

Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> January 2019  
The highest priority of the Christian life.  
Philippians 3.1-16

The beginning of a new year it is a good time to do something other than making resolutions about weight or exercise, good as those may be, but to have a personal spiritual examination to consider how we have fared in the past year. It is important to consider how our sails are set, and what course we have plotted. In other words, to consider where we have come from, where we are going, and how we plan to get there. Self-examination is enjoined on us in Scripture, and it is often a painful and difficult thing to do. It is part of our fallen nature to view our actions in the best light, and we are all experienced practitioners of this, and have been since the fall!

This passage in Philippians chapter 3 gives us a glimpse into Paul's passion, course and desired destination in life. It appears to contain both negative and positive aspects, but in actual fact, it is all positive.

The key part of this passage, for our purpose today, is found in verse 10. Paul wants to 'know Christ and the power of His resurrection,' and 'to share in the sufferings of Christ,' and so on. This is the course that Paul has been set on from his conversion. He is determined to pursue this same course, and even though he has to adapt to contrary tides, winds, storms and many other delays and set-backs, yet he has set his eye on one port of destination, and one alone, that of Christ Himself. All that he does flows from this one goal.

There is an old hymn that begins, 'My goal is God Himself, not joy nor peace, nor even blessing, but Himself, my God.' It may be old, but it states in verse what this passage in Philippians is all about. Few Christians today sing this song, partly because they don't know of it, and if they do, it takes courage to engage with these high concepts and realities. The next verses of this hymn do not speak about joys and flowery beds of comfort, but of steep slopes and a hard pilgrimage, topics that our generation does not like to think about! This is not a hymn for the faint hearted, but for those who can look life square in the eye and say, that no matter what, Christ is the one we will follow! However, even the faint hearted can aspire to such a goal as God Himself.

Paul has set his sights on this pursuit of God. He wants to know Christ. This is more than a knowledge of information and facts, this is something that goes to the heart. When you hear your husband or wife, or child on the phone, assuming it is not a bad line, we know at once who we are speaking to. There is a warmth – usually – in this encounter, because there is a personal knowledge and a history with that person. No matter how nice the person is on the end of a help line, it is different from having a conversation with someone with whom we have a long and intimate shared history. This is akin to the knowledge that Paul is alluding to.

However, that is not the end of the package that Paul speaks of. Along with this intimate knowing of Christ, His person, not what He gives or promises in the first place, but who He is in Himself, there is a desire to know the power of Christ's resurrection.

Every person who believes in Jesus, who becomes aligned with Christ by faith, who is born again, has the principle of the resurrection life of Christ at work within. It is this life of Christ in us which makes us a Christian in the first place, and which will take us to heaven after death. However, Paul has something more in mind than this. This is the power of the resurrection life of Christ at work in our daily lives. Now think about this. How can we have resurrection power at work in us unless there is also death at work as well? Resurrection is only pertinent where there is death. The death which Paul has in mind is not physical death, although many of us could testify to the many providence's of God that have saved us from all sorts of injuries, but the death that comes from taking up our cross and following Jesus. These includes the conflict that we have as Christians from living in a beautiful but fallen world, the malice and strategies of the devil, and the mortification of indwelling sin within us. We are called to follow Christ, and life often crossed His path. Think of Joseph, remember how the path of God for him took him to some unexpected, unpleasant and troubling place!

Paul then adds on a reference to sharing the sufferings of Christ. This can include a lot of things. We are told in Hebrews to consider Christ and all the hardships that He endured. We are told that as He was in the world, so our experience would resonate with His. Today in the West, our focus, even in the Church, is so much on ourselves, our comfort, the avoidance of anything troubling or difficult, is it any wonder we find ourselves and our nation and the Church in such a low ebb? We are called in Scripture to be soldiers of the Cross. C. T Studd, a missionary from a past age once wrote a sermon where he compared many in his generation as being either chocolate tea pots, or chocolate soldiers. I can't remember which it was, but either way, we can see his point, we melt when the heat comes on!

None of us likes suffering, but the Bible says a great deal about it, its use and how to see our troubles redeemed and sanctified for our good. We tend to avoid anything which smacks of trouble. We tell children that a dead grandparent has become a star in the sky, or is just next door in a room which is closed to us! Do we really think that this will help anyone prepare either for the death of a relative or our own death?

The path through life is never smooth or straight. We wander, drift, get blown off course, get buffeted by storms and waves, but we can reset our course back on track. Christ Himself gives us the compass, the Scriptures. Paul was shipwrecked a number of times, literally, and was often buffeted by storms. Please get hold of an old hymn book, you will be astonished that the experiences of the past generations are exactly the same as those we face. Our generation and experience is not unique. The troubles and distractions may not be invading forces, or the stage, but we have our own distractions, the internet and the pursuit of pleasures. Human nature does not change, only the details of the distractions!

However, no matter what happened in Paul's life, his goal was the same, to pursue the knowledge of Christ. This can and should also be our goal if sincere in our faith. Indeed, verse 15 tells us that this outlook is that of maturity. Here we have a litmus test of both sincerity of faith and maturity of faith! For Paul, Christ was his guiding star, his port of departure, and his port of destination.

Many people see a negative reference in this passage, and there is a sense in which it is so. However, look at verse 8. We often think that what Paul is alluding to is his days before he became Paul, his days as a Pharisee and persecutor of the Church, his days as Saul. Now it is true that Paul had finished with all that. He did not forget these days. He remembered them so as to be thankful to God for delivering him from what he was into Paul the apostle. These memories humbled him and made him meek. What Paul is principally referring to is this, he is even rejecting the good things. He is not camping out on past achievements, he is not feeding on yesterday's manna, but is pressing on to journey forward today into new grace and mercy which is new every morning.

Paul despised all that had gone before, not because it was all bad, but because he wanted to travel light and not be encumbered with weights that held him back from following after Christ. He does this because of, 'the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ.' It is because of this that Paul dares to lose and cast of all things. We often think of Saul the persecutor of the Church, but this is Paul the Apostle, the passionate follower after Christ. Yesterday's manna was left behind so that he could pursue Christ today. It was out of delight in Christ, the beauty of knowing Him, of being lovesick for Him that drew Paul on.

All that is about pressing on to know Christ, but Paul attaches the power of Christ's resurrection and suffering to it. We cannot truly know Christ apart from, and without, encountering a need to be resurrected and the experience of suffering. Ouch!

Resurrection – the Christian life is one of dying to ourselves, taking up our own cross, being buffeted by the world, the devil, of confronting our own indwelling sin and corruption and daily dying to ourselves, our wills and our preferences. This is death. Christ offers resurrection. To whom does this promise apply? To those who take up their cross and die to themselves! We have to die before we get resurrected! Do we believe this, or avoid it? In 2 Corinthians 1 verses 8-9. We read Paul's personal testimony. Even the mighty Paul experienced this dynamic of death leading to resurrection. There can be no resurrection without the death, and the thing is, we are to die to ourselves, even if there is no resurrection! Sometimes, there is even despair of life before resurrection comes! Read the passage. If this was Paul's experience, should we expect anything less?

Then there is the fellowship of Christ's sufferings. John 8 verse 12 gives us information regarding this. The light of life is promised to those who follow Christ. What does it mean to follow Christ? It sounds good, but how do we know if we are doing this or only paying lip service to it? To follow Christ is to trust Him, to have faith in Him and so obey Him no matter what. Do we think that this is an easy path? Read the biographies of the

missionaries, the Reformers and those who have lived through times of revival and community transformation. We will read of heroic faith, robust faith, faith that looked to Christ when everywhere else was, 'sinking sand,' when everything around gave way. This is faith that listens to the Word of God, not to the spurious wisdom of the world or emotionalism, or our own desires. Do you remember one of the reasons the Hebrews gave for not going into the Promised Land? They said that it would be too risky for their children. In fact, it was the children who got into the land not the generations of their elders who were fearful and unbelieving. Sadly this generation also went astray. Perhaps they did so because the parents modeled fear and not trust? Trust, faith and obedience often leads to suffering, but this leads to the working of spiritual life within us, and spiritual life is eternal, so worth it!

What was it that motivated Paul to such a pursuit of Christ?

It was not fear of hell, nor was it the desire for personal blessing, it was the raw and naked desire to know Christ Himself, because Christ was becoming daily more desirable to him, more beautiful, more worthy, and more lovely to him. The love of God was constraining him to ever increasing love for Christ. Faber said it best when he said, 'for those who love God cannot love Him by measure, for their love is but hunger to love Him still better.'

Are we discovering day by day, week by week, year by year, that Christ is becoming altogether more desirable and precious to us, His person, even more than His providences and blessings? Is Christ increasing in our awareness and thoughts, do we ever taste of what Sarah Edwards wrote about during a revival in New England in the 1700's. She spoke of, and felt, 'the nearness and the dearness of Christ.' This is what Paul is after.

Why is this desire for, and pressing on after Christ to be the prime objective of our lives?

This is important because as I have often said before, who we are is more important in the first instance than what we do. Character is for eternity, good works will pass with this life. Both must exist, but there is an order which we need to note. I do not think many believe this to be true. We live in an age when we pride ourselves that humanity can achieve anything.

Genesis 4 verse 4-5 'The Lord looked with favour on Abel and his offering.' God looked at Abel first, and because he was 'right', God accepted the offering. The person comes first, not the offering. There are many good things in themselves which people do, even 'giving their bodies to be burned', but if the person is not right, the offering is not acceptable to God!

Matthew 23 verses 25-26. Jesus says to the Pharisees, that they should clean the inside of the cup, and not focus only on the outside. He goes further, and says that if the inside of the cup is cleansed, then the whole cup is clean!

Matthew 7.22-23. Jesus speaking again. 'Lord. Lord, did we not do, 'this and that? Yet without knowledge of God, the work is unacceptable to God. Paul speaks about building

with wood, hay and stubble, or gold, silver and precious stones. Looking back, I see a lot of building with what now looks like wood hay and stubble, not only personally, but in various denominations and congregations all over. So much time wasted in working in our own strength when God was not requiring such things from us. So many mud huts built that got washed away when the flood came, so little character formed, so little fruit grown.

What is it that Paul determines to do?

Philippians 3 verse 15. He will do the mature thing, he will press on to know Christ, His resurrection and sharing in the sufferings of Christ. This is maturity. The word translated 'press on' has the sense of the activity of a pack of hunting dogs who will not give up the chase until the quarry is run to ground. Proverbs 2 verses 1-8 gives us more insight into what pressing on means in the figure of digging for treasure. It has the sense of fleeing, making haste, pushing ahead. Think of a rugby scrum, pressing on even against opposition. All these ideas are contained in the word. It means to follow after Christ in the light, in the dark, to Golgotha, and to wait at the tomb until the third day. It is a pursuit of Christ that goes with Him in the green pastures and in the valley of the shadow. We love Psalm 23, but it is a Psalm about real life. Make a list of where the shepherd leads, and who brings us through these places, it may surprise us! Verse 3, why would we need our souls restored? Check out 1Peter 5 verse 10 and 11. What do you make of that?

Let me conclude with some practical suggestions of what can help us to press on after Christ. It refers to our time, energy and money, but mostly to time and energy, and perhaps that will affect our earning capacity, perhaps not.

1. Get a good Bible, with clear print and of a size that does not make you concentrate so much on peering at the text so that we can't concentrate on what we read.
2. Get hold of a Bible reading plan. Choose one that takes us through the whole Bible in a year or two years. The purpose of this is to familiarize ourselves with what is in the book, the history, poetry and so on, to become aware of the Parables Jesus told, and how He encountered the people
3. Read widely in the Scripture, but also read portions more slowly and take time to think about and pray about any verse or passage that arrests our attention and interest. This is how to start meditating on Scripture, the recommendation of Psalm 1 with a promise of blessing on those who do so. In meditation of Scripture, we ask ourselves questions. Who is this passage about? Is there a promise given, does it have conditions? Is there a command here? Does it tell me anything about God's Person, or Christ or the Holy Spirit. Even take notes! Ask ourselves if we are obeying God in this or not. Pray for forgiveness if we are disobedient or unbelieving in these matters. Ask God for more of the Holy Spirit's work in our hearts. Ask God to increase our faith, to open our spiritual eyes, to trust and depend upon Him.

4. Be circumspect and read over what we take into our minds through the media, the web, TV and all that. Be astute in our reading. If you don't read Christian literature, start to do so. If you read other things, they may be lawful to read, but they may not be helpful! Perhaps we need to ration screen time, novels, or whatever our fancy is.

5. Take the history of the early church seriously. Acts 2.42 is a watershed statement. Ensure we do not become lax and careless in receiving the apostles teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread and prayer. Avail ourselves of the opportunities to do these things in the congregation, risk a prayer gathering or Bible study or house group, be involved in the wider life of the congregation. If we start these things and are diligent in them, then we will grow in Christ and discover that Christ is becoming more and more desirable to us and less of a stranger to us.