

I Want to Know Christ

Philippians 3:1-11

Key Verse: 3:10

“I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death....” (1984 NIV)

From the moment we are born into this world, until the moment we pass from this world, we human beings are striving to obtain something. When babies are born they naturally grasp with their hands, trying to grab something. At the moment of death, one's hands lose tension, and open in a gesture of letting go. The question is what are we trying to grab? For what purpose do we struggle and strive? Many people are blindly grabbing for something without knowing their life goal, or deeply considering if what they pursue is valuable enough to be worthwhile. Most people waste their time and energy pursuing things that, in the end, are worthless. Some people pursue academic achievement, others popularity and fame, and still others material goods. One person was so defined by the pursuit of a fancy car that at death, he made it his headstone. Yet none of these things can be our life goal. We human beings are not so low leveled that we can be satisfied with temporal things. We need something of greater value, something spiritual and eternal. Then what can be our life goal? What is worthy of the investment of all our time and energy? What is our master passion? What is the driving force of our lives? In today's passage, through Paul's personal testimony, we find the answers to all these questions. Paul had a clear life purpose to know Christ and he pursued this passionately. Let's learn from Paul's master passion to know Christ. We will study this passage in three parts: No confidence in the flesh (1-6), the surpassing worth of knowing Christ (7-9), and Paul's master passion (10-11).

First, no confidence in the flesh (1-6). In verses 1-6, Paul encouraged the Philippians to rejoice in the Lord and warned them against the influence of Judaizers. He contrasted those who put confidence in the flesh with those who serve God by the Spirit, using himself as an example.

See verse 1a: **“Further, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord!”** Paul repeated the words **“rejoice in the Lord”** again and again. It seems to be Paul's motto. It is amazing that he did this from a prison cell. He could have been full of anger, bitterness and complaints. Instead, he was full of joy, thankfulness and hope. That is why he said, **“It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again...”** (1b). No one and nothing could rob Paul's joy. He wanted to share this joy with the Philippians and help them rejoice. And he added, **“...it is a**

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safeguard for you.” In what respect is rejoicing in the Lord a safeguard for us? The word “safeguard” implies that someone or something is trying to take away our joy, and that we must keep it, and not lose it. God gave us reason to rejoice always (1 Th 5:16). In the past, we had no reason to be joyful because we were doomed to die and face eternal condemnation. Out of our deep despair, we could only seek pleasure, which was temporary and not really satisfying. So there were always elements of fatalism and sorrow in our hearts, no matter what we did. However, God forgave all our sins and gave us eternal life through Jesus Christ. He also poured the Holy Spirit into our hearts. Joy is a fruit of the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:22). Now we can have real, deep joy all the time, regardless of our circumstances. This is only possible when we are in the Lord Jesus Christ. However, there are gospel enemies who want to steal this joy. Paul warned the Philippians about them.

Look at verse 2. **“Watch out for those dogs, those evildoers, those mutilators of the flesh.”** Who are these people, and why does Paul use such strong language? To us Americans, dogs are often called, “man’s best friend.” But here Paul is referring to street dogs which bite people at random and spread rabies. The phrase “mutilators of the flesh” refers to those who advocated circumcision. Outwardly they were clean-cut people who looked very pious. But inwardly they were self-seeking and took advantage of believers. So Paul called them “evildoers.” In other letters he refers to them as the “circumcision group” (Gal 2:12; Tit 1:10). They were enemies of the gospel. That is why he tried to protect the Philippians from them by using strong language. What was their problem? They perverted the gospel that Paul preached by emphasizing circumcision. They claimed that unless a person was circumcised they would be cut off from God’s people (Gen 17:13-14). Circumcision was the sign of obedience to God and the mark of being his people. Paul explained that circumcision is not merely outward and physical, but it is circumcision of the heart by the Spirit (Ro 2:28-29a). Those who are circumcised by the Spirit will love God with all their hearts and souls (Deut 30:6). However, the circumcision group emphasized keeping the law of Moses, saying, **“Unless you are circumcised according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved...”** (Ac 15:1b). But no one can keep the law of Moses. Trying to attain righteousness based on the law leads only to legalism, self-righteousness and pride. It makes people judgmental toward others. At the same time, when they don’t keep the law, they feel utterly condemned and tortured themselves. Many people think Christian life is like this. There is no joy in such a life, but only performance anxiety.

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Paul tells us who the true circumcision are in verse 3. It says, **“For it is we who are the circumcision, we who serve God by his Spirit, who boast in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh...”** The true circumcision are characterized by three things. They serve God by his Spirit, boast in Christ Jesus, and put no confidence in the flesh. Serving God by his Spirit contrasts the works of the flesh. The power source for service is the Holy Spirit, not one's own effort and wisdom. That means that in serving God, we first pray and seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We follow God's direction instead of our own. Then God surely leads us in the best way according to his good purpose. Boasting in Christ Jesus makes a great contrast with boasting in the flesh. Those who only depend on what Christ has done have no reason to boast. So they boast only about Christ and give all glory to him. Those who put confidence in the flesh rely on themselves: their ability, willpower, talents, intellect, and so on. They become very proud. But those who have no confidence in the flesh do not rely on themselves, but on God. So they are very humble.

In verses 4-6, Paul shares his own testimony to help the Philippians realize that it was futile to put confidence in the flesh. At one time, Paul had been the poster boy of the circumcision group. So he said, **“If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more...”** (4). Then he listed seven reasons for his confidence (5-6). The first four were inherited and the last three were earned by his effort. By having been circumcised on the eighth day, he had covenant privileges from infancy. Romans 3:2 tells us that chief among them was being entrusted with the very words of God. Romans 9:4-5 describe them in some detail: adoption to sonship, the divine glory, the covenants, the law, the temple worship and the promises, the patriarchs, such as Abraham and David, and the human ancestry of the Messiah. He had the national advantage of pure Israelite descent. He also had an ancestral advantage by being of the tribe of Benjamin, which had remained loyal to David's line while the ten tribes went their own way. He had the parental advantage as a Hebrew of Hebrews. He grew up in the Hebrew culture and could speak Aramaic freely, which was the national language of Israel in his days. He was from the strictest religious sect, the Pharisees. Under the eminent rabbi Gamaliel he was thoroughly trained in the law. He was so zealous that he even persecuted the church. As for righteousness based on the law, he was faultless. His moral and religious standing was at the top in his society. His confidence surpassed that of the false teachers. If Paul wanted, he could have boasted of these things. But Paul put no confidence in the flesh. What, then, did he value?

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Second, the surpassing worth of knowing Christ (7-9). Let's read verse 7. **“But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ.”** In the past Paul had valued all the advantages he mentioned in verses 5-6. He boasted about them and strove with all his effort to earn even more. He thought he would gain salvation by doing this. But the more he struggled, the more deeply he sank into the mire. So he cried out, **“What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?”** (Ro 7:24) In his deep despair, he encountered the Risen Jesus. Jesus shone brilliant light upon Paul. Paul was blinded by the light and heard Jesus' voice. At that moment, his spiritual eyes were opened. His old self died and his new self in Christ was born. It was like a caterpillar shedding his old shell and becoming a beautiful butterfly. He could stretch his wings and fly; he was free. His value system was completely changed. In verse 8, he says, **“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....”** For the sake of Christ Paul had lost all things and considered them garbage. He realized that all of man's righteous acts are like filthy rags (Isa 64:6). How could Paul do this? It was because he found that knowing Christ Jesus was of surpassing worth. What does this mean? Here, knowing Christ means having an intimate relationship with Jesus. It is not knowing about Jesus, but knowing Jesus personally. We may know many things, and even have doctoral degrees. But this kind of knowledge is very limited. Many well educated people suffer from a profound existential crisis and many kinds of relationship problems and live miserable lives. In fact, this kind of knowledge puffs us up and makes us useless. However, knowing Christ is different. It gives us forgiveness of sins and eternal life; it restores our love relationship with God and with others and gives us true joy and peace, and a living hope in the kingdom of God. Knowing Christ is most important. That is why Paul wanted to gain Christ. In order to gain Christ, Paul held tightly to Christ and was willing to let go of other things, considering them garbage. He did not do this by his own effort, but by faith in Christ. So he said in verse 9, **“...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.”**

Here we learn that Christ is the greatest treasure that is beyond compare with anything in this world. Jesus told a parable in Matthew 13:44. One peasant was going through a field and happened to see something that drew his attention. As he uncovered it, he found a treasure box. Upon opening the lid, he saw a huge pile of pearls, diamonds, rubies, and innumerable solid gold coins. It was a fortune! So he quickly closed the lid and hid it again very carefully. He went off and sold

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everything he owned, such as his car, his i-pad, his computer, and his television. Then he found the owner of the field, and purchased it. When he sold everything, people might have said he was crazy due to stressful labor in the field. But he was full of joy and thanks and hope.

Charles Colson was a special presidential aid during the Nixon administration. He enjoyed privileges and power, which he used ruthlessly. But he was imprisoned because of the Watergate scandal. During that time he accepted the gospel and was completely changed. He volunteered to do many menial jobs to serve prisoners. In his biography he confessed, "During my lifetime I had never done such menial jobs. But after meeting Jesus, I could find true happiness while serving prisoners." After being released from prison, he established Prison Fellowship. He served many needy people with Christ's mind and humility. His value system was completely changed when he met Jesus personally. So he was recognized for Christian service and given the Templeton Award in 1993. Not everyone can be like Chuck Colson, or Apostle Paul, but whoever comes to know Christ finds that he is of surpassing worth and treasures him more than anything in the world. Realizing this has motivated many to be missionaries. The missionary martyr Jim Elliot said, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose." Mother Sarah Barry has lived a most sacrificial life in Korea as a missionary, and in America. Yet she often says that she feels no sense of loss, for she has found knowing Christ to be of surpassing value. Knowing Christ is more than just having assurance of going to heaven when we die. When we really know Christ we find him to be the most precious treasure and everything to us. He is worthy of the investment of our time and energy and all we have and are. Amen!

Third, Paul's master passion (10-11). Thus far Paul has testified that knowing Christ is of surpassing worth. Now he tells us what it means specifically to know Christ. Let's read verses 10-11. **"I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection of the dead"** (1984 NIV). He wanted to know Christ fully, in every way: to know Christ himself and his character, the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings even to death.

First of all, Paul wanted to know Christ himself and his character. As we can see in the gospels, this was the purpose of Jesus' disciple raising ministry. Jesus spent time with his disciples very personally through daily life together for more than a year. Then Jesus tested them by asking, **"Who do you say I am?" Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God"** (Mt 16:15-16).

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Jesus was more than a prophet. Jesus is God who came into the world. Jesus is God who is worthy of our worship. Jesus is the Savior of the world. Jesus is the source of boundless riches (Eph 3:8). All the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden in Christ (Col 2:3). For a believer, the moment of meeting Christ and receiving justification is just the beginning of knowing him. We need to grow in the knowledge of Christ. So Apostle Peter exhorts us to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (2 Pe 3:18). Specifically we need to know Christ's humility, love, patience, compassion, and so on. Some people are frustrated because even though they have believed in Jesus for a long time, their bad habits have not changed. Is it possible to really be changed? Let's consider Paul. He was a narrow-minded, bigoted man who did not mind the killing of Christians. But after meeting the Risen Christ, he became the most broad-minded person who could embrace any kind of person. He became like a loving mother even to a runaway slave, Onesimus. His love grew to be so deep and wide that he wrote the world's best love song in 1 Corinthians 13. How could he do that? He said in 1 Corinthians 11:1, **“Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.”** As he followed Jesus, Jesus changed him into a most exemplary man of love. No matter who we are, when we really follow Jesus like Paul did, he changes us into his likeness.

Secondly, Paul wanted to know the power of Christ's resurrection. Why did Paul want to know this? It is because Christ's resurrection defeats the power of death. The power of death is so prevalent in our world that everyone knows it, even little children. One day my son Joshua said to me sadly, “Dad, you are older than me and you are going to die before me.” The power of death is revealed constantly in our day to day conversation, such as when we say, “I'm freezing to death,” or, “this heat is killing me,” or “there is nothing certain except death and taxes.” People are suffering from fear, anxiety, sorrow, meaninglessness, despair, and powerlessness which are rooted in the power of death. When a fatal disease attacks us we become very fearful. No one can defeat this power of death. Only the power of Christ's resurrection can give us victory over all the elements of the power of death. The power of Christ's resurrection enables us to live a joyful, meaningful, powerful, and dynamic life.

Thirdly, Paul wanted to know the fellowship of sharing in Christ's sufferings. Many people want to live a powerful life. But they don't want to suffer. Many people want to receive a crown of glory, but they don't want to experience the crown of thorns. They try to avoid sufferings by any means. Even hearing the word “suffering” gives them a nervous sensation up and down their spine. But there is no glory without suffering. There is no resurrection without death. That's why Paul

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wanted to know the fellowship of sharing in Christ's sufferings. Whenever he faced sufferings and hardships, Paul related them to Christ's sufferings. In that way he could know Jesus better through experiencing life together. Suffering has deep meaning. Paul said in Romans 5:3-4, **"Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope"** (1984 NIV). When Paul knew the meaning of suffering, he was willing to participate in it. So, after being stoned almost to death and dragged outside the city of Lystra, he got up and went back into the city, encouraging the brothers, **"We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God"** (Ac 14:22). Apostle Peter was once afraid of suffering. So he denied Jesus three times on the night he was betrayed. But later, when he met the Risen Jesus, he could understand the meaning of suffering. So he encouraged the early Christians, **"But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed"** (1 Pe 4:13). He also encourages us to suffer, not for our own sins, but for the sake of Christ (1 Pe 4:15-16). Paul had a master passion to know Christ and his character, the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings even to death. In this way he could grow to be like Jesus and become a great man of God.

Charles Studd, one of the Cambridge Seven, said, "We need to be passionate. We must be passionate year after year." We need a master passion to know Christ year after year. Let's not become habitual as time passes, but more and more passionate to grow to be like Jesus.