



Paul's letter to the

PHILIPPIANS

LESSON 5

PHILIPPIANS 3:1-11

A PRAYER FOR THOSE LOOKING FOR JOY

When the world expects sadness,
help us, Creator of Light, to look for pockets of joy.
When the world is overwhelmed by darkness,
give us eyes to see little delights.
When the world is caught up in sensationalism,
help us speak of the hidden wonders we've discovered,
holding them up for others to see.

The sacred stillness of the early morning,
a quiet moment in the sun,
small children laughing on scooters,
trees and flowers bursting into bloom.
These small joys reveal the truth of the world we live in.

No, there is not peace everywhere
and all pain has not been removed.
But there are still people returning home,
voices that pray, moments of forgiveness, signs of hope.
We don't have to wait until all is well
to celebrate the glimpses of your Kingdom at hand.

Let us not deny sadness,
but transform it into fertile soil for more joy.
Let us not deny the darkness,
but choose to live in the light.
Cynics seek darkness wherever they go,
but joy is the mark of the people of God.

Help us discipline ourselves to choose joy
for the reward is joy itself.
Help us renew our minds until they default to joy and not fear,
for there is so much to frighten us.
Help us believe that the Light can be trusted,
for there is so much darkness to mislead us.

Jesus, you are both the Man of Sorrows and the Man of Complete Joy,
help us to hold both sorrow and joy in the ways you've shown us.

Help us to remain in your love
so that your joy may be in us
and our joy may be complete.

Amen.

Philippians 3:1-11 (NLT)

The Priceless Value of Knowing Christ

3 Whatever happens, my dear brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord. I never get tired of telling you these things, and I do it to safeguard your faith.

2 Watch out for those dogs, those people who do evil, those mutilators who say you must be circumcised to be saved. **3** For we who worship by the Spirit of God are the ones who are truly circumcised. We rely on what Christ Jesus has done for us. We put no confidence in human effort, **4** though I could have confidence in my own effort if anyone could. Indeed, if others have reason for confidence in their own efforts, I have even more!

5 I was circumcised when I was eight days old. I am a pure-blooded citizen of Israel and a member of the tribe of Benjamin—a real Hebrew if there ever was one! I was a member of the Pharisees, who demand the strictest obedience to the Jewish law. **6** I was so zealous that I harshly persecuted the church. And as for righteousness, I obeyed the law without fault.

7 I once thought these things were valuable, but now I consider them worthless because of what Christ has done. **8** Yes, everything else is worthless when compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have discarded everything else, counting it all as garbage, so that I could gain Christ **9** and become one with him. I no longer count on my

own righteousness through obeying the law; rather, I become righteous through faith in Christ. For God's way of making us right with himself depends on faith. **10** I want to know Christ and experience the mighty power that raised him from the dead. I want to suffer with him, sharing in his death, **11** so that one way or another I will experience the resurrection from the dead!

Philippians 3:1-6



“We Rely on What Christ Jesus Has Done For Us...”

I never get tired of telling you to rejoice in the Lord! I also want you to be on the lookout.

In chapter three of Philippians, Paul warns the believers against people who insist that circumcision is necessary to belong to God (3:2). It's a warning that parallels the situation that Paul faced in Galatia. In those churches, Paul had been followed by some Jewish emissaries who had been trying to persuade the young Galatian ex-pagan Christians that they needed to be circumcised if they wanted to be part of the true Abrahamic family, a family defined by the Mosaic law and observance of it, particularly circumcision (a visible mark that identified those who bore it as members of Israel, God's chosen people). Though it seems that such people have not yet arrived in Philippi, it appears that Paul is aware that there might be a rival mission on its way, and he wants to warn the Philippian church that they are not to give in to such people or yield to them because they are going in the wrong direction.

Verse three indicates where the issue really lies: “For we who worship by the Spirit of God are the ones who are truly circumcised. We rely on what Christ Jesus has done for us.” The question at issue is who constitutes the people of God and why does that matter in a town like Philippi or Galatia. Paul insists that it is those who trust in Christ who have become “the circumcision”—that is, the true people of God (3:3). This is a remarkable thing to say to a mixed company of Jews and gentiles, slave and free, men and women — that *we are the circumcision*.

How can Paul say that? In the Old Testament (including **Deuteronomy** and **Jeremiah**) the prophets prophecy that one day God will circumcise not only people's flesh, but also their hearts; there will be a new covenant (Deuteronomy 10:16; 30:6; Jeremiah 4:4; cf. 6:10; 9:25).

In **Acts**, the early Jerusalem church, which was entirely Jewish, was forced to recognize that God had included uncircumcised Gentile believers within his people by placing his Spirit within and among them (Acts 10:44-48; 11:15-17; 15:7-9).

Elsewhere in Paul's writing (**Romans 2:25-29**, **Colossians 2:9-15**), he picks up this idea of a new kind of circumcision, and he applies it not only to Jews but also to Gentiles who are part of the Messiah's family.

“In him you were also circumcised with a circumcision not performed by human hands. Your whole self ruled by the flesh was put off when you were circumcised by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through your faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead. When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross” (Col 2:11-14).

Paul also reminds the **Galatians** that the presence of the Spirit among them was proof that they were members of God's people and needed no additional status markers (3:1-5). Paul's claim is that God has acted in Jesus as the Messiah, and the death and resurrection of Jesus has transformed what it means to be the people of God. Thus what Paul is talking about here is the new creation, the new family, which turns out to be the Messianic people who inherit all that God had promised to his people, Israel.

Philippians 3:1-6



Paul, however, is not saying that God has swept away the Jews and replaced them with a Gentile organization called Christians. He's saying that the category of God's people has been enlarged and spread over the whole world in principle.

To drive this point home, Paul turns to autobiography and uses himself as a negative example to illustrate the confidence in human achievement and boundary markers against which he speaks. He had done everything to gain the greatest covenant status you could imagine.

One of the reasons Paul does this is to show that he knows what he's talking about when he warns against people who are trying to pull young Christian converts into that mold. He knows that world. It's a God-given world that was meant to move forward to the coming of the crucified and raised Messiah. Paul was a Jew who was hoping to bring a new vision to his own religion. His goal was reforming it, to some degree like many of the prophets before him had tried. His reform program followed that of Jesus of Nazareth, through whom God has done a new thing, creating a people who worship God in the Spirit, who boast and celebrate and claim Jesus as Lord, and who refuse to trust in the flesh.

Thus, Paul points out that if anyone has the right to claim any status in the presence of God it is he himself. He has more reason to boast in the flesh than anyone (v. 4b). Listing seven things, he outlines everything about himself that might be considered of value and significance.

- 1) He is a full member of God's covenant people ("circumcised on the eighth day"),
- 2) He is an Israelite by birth with all the rights and privileges that come with that ("a member of the people of Israel"),
- 3) He hails from the tribe of Benjamin, one of the two tribes considered to be faithful to the covenant ("of the tribe of Benjamin"),
- 4) He is the son of Hebrew parents with no Gentile contamination ("a Hebrew born of Hebrews").

The last three are achievements:

- 5) He belonged to strictest sect and practices strict observance of the law ("a Pharisee of Pharisees")
- 6) He exhibits avid devotion to God through not just words, but actions ("as to zeal, a persecutor of the church")
- 7) He is above reproach according to a Pharisaic interpretation of the law ("as to righteousness under the law, blameless")

For most of these, they were about his covenant status. Paul is saying that whichever way you look, he possessed the greatest status of any Jew imaginable. And his point is that this has nothing to do with righteousness at all. He has excelled here and found it empty and meaningless. None of these things has anything to do with knowing Christ, as he will go on to say in 3:7-11.

Philippians 3:7-11



The Infinite Value of Knowing Christ Jesus

What does it mean to belong to Christ? In Philippians 3:7-11 Paul gives us a central description of what it means to belong to the crucified and risen Jesus. What he says in 3:7 picks up from the portrait of himself that he has just drawn. He regards *everything* as loss for the *surpassing value/greatness of knowing Christ Jesus his Lord*; for the sake of Jesus Christ, indeed, he *has lost* all things and regards them as *rubbish, in order that* he might gain Christ *and be found in him*. This is because of the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus as his Lord, which is worth far more than everything else put together.

Here Paul picks up some of the themes that we find in Jesus' own parables. Think of **Matthew 13:44-45**, where we find the parable of the buried treasure. **A man finds treasure in a field**, and for the joy of what he has discovered, he goes and sells everything he has and buys that field so he can have the treasure. There's also the **merchant who finds a pearl** that is so wonderful and valuable that he sells everything else, including all the other fine pearls he collected, in order to get this *one* pearl. That note rings throughout the teaching of Jesus and through Paul's writings as well.

The value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord and being found in Him (3:8-9) so surpasses all other things in value that their net worth is zero. Everything that others might consider to have value in the present age—religious advantages, status, material benefits, honor, comforts—these appear to Paul as total *loss* in light of Christ. Paul states that he regards all attributes of acquired honor as “loss,” “garbage,” or “rubbish” (NRSV, NLT, NIV; the Greek term *skybalon* can also mean “dung,” literally “excrement”). In the framework of the ancient Mediterranean world, the apostle was countercultural. He no longer strives for such “gain;” now his only gain could be Christ (Philippians 3:8)

Paul found something in Jesus that emboldened him to forfeit his previously normal life. Paul's faith is made up of things forfeited: "I've suffered loss...in order that I may gain Christ" (Phil. 3.8). What did he forfeit? Title and reputation, friends and community standing. Steady income and a warm bed most nights. But, more importantly, he forfeited designing his own life for calling designed by God. He gave up the myth of independence for the truth of interdependence. He allowed what was in his head about Christ to enter his heart, his schedule, his entire way of life. He took on Jesus' spirituality of simplicity. Praying without ceasing, cheerfully giving, basking in the quiet that speaks, ever mindful that there is no condemnation or separation from the love of God in Christ Jesus. This filled him up and rescued him from the folly of entitlement.

Thus, Paul's future is not primarily about him. It's about God. Specifically, it's about "*the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord*" and being "*found in him*." This is Paul's hunger—to know Christ. This hunger is partially satisfied through being found *in Christ* where the faithfulness of Christ has achieved for him and for us a status of righteousness (3:9).

For Paul, the precise meaning of being “**in Christ**” varies from context to context, but to be “**in Christ**” **principally means to be under the influence of Christ's power, especially the power to be conformed to him and his cross, by participation in the life of a community that acknowledges his lordship.**

Being “**in Christ**” refers to the experience not merely of the individual but of the community, into which the person of faith is baptized and in which he or she coexists with others (Rom 8:1; 1 Cor 9:1; Gal 3:28; Gal 5:6). The Christ in whom believers live also lives in them, both individually and corporately. Just as believers have been baptized into Christ's story, so also his story is relived in and among the baptized. It is the gift of God which we receive by faith.

Philippians 3:7-11



Yet Paul hungers for more than a declaration that he has been “set right” (righteousness) in Christ.

He wants to know Christ and the power of his resurrection.

He wants to share the path that Christ walked through suffering, death, and resurrection (which echoes the Christ hymn of 2:6-11).

He wants to become like Jesus.

Those who are in Christ share his faith, his righteousness, and his resurrection—but only if they are prepared to share also in “his sufferings.” This is an experience that has already begun for Paul and the Philippians.

Paul has already said, “To live is Christ and to die is gain.” Under the threat of death for following and preaching Jesus, he believed that his “present afflictions are not worthy to be compared with the glory that will be revealed in us” (Rom. 8.18). You can't say those words until you've lost something and seen Jesus change it into abundance. You can't declare Christ as all sufficient until you know it yourself.

As verse 10 clarifies, *knowing Christ* doesn't mean to have knowledge about him but to know him personally and relationally.

Paul has thus taken up the OT theme of *knowing* God and applied it to Christ. It means to know him as child and parent know each other, or wife and husband—knowledge based on personal experience and intimate relationship—and thus to know Christ's character intimately. **In Jeremiah 9:23-24, those who “boast” in the Lord do so because they “understand and know” God, which is then spelled out in terms of God's “kindness, justice, and righteousness.”** It is this kind of knowing Christ that Paul spells out in 3:10-11.

Being conformed to Christ's death is an ongoing process in the life of the believer (2 Cor 4:10-12), but attaining the “resurrection from the dead” clearly lies in the future—even though we already know the power of Christ's resurrection in our lives!

It is the power of Christ's resurrection that is at work in Paul's life and our own, even in the midst of suffering, that provides the assurance of both his—and our own—future resurrection.

Reflections

1

The Challenge of Faith

The passion and personal nature of Paul's words reflect one who has known firsthand a complete life makeover and reorientation to a new Lord, for whose sake "all things" are now comparatively worthless. Paul cannot but write fervently and personally about this new path and participation in Christ's work—partially to instruct others, but no less to reflect his own experience. Paul describes his own leap of faith as giving up everything he had gained—laying aside full confidence in his own capacity to navigate the world—for the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus as Lord. For Paul, this marked a decisive turning point in the way he understood his identity, his values, and his purpose for living. "I want to be like Jesus." That's how Paul summarizes his new purpose. That's what drives his ultimate dreams and greatest desires. In this way, Paul calls us to see that faith is deeper than having a particular religious heritage or all the right beliefs. Faith requires a renovation of the heart—training ourselves to see and embrace the surpassing value of knowing Jesus.

2

The Sharing of Christ's Sufferings

Paul's life goal is the *koinōnia* of Christ's sufferings (the fruit of his self-giving love), meaning sharing in and conforming to his death, and as a result, intimate knowledge of the power of his resurrection (3:10). Whenever Paul makes autobiographical statements, he is offering himself as an example to be imitated — "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ" (1 Cor 11:1). He wants the Philippians, and all who hear or read this letter to them, to have this kind of intimate communion (*koinōnia*) with Christ — participation in his death and resurrection — as their life goal. This participation in Christ, especially in his death, is a shared activity with other believers and comes to fruition in concrete practices of sacrificial, generous, self-giving love.

Sharing in Christ's sufferings and the power of Christ's resurrection requires the willingness to let go of status and significance in the eyes of the culture in which we live. Nothing we have been, nor that we have worked for previously, is of value unless it is rooted in and built upon the foundation of Christ. It also requires the willingness to be obedient to the values and ethos of the kingdom of God. These values are summed up in love of God; love for one other; love for one's enemies; love for the outcast; love for all of creation. As Paul prays in Philippians 1:9, "And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more ..."

3

The Focus of Our Lives

Paul's words raise the natural question for us, as believers and as a church community: What superficial "gains" has Christ shown to be "loss" for us? In light of this text, we may reflect on what we value most as individuals and as a church. Perhaps we tend to value certain inherited qualities or achievements as "gains" that we perceive give us value before God. Spend some time taking inventory of your values and achievements. Make a list of what you think they are. Then consider the economy of your life at this moment: Where are you spending your energy? What consumes your imagination? What are your deepest anxieties? What do you spend your time pursuing? If you joined Paul in identifying your highest value as the pursuit of Christ's character in your life, your gifts, your situation — what would be different?

Discussion

Philippians 3:1-6

1. Name a group or organization you are part of. How does that group define “membership”?
2. What does Paul mean when he says that the church is “the circumcision”?
3. Why is it important for Paul to describe the quality of Jew he was under the Law?
4. In what ways are you tempted to define yourself by something other than Jesus?

Philippians 3:7-11

5. Describe something in your life that is valuable to you? Why is it so valuable?
6. What does Paul say he had to give up in order to “know Christ Jesus my Lord”? What superficial “gains” in your life has Christ shown to be “loss” or “worthless” to you?
7. How does Paul draw on the Christ hymn of 2:6-11 to shape his understanding of what it means to be the Church? Based on what Paul says in these verses, how would you describe the relationship between faith and faithfulness?
8. What does it mean to “know Christ”? Where has knowing Christ compelled you to say “No” to the priorities of our culture in order to pursue the things that truly matter?
9. How does Paul’s idea of sharing in Christ’s sufferings challenge you? What would it look like for your life to be more fully defined by Christ’s faithfulness?