

Sermon Notes of Rev.Dr.I.J.W.Oakley (5-4-1992 Cleland Baptist Church)

Philippians 3:10

Additional Bible reading: Psalm 42 & 63

Introduction

In today's verse, Paul summarizes his ambition. **I want to know Christ and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of sharing in His sufferings, becoming like Him in death** (Philippians 3:10). To many Christians, this may appear a very narrow ambition, with very few aims for life, and all centred on Christ. This is because many Christians are just dabblers, with their fingers in many pies, interested in many things at the same level – making money, keeping ahead at work, and keeping up with the neighbours, all at the same level as their Christian ambitions.

To Paul, life was too short to dabble. He needed to be single-minded. Christ was the Mount Everest of his ambition, his one and only goal, and all else was related to that. Other things were allowed, only if they served this one aim. His master passion was Christ, that was who he lived for, that was his guiding light in all choices. Nothing was allowed to obscure this – Christ, His glory, will, power, purposes and blessing. **For me to live is Christ** (Philippians 1:21).

This is a challenge to us in the church now. Why are we here? Out of habit, duty, to pass the time? Or are we longing for Christ?

Paul aimed to know the person of Christ

There are many ways of describing the Christian. He believes in Christ, he has received Christ, he has come to Christ, and also he knows Christ. **The surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord** (Philippians 3:8). **Now this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent** (John 17:3). Paul enjoyed a direct contact, personal relationship with Christ. He “knew” his master, and desired that this knowledge might grow and enlarge. He did not merely know about Christ, or just follow His example, or serve His church. But he knew Him personally; he trusted Him and had experienced Him.

Paul's ambition is remarkable because, by our standards, Paul was already advanced in his knowledge and experience of the Lord. He taught others, went on three great missionary journeys, wrote many letters, had an impressive prayer-life, as reflected in his letter to the Ephesians. Yet he was convinced there were depths and riches still to be explored. He could say with the Psalmist, **As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul thirsts for you. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God** (Psalm 42:1,2). The deer is hunted and exhausted, longing for water brooks to satisfy his thirst. The Psalmist describes himself in the same terms, **O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you, in a dry and weary land where there is no water** (Psalm 63:1). This is not a man weighing up whether or not to have a third cup of tea. No, he is in the desert, has not drunk for hours, his mouth is parched, his tongue swollen, and he would give anything for water.

That is how Paul feels for God. His passion is for Christ. He is wrapped up in Him. Christ means the world to him, and he will never be content or satisfied without Him. He is never content with his present attainments.

Ignatius, second century martyr, "Give me burning, hanging and all the torments of hell – if I may get my Saviour, I would fain be content to bear them all as a price." Samuel Rutherford, imprisoned in an Aberdeen dungeon, "My enemies thought they sent me to a dungeon, but Christ has been so precious to me I thought it was a King's parlour and paradise of God."

What of us? Are we passionate in our desire to know Him? Is our prayer-life cold and formal, or are we urgently longing for Him? How about the church's prayer meeting? Are we regular and faithful? Do we go along to present out weekly shopping list? Or do we long for Christ? Is our Christian life more than sound doctrine, how much we give, how many hours we spend in His service? Or are we concerned to know Christ, His person, knowing Him better, longing for Him?

The power of His resurrection

It is important that this comes second. Some people want the blessings, but not the blesser; the gifts, but not the giver.

*"Once it was the blessing,
Now it is the Lord.
Once it was the feeling,
Now it is His Word.
Once His gifts I wanted,
Now the giver own.
Once I sought for healing,
Now Himself alone."*

The Apostle looks back at the resurrection. The dead body of the Lord was laid in the tomb. But then there was a mighty display of power which raised Him. His glorious resurrection body had new powers, abilities and properties. He was exalted to be the Son of God with power. After the resurrection came the ascension, and He is now seated at the right hand of God. All authority is His in heaven and earth. Paul saw in this the greatest power of God in action. Only God could do that.

Paul wanted that power in his own life. He felt he was such a feeble creature. He was called to holiness of life, to be like Christ, conformed to His image, to face the wiles of the devil, the downward pull of the world, the pull of the flesh, called to serve, to preach, give pastoral care, counsel believers, warn and challenge unbelievers. How weak he felt in the face of all that he was called to. He had no strength or power of his own to raise the spiritually dead, or give sight to the spiritually blind, to care for all those churches with their problems, squabbles, weaknesses, difficult people. How could he face that? He needed power outside of him. He came into touch with the divine power on the Damascus road, and his life was revolutionized. He became a new creation, a new person, a new man. But it was essential that he should know that daily in his life.

There are unknown, untapped resources in Christ, depths and riches yet to be known. Paul longed to explore all there is in Christ. The resurrection was not just a past event in history. It makes a vital difference to the life of the individual believer. It inspired a wealth of great phrases from Paul: **Christ in you, the hope of glory; Christ lives in me; For me to live is Christ; Christ dwelling in the heart by faith.** What possibilities and potential there is because of the resurrection of Christ. We need to possess our possessions. When we are in the grip of the absolute master, we find in Him the secret of life and peace.

The story of a steamer going to Florida. One passenger had to pay nearly all his savings for a ticket. He brought his own bread and cheese with him, to last as long as possible. But once it had gone stale, he got very hungry. Three times a day the most appetizing smells came from the kitchen. The day before the end of the crossing he became frantic and asked the steward bearing a great plate of turkey how much it cost. The reply was “Nothing. All the meals were covered and paid for in your ticket.”

He who did not spare his own son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? (Romans 8:32). Am I living the Christian life, and forgetting that Christ is in me? Am I living on my own resources, depending on myself? We need to know Christ’s power in the same way Paul longed for, whether we are Sunday School teachers, preachers, Christians living in a hostile home or a hard work-place, going through a trying time – we all need the power, wisdom and grace of the risen Lord.

Stop living below your privileges. **Remain in me and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me** (John 15:4). If you abide in Him, you will bear fruit, and more fruit, and much fruit. When we are submitted to and trusting in Christ, that makes life an entirely different thing.

The privilege of suffering

We can understand the first two points, but this one is much more difficult. Suffering is a painful experience. Who would want that? Jesus made it clear that discipleship was costly. He constantly told would-be disciples to count the cost. Yet at the same time, suffering can be the occasion of rejoicing. **Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven** (Matthew 5:11,12). **The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name** (Acts 5:41). Paul and Silas sung praise to God at midnight in the jail (Acts 16). **Rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ** (1 Peter 4:13). And here in Philippians Paul says it is his ambition to share in Christ’s sufferings.

Fear of suffering is something we all know. It keeps some people from conversion, for they are afraid of the reaction of their friends. It keeps some Christians from baptism and openly declaring that they are on the Lord’s side. It makes some keep quiet about their faith in certain company.

The Bible says suffering as a Christian is inevitable. **Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted** (2 Timothy 3:12). Paul's list of his sufferings in 2 Corinthians 11:23f includes being beaten and stoned, peril from the sea and from bandits, being shipwrecked, hungry, thirsty, cold and naked. And yet he counted this a privilege. His reason was the spiritual blessing it brings. It was in these times that he experienced God's power. In weakness he became strong. The power of Christ visibly rested on him.

So our suffering brings Christ near. We realize His grace and power when we suffer, and we are strengthened and encouraged. Unbelievers are challenged. God is glorified and our faith is deepened.

John Woodrow, a Glasgow merchant, wrote to his wife on the day of his execution as a Covenanter, "I thought I had known my dearest Lord before. But never was He so with me as since I came within the walls of this prison. He is without all comparison. O love, love Him. O taste and see. And that shall resolve the question best."

The price to be paid for these experiences

Paul wants to become like Christ in His death. How nice it would be to close now and say all these things are ours for the asking. But the text does not allow for that. We have to consider what it means to be conformed to His death, identified with Him in His death, like Him in His death, share with Him in His death. We need to ask the question, what are the hindrances to these aspirations being fulfilled in my life? Why do I know and want to know so little of Christ in my life? Who gets in the way? I do. Why do I know so little of His power? Whom do I trust first of all? Myself.

To be conformed to His death means dying to sin, its claims and authority. So I must die to it in the form of self. Reject it, deny it, turn back on it, and refuse it. Die to every hindrance that comes between Christ and my soul.

George Muller's secret: "There was a day when I died. Died utterly - died to George Muller, his opinions, preferences, tastes and will; died to the world, its approval and censure; died to the blame or approval of my brethren and friends. And since then, I have studied only to show myself approved unto God."

We must reckon ourselves dead to sin and alive to God. This is being identified with Christ in His death. The less we think of self, the more we think of Christ.

Conclusion

Paul's overwhelming aim in life was to know the person of Christ, experience the power of His resurrection, the privilege of suffering, and he was prepared to pay the price of conformity to His death. Let us examine ourselves. This is a commendable ambition. These things are important, and they ought to be ours. The only way we shall make progress.

Life is very full for all of us. We have to live in the real world, have a house to run, job to do, and family to care for. All these things are legitimate and proper. Yet over

and above all else should be Christ and our relationship to Him. We should not be content to be an outer court worshipper. He should be central.

What a change there would be if these words were really laid hold of by Christians. There would be changes in our lives. Our churches would turn upside down. The world would sit up and take notice. Christ would be uplifted and glorified.