



Fifth Sunday of Lent
Light of Christ Anglican Church
The Rev. Mike Moffitt
April 3, 2022

In Order That I May Gain Christ

Text: [Philippians 3:7-16](#)

Years ago a friend of ours was walking through a hotel where he was staying while texting on his cell phone. He was lost in what he was texting and walked right into a wall. He hit pretty hard but stayed on his feet. He looked around to see if anyone noticed and there was only one woman coming down a hallway who noticed.

He wanted to see the video of what he had done. So he found the security office at the hotel, and they gladly provided him with a copy of the video. In the video you can see that as soon as he turned away the woman put her hand over her mouth to muffle the laughter.

He then posted it on YouTube along with some commentary. A few days later YouTube contacted him asking if they could advertise next to his video and they would share the revenue with him. Of course, he said, "sure."

When I first saw the video of course I laughed but as I thought about it later I saw this as a wonderful object lesson, reminding us of the danger of letting your attention be diverted from the goal of the "*upward call of God in Christ Jesus*" that Paul refers to in Philippians 3:14.

Today is the 5th Sunday in Lent, a season where our focus is to be on the cross of Christ and the seriousness of our sins because they separate us

from the holiness of God. Today we will be focusing on our passage from [Philippians 3](#), primarily on verses 12–16.

In other sermons I have shared that years ago [Philippians 3:7–11](#) had a major impact on me as I focused on the need to know more of Christ in my life. I was moved that Paul saw the loss of all things, which in his case was his role as a Pharisee, his reputation in the synagogue, his family and most of his Jewish friends, and of course his safety. In other words, everything that he once held dear and as of first importance.

I wondered why he would consider all that as rubbish (which is actually translated as excrement or dung) in comparison to what he had gained in Christ? What had he gained in Christ? What changed his mind?

This is what I wanted to know, not just intellectually, but way down deep in my soul and it was his prayer that floored me. I understood why he would want to know Christ in the power of the resurrection, that made perfect sense, who wouldn't? But to be like Christ in his sufferings and death? Why would he want that? I felt the Holy Spirit reminding me of Paul's encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus, where he intended to arrest the Christians there and throw them into prison. Acts 9:3–6 reminds us what happened,

Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do."

Paul had been a faithful Pharisee, zealous for the law of God, which is why he persecuted those in the church, whom he felt had turned away from the

law of God and were blaspheming. In Philippians 3:6 he writes concerning his former life, *“as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.”* In Christ, Paul moved from “behavioral righteous” where he had hoped to gain an advantage with God by keeping the law, to “positional righteousness” given by God to those who come to Christ by faith alone. Now he would be seen by God as righteous because of Christ's righteousness.

For all his striving to be righteous according to the law, Paul had yet to meet the one who had given the law to Israel. The encounter that Paul had with Jesus that day changed everything in his life, even to the point that he was willing to suffer and die for the glory of Christ. Whatever he would suffer was worth it because of what it meant to him to encounter Jesus, so that he could say, *“becoming like him in death, that by any means possible I may obtain the resurrection from the dead.”*

Years ago I began praying the same prayer as Paul because I wanted to encounter Jesus in the same way that Paul did. I reasoned that it didn't matter what it cost me if I could encounter the resurrected Lord, the creator of all things. If measured by outward righteousness Paul seemed to be a man of God, zealous for the law of God. Within Judaism Paul seemed completely sold out to God.

I couldn't claim that but I knew that if measured by outward righteousness I was a dead man walking. However, I found out that I could never be righteous enough to earn my way into God's presence, nobody could. Trying and failing over and over again drove me crazy because I assumed that my guilt made God despise me. I had missed the point of the cross. I needed an encounter with him, that would set me free from guilt and shame and change me into the man Jesus wanted me to be.

In this I discovered that the ultimate goal is not to be able to keep the rules but to intimately know the one who created us. What God has for us in Christ is far more personal and wonderful than just woodenly keeping the law. It's having an encounter with the lawgiver who changes the law from a burden to a joy. Instead of a heavyweight that is far too heavy a burden to carry, it changes us so that we see it as the way to live in joy and peace with the Master.

Paul found that his righteousness would never be enough, but through faith he could be acquitted and set free because of Christ's righteousness. Coming to that understanding changed everything for Paul and it's still changing everything for me.

Paul was not saying that everything would now be all rosy (all glory without pain), but neither did he know anything of the rather gloomy stoicism that is often presented by many as the life of Christians in historic Christianity. I have had people tell me that they believed that Christianity took all the fun out of life. That wasn't Paul's experience nor is it mine.

I recently watched a video series on the lives and teachings of the Puritans, who were a religious reform movement in the late 16th and 17th centuries. The series is entitled, *Puritan: All of Life to the Glory of God*. What initially attracted me to the series was the tagline advertising it.

If you think the Puritans are defined by scarlet letters and witch burnings, you really don't know these physicians of the soul.

I became acquainted with many Puritan writers like Thomas Watson, Jonathan Edwards, John Owen, Richard Sibbs, John Bunyan, Thomas Goodwin, and many more. What I found were men of God who had a passion and dedication to God and therefore His Word was more precious than gold. They had such joy in their relationship with Jesus Christ and

they were instrumental in teaching the truth and purity to be found in God's Word. They were instrumental in showing how all of life is to be lived to the glory of God.

They discovered along with the Apostle Paul that life lived in the power of Christ's resurrection was the greatest reality for the life of the Christian. Paul was so convinced of what happened on the cross of Christ by the encounter that he had with the Risen Lord on the Damascus Road. He came to understand that Christ's resurrection guaranteed his own. He could throw himself into the present with a kind of holy abandon, full of rejoicing and thanksgiving; not because he enjoyed suffering, but because Christ's resurrection had given him a unique perspective on present suffering, as well as an empowering presence whereby the suffering was transformed into intimate fellowship with Christ himself.

For Paul the Christian life was not simply a matter of salvation and ethics but was ultimately about knowing Christ. Even in the resurrection, Paul's sole focus was not on the life to come, but all his focus and efforts were on the prize of knowing Christ Jesus himself and making Him known to others. In our passage he admitted that this was his journey, as it should be for all who call themselves Christ-followers. However, it would be a lifelong struggle in this fallen world, but it was worth it.

So with that background let's turn to [Philippians 3:12-14](#),

Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

As many of you know, during this Lenten season we have the Tuesday night Lenten Soup Suppers. It's a great time of fellowship around different wonderful offerings of soup provided by different people each week. In our Lenten study we have been considering the imagery and reality of "the Mountains of God." Last week we looked at the invitation to Moses to enter the "glory of God" within the cloud that descended on Mount Zion in [Exodus 24:15-18](#). It's such a compelling story because God didn't invite Moses to come into His presence because he was so righteous, but that he had made a burnt offering to the Lord for sin and a peace offering, a fragrant aroma to God in preparation for entering God's holiness within the cloud of glory. Moses offered this sacrifice because he knew that he would be approaching the great "I Am."

Moses alone entered the cloud as Israel's representative and the mediator of the covenant made with God on behalf of Israel. Of course all this would point to Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension back to the Father where He lives as the mediator of a better covenant.

Paul understood this and found his hope in the resurrection and Lordship of Jesus Christ, as should we.

Often there can be the tendency to assume that at this point in Paul's ministry he had arrived at a level of maturity and strength that made him the constant victor over sin and temptation. He is reminding his reader that nothing could be further from the truth.

In 2 Corinthians 1:8 Paul wrote,

for I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself.

Later in the same letter he would write in 2 Corinthians 4:7-11,

But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh.

Paul needed Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit to accomplish in him all that God had commanded, just like you and me. He grew weary of the struggle; he felt the pain of suffering even to the point that he wanted to be done with all of it and simply go home to be with the Lord. He grew impatient with those in the church who were not willing to lay down their lives for the sake of Christ's glory and honor. I have no doubt that at times he cried out to God, "I'm done with it. I can't take this anymore!"

You have to ask the question, "Why would Paul continue to put himself in situations where he suffered so greatly?" It doesn't seem normal, does it? By nature, human beings flee suffering. It's amazing how many products are available for sale that are claimed to be able to give us a healthy and pain-free life. Vitamins have become a billion-dollar industry as has the purified water industry. We do everything we can to be safe and protected from harm's way.

I've never seen an advertising campaign inviting people to suffer or to give up their lives for something more important. It's counter-intuitive and yet Paul speaks of suffering as a way of encountering Christ and knowing him more intimately.

Paul gives us the reason that he is willing to suffer and die in our passage in Philippians 3:12b, “...*but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.*” I love the wordplay here. He has “*not yet*” attained perfection but “*Christ Jesus has made me his own*”, so he will “*press on.*” I think that Paul made it his habit of remembering his story from the beginning on the road to Damascus, where he first encountered the risen Savior. Sometimes it is helpful to remember your beginnings and victories through Jesus as a shot of adrenaline for continuing the race. It’s helpful for us to speak of the victories that we have had in Christ so that others might be encouraged to follow him as well.

Why had Jesus made Paul his own? Paul knew why because in Damascus Jesus sent Ananias to tell Paul what he must do. Acts 9:15–16,

But the Lord said to Ananias, “Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.”

In other words, suffering was simply a part of the apostolic calling upon his life. To be faithful to his calling he had to embrace what Jesus had called him to do—which included suffering. Paul had begun the letter to the Philippians by exhorting the church at Philippi to be willing to suffer.

In Philippians 1:27–30,

Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, and not frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God. For it has been granted to you

that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake, engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.

We can see here that for Paul suffering is not limited to apostles only but should be seen as a gift for all those who believe. Was this merely the opinion of Paul or was it to be seen as ordinary for every Christian? Jesus was very upfront to those who listened to His teaching. He told the crowd in Luke 9:23–24,

And He said to all, "if anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it."

Paul was focused on one thing and would not let those things which are behind distract him from it. He pressed on for the prize. We often let those things which are behind distract us, whether they be good things or bad things. Looking at what is in the past often keeps us from what God has for us in the future.

If you're like me, the enemy likes to whisper in my ear that I am not worthy because of things bad things I did in the past. Certainly, Paul had many times been reminded by Satan that he had been responsible for the persecution and death of many Christians before he encountered Christ. It is a deception to live either in the past or in the future; God wants us to press on in the present because the present is where eternity touches us now. Paul knew that a race is won only in the present moment, not in the past or in the future.

"I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." The prize is the upward call of God. Just like in Exodus 24 where

Moses was invited to enter the glory cloud into the presence of God on Mount Sinai. The prize is the call itself to encounter God. The prize is being able to run the race and working with God as a servant-partner to do the work of His kingdom. Paul knew that the calling had come from the heart of God and that made it holy and wonderful. It was a summons from Christ who sits at the right hand of the Father.

Paul's life had become one thing and one thing only—the pursuit of Christ. It had become his singular passion to know him in the power of the resurrection and that became the goal of his pursuit. The metaphor here is likened to a race where the finish line must be kept in view.

Paul knew that there was never a shortage of things to take his focus off of his pursuit of Jesus which is why he needed to focus intently on the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. He also knew that the more he found Christ in the middle of suffering the less he was inclined to find satisfaction in himself and the world.

Malcomb Muggeridge, the Christian journalist, who lived long enough to have a realistic view of the illusion of painlessness, wrote,

Contrary to what might be expected, I look back on experiences that at the time seemed especially desolating and painful with particular satisfaction. Indeed, I can say with complete truthfulness that everything I have learned in my seventy-five years in this world, everything that has truly enhanced and enlightened my existence, has been through affliction and not through happiness, whether pursued or attained...this of course, is what the cross of Christ signifies, and it is the cross more than anything else, that has called me inexorably to Christ.

In conclusion, let's read Philippians 3:15–16,

Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. Only let us hold true to what we have attained.

Paul is speaking to those who are mature in their faith and those who consider themselves to be so but maybe aren't. He is challenging each one to evaluate their priorities as to whether they line up with the upward call that God has on their lives or not. He is calling the church at Philippi to be united in their pursuit of Christ and the building of the kingdom of God. It would come with a price but should be seen as well worth it in light of the prize of knowing Jesus intimately.

In our Gospel reading this morning from [Luke 20:9–19](#) Jesus was addressing the religious leaders who were questioning his authority to teach by speaking to them in a parable of the tenants. At the end of the parable they clearly realized that he was speaking of them as the wicked tenants and Jesus was claiming to be the owner's Son, whom they were rejecting. He quotes to them from Psalm 118:22, *“The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.”* They would have been very familiar with this Messianic Psalm, but next Jesus refers to the danger of opposing him. If they tripped over the cornerstone, they would be injured but if the stone fell on them, they would be crushed. They wanted to arrest him but were afraid to because the people saw Jesus as a great prophet. In claiming to be the cornerstone Jesus was actually saying much more. Let me read to you Psalm 118:22 but add in verses 23–24,

“The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.

This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it."

People often quote this verse to imply that every day we should rejoice simply because God made it. Even though this is true I don't believe it's the point of this passage. The Psalmist was declaring that there would be a day where the stone that the builders rejected would be the cornerstone that the kingdom would be built upon. Jesus was claiming that he was that cornerstone. They wanted to kill him for claiming such a seemingly blasphemous thing. The Christian church has found out that making this claim is also dangerous even today.

Christianity is built upon Jesus Christ as the cornerstone. The cornerstone is the first stone set in the construction of a masonry foundation. All other stones are set in reference to this stone, which in effect determines the position of the entire structure. The enemy of God knows very well that Jesus is the cornerstone but will do anything that he can to stop you and me from realizing it. Because we know this we should be diligent in proclaiming Jesus as Lord. Paul was teaching the Philippians that suffering for preaching this gospel of the Lordship of Jesus Christ over all creation and the ONLY way to salvation should be expected. Paul found this out but he also knew that the prize of knowing Jesus as the foundation of God's kingdom would make it well worth it.

Let's pray.

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