment, misunderstanding, physical and verbal abuse, and every kind of strain on his earthly and spiritual life. As we saw on Friday, his sufferings are intimately bound up with our salvation. It was through his suffering and death that our sins are forgiven.

When Paul said he wanted to know Christ through participating in his sufferings and becoming like him in his death, it doesn't mean that he sought to

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harm himself or that he recklessly endangered himself. Rather, he sought to imitate Christ's life of mission, embracing the sufferings that come along with that.

Regardless of your opinions about suffering, there's one thing that's undeniable, and that's that one way or another, everybody suffers. We all, in our lives, have experienced and will experience a wide range of sufferings, some of which are visible to others, and some of which are internal and almost inexpressible. But the good news is that in the gospel, we can decide to know Christ through our sufferings. Christ's sufferings give meaning to our sufferings and make them all work to a good purpose. With faith, we can overcome our dread of suffering and take up our cross daily. Then, our sufferings become a participation in the sufferings of Christ himself. Then, we gain a very precious spiritual connection with Christ. We know him personally because we have (partly) gone through what he went through. We can see from Christ's perspective, overcoming our pettiness and self-centeredness. Then, as Christ's resurrection power appeared after his suffering and death, the resurrection power of Christ can spring up in us as new life after we experience death to our old self. (11)

I can't say that I have really suffered a lot to know Christ. I have so many supportive friends in Jesus that help me through my sufferings. However, I have gone through one type of suffering that is increasingly common among the generation of today's young adults: it's the suffering of taking a longer time than expected to find our way into a stable career. In general, this is not a good thing. It is genuine suffering when we are unable to support ourselves, possibly going deep into debt, and we can feel directionless and even depressed. If you can settle down and earn your bread, you should, as Paul said in Thessalonians. But if we have to go through these kinds of sufferings, we can be sure that God has a goal for us to know Christ through them.

When I graduated college with my Bachelor's, I was full of dreams of becoming a great scientist and professor in my chosen field of computer science. With the help of good advisors and mentors, I got into the PhD program at Princeton. It was like a dream come true. However, the dream soon turned into a nightmare. I felt so under-prepared, and was so intimidated in that environment that I became paralyzed, and only procrastinated and avoided contacting my advisors. When one of my classmates achieved something that I hadn't, I burned with jealousy. But instead of motivating me to work hard, those emotions just made me more paralyzed. I made no progress in research for five long years as I freely spent all the stipend money from a fellowship I won. The year I got married to my wife M. Anastasia was the year before I was kicked out of Princeton. From

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the beginning, we didn't have much money. Once we had no cash left and no gas in the car, so I gathered up all our nickels and dimes and used that to pay for 5 dollars' worth of gas to go to work on. The gas station attendant yelled at me for wasting his time. It was one of the most humiliating days of my life.

However, strangely, I did not become miserable during that time. Through Bible study, I had found calling in campus mission and joy in serving ministry. Though life was not easy and my earthly dream seemed to be lost, M. Anastasia and I were happy, keeping our focus on serving Jesus on the campus and in NJ UBF. Thank God M. Anastasia said, "I don't need a PhD husband, I need a husband who loves Jesus." Based on our wedding key verse, like Priscilla and Aquila, our house was always open to serve Bible students and coworkers and second-generation missionaries.

Of course, many times I questioned what I was doing and became anxious, wondering whether I had any hope to ever provide properly for my family. I was often tempted to feel sorry for myself, thinking I had received so many great opportunities but had let them all pass me by. However, when I reflected on my life, I saw that this long period of instability had helped me to redefine my identity not based on material things or visible achievements, but on the quest to know Christ better. In the final equation, when I saw how incredibly blessed I was, I found that suffering joyfully to know Christ has a value surpassingly greater than suffering miserably to grab some earthly achievement.

To apply the gospel to our lives, we should start by asking ourselves a question. That question is, "What do I want?" When we say the words "I want..." what's the next thing that comes into our brain? Next, we have to ask ourselves whether that thing is really something of surpassing worth. I can testify that when we are open to changing our value system in the gospel, God is faithful. When we make a small decision in our heart, saying, "**Yes, I want to know Christ,**" God will faithfully lead us to greater joy in the knowledge of him.

II. Pressing on (12-14)

In the next verses, Paul addresses the issue of the discrepancy between the holy desire to know Christ and our own obvious weaknesses and shortcomings. It might help us feel a little less intimidated. Look at verse 12. "**Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.**" Even the great apostle Paul admitted that he had not yet attained the full height of the spiritual

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level that he could envision and aspire to. But he didn't let this discourage him. First of all, he didn't try to claim that the effort originated from himself. Despite his strenuous efforts to know Christ, Paul was not calling himself a self-made man. He said that first, Christ Jesus had taken hold of him. This phrase **“taken hold of”** conjures up an image, not just of, say, pulling someone along by the hand, but of Jesus embracing Paul's whole self in order to lead him to glory. Because the high goal of knowing Christ was something that Christ himself had taken hold of Paul for, then Paul could have confidence, and know he would not fail to attain that goal.

However, Jesus' initiative did not result in Paul becoming passive. He fully and willingly reciprocated Jesus' embrace. **“I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.”** To **“press”** means to apply steady, continuous force, without letting up. That's a vivid term to illustrate what it means to persevere toward a goal. Look at verses 13 and 14. **“Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.”** He pressed like one would press on to win a great prize in a race.

In addition to sustained effort to know Christ, Paul purposely let go of things that were behind him. By **“forgetting what is behind,”** Paul was free from letting his past failures chain him down. This is possible because of the gospel, in which all our past sins are washed away by the power of grace. Paul also didn't let his past successes make him complacent. In the gospel, Paul was future-focused, not past-focused, and unapologetically goal-oriented, because the goal is of surpassing worth.

Are you getting any encouragement through this conference to press on? Let me briefly finish my story up to the present day. I was convicted that I should try again for the PhD, to glorify God by not giving up. But this time I knew it had to be by the power of grace, and not by the fear of being outdone. With coworkers' help, I got into a second PhD program, this time at Rutgers. It was basically starting all over again, and it took me 7 more years to finish the degree. I could tell you why that took so long, but already I talked too much. Our growing family lived in Rutgers campus housing for 6 out of those 7 years.

Finally, graduation began to be in sight, and it was time to think about the next step. The most obvious path was to look for an industry job, of which there are plenty available with good salaries for PhDs in computer science. That's where

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most of my classmates were headed. But at one point I realized that, through my struggles and failures, I had learned something about Christ's heart for students who were struggling like I had. So instead, I began to look around for professor jobs that had more emphasis on teaching. Almost right away, I landed a very nice job teaching small classes at a private university. So in the summer of 2015, our family moved from the east coast to the Midwest and joined DuPage ministry. Like life from the dead, I became a professor shepherd 16 years after entering my first PhD program. Now when I go into my office and sit at my desk with the door open, students come in and ask me for help, and I remember when I was just as unsure as them and I am amazed at God's faithfulness.

That's an example of what can happen through pressing on. Of course, the point is not that we can obtain career success and then that's it. Now I have entered this new phase of life, there are new spiritual challenges. I know I must avoid the temptation to live just to keep things externally going well. When I really search my heart, I know I still cannot be satisfied with what I could achieve in this world. To me, **"forgetting what is behind"** now means not becoming complacent in what I've achieved. I want to keep reminding myself that knowing Christ is the one thing that is of surpassing worth to me, and press on.

Maybe some of us here are in the middle of a long spell of strain and fruitlessness, and though we have eagerly sought to know Christ and his power in our lives, it seems that not much has changed. What can we do? I'm sure that the goal of knowing Christ never gets old or stale if we understand God's ways of working. The problem is when we think we need to look behind, when we say, "I just need the kind faith that I used to have." That's like asking to get stuck. The goal of knowing Christ does not change; but God wants to stretch us into a new kind of faith for a new phase of life.

First, we need to re-ignite our spiritual desire based on this goal: **"I want to know Christ."** Then, like Paul, we admit that we have not yet taken hold of it, and search again for a new spiritual perspective that will enable us to exercise faith in a new way. With God's help, we can start to grow again, and other things also can begin to change for us. We will be able to forget about some glory days in the past and glimpse what is possible going forward. **"I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus."**

I hope you have all received a great spiritual blessing through this conference, which you can take back with you and become more fruitful and victorious in the gospel day by day. Let's press on to know Christ.