

Pray

Reading

If you don't mind me asking rather a personal question: how satisfied are you with your Christian life? Is it all you hoped it would be? Or do you sense that it ought to be more than it is?

Do you think the Apostle Paul was satisfied with his Christian life? In one sense, I think the answer to that, is no. There's a restless desire to know Christ more intimately. I think you see that in our passage this week: Philippians chapter 3 verses 10-11. We're going to pick it up from verse 8.

This is the word of the Lord. Paul says:

8 ...I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that

depends on faith— 10 that I may know HIM and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, 11 that *by any means possible* I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

(Php 3:8–11)

Intro

It dawned on me as I prepared this sermon that at the time he was writing to the Philippians, Paul had been a Christian for about the same length of time as me. About thirty years.

And one of the remarkable things about that is that even thirty years after his conversion, Paul still speaks of Christ with the kind of single-minded hunger that we typically associate with brand new believers. “I want to KNOW Christ and the power of his resurrection, sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead” - thirty years on, he still sounds like an athlete in training who will do ANYTHING just to shave that extra millisecond off his best time. There’s no complacency in his Christian life.

In fact he says in verse 12, a verse that Larry will pick up next week: “Not that I have already attained all this, but I PRESS ON to make it my own”.

He’s striving to know Christ and become as much like him as he possibly can. It’s the kind of zeal that we typically associate with new believers.

I remember how it was for me. Easter 1992. EVERYTHING seemed miraculous to me. It felt like my desires had been changed almost overnight. People close to me commented on how different I seemed - even physically! And I was hungry to know more about this Jesus.

But then, I wonder if, for some of us at least, after that bright beginning there's a kind of spiritual midlife malaise that sets in. We're just not as excited as we once were about opening the Bible, or coming to church, or loving others. We no longer have that eager expectation that God can do something remarkable at any moment.

Can you relate to that? Maybe this morning you feel like you're in a holding pattern, like you're treading water, maybe even stagnating.

And you feel dissatisfied with that. You don't just want to get up each morning and live a life which to all intents and purposes is much like everyone else's life. You feel things ought to be different for a believer.

Paul would've agreed. Maybe you can echo the hunger in Paul's words: "I want to know Christ" - more deeply, more intimately, more fully.

If so, this message is for you.

Paul tells us: if you want to KNOW Christ more deeply,
more vibrantly, you must:

Know the power of his resurrection

Share in his sufferings

Become like him in his death

1. We must know the power of his resurrection

One of my kids' favourite stories is the story of The Runaway Pea.

The first part is essentially a retelling of the parable of the prodigal son. The pea wants to have fun, so he runs away, and gets into terrible trouble. It's very much like the parable of the Prodigal Son, except for the bit where the pea lands in a toaster and accidentally sets fire to his bottom. I don't think that bit is in the Prodigal Son, but otherwise, very similar.

Anyway, the pea ends up rolling off the dinner plate, and he ends up under the fridge. There he meets a dried up banana and some mouldy grapes. And they say, "We were naughty and ran away like you. And now look at us - we're old and wrinkled and we smell terrible."

So the pea, who presumably by now is quite traumatised, says, "I've changed my mind. I want to go back. I'll get back on the dinner plate".

And they say, "No you won't because you've been on the floor. So you're not loved anymore."

Anyway, this pea essentially gives up hope and dies. It doesn't say that, but I'm reading between the lines. He gets swept up and thrown out.

But then something unexpected happens. Having gone through the darkest part of the story, the pea experiences a resurrection.

He's thrown down beside the recycling heap. And he starts growing roots. And soon there are baby peas sprouting out of his head. Again, it's not EXACTLY like the Prodigal Son.

But it IS about suffering, and being rejected, and dying a kind of death, and through that experiencing a resurrection.

When you think about it, this is pretty much the shape of every good story ever told. Everything's fine, then there's a crisis, then there's a kind of death, where you think all has been lost. And then through that, because of the death, there comes a kind of resurrection. And things are somehow better than they were in the first place.

Which brings us to the resurrection Paul talks about here in verse 10.

I want you to notice something unusual about it. When he says, “I want to know... the power of Christ’s resurrection”, he’s not talking here about the resurrection on the last day, when the Lord returns.

Paul is saying that for you as a Christian, there is a way of knowing the power of the resurrection right NOW, in the middle of your daily life. He’s saying that as believers, you and I are able to experience MINI-resurrections, BEFORE our final resurrection takes place.

We might say, well that sounds good. The question is: HOW? How do we get to experience resurrection power in our daily lives?

Paul’s answer is straightforward, but also shocking. The way you get to experience a series of resurrections in this life... is by experiencing a series of deaths.

Which brings us to our second point. Knowing Christ more deeply means...

2. Sharing in his sufferings

For Paul, suffering is a kind of death that enables him to experience a kind of resurrection.

That's why he's so eager, verse 10, to "SHARE" CHRIST'S sufferings.

The word for "share" is one we've already seen several times in Philippians. It's that word "koinonia" again, and it means "communion" "fellowship" "partnership". Some translations say, "I want to know... the FELLOWSHIP of sharing in Christ's sufferings".

This is not the first time Paul has described suffering in positive terms. You may remember at the end of chapter 1, Paul says:

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 (Php 1:29)

"Granted to you" - as if suffering or being persecuted for Christ were a gift. What on earth is he talking about?

Paul wants to share Christ's sufferings because suffering for Christ confirms that he is truly IN Christ. Listen to this passage from Romans:

The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we ARE children of God, 17 and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.

(Ro 8:16–17)

So when we share in Christ's suffering, that shows we bear the family likeness. When people look at my children, they can see from the family likeness, ah, those are the Cooper kids. So it is with believers: our sufferings and afflictions and persecutions confirm that we are closely related to the crucified King.

And that's a tremendous source of comfort and joy to Paul. The Apostle Peter says:

...REJOICE insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. 14 If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. (1 Pe 4:13–14)

Suffering blesses you, because it shows God's presence rests on you, and you are destined for glory.

But there's something else about suffering. Suffering can draw you into closer intimacy with Christ.

A few weeks back, I watched a documentary about the actor Michael J Fox, who was diagnosed with Parkinson's Disease in 1991.

In his memoir, which he called Lucky Man, he said:

I have referred to Parkinson's [disease] as a GIFT - something for which others with this affliction have taken me to task. I was only speaking from my own experience, of course, but I stand partially corrected: if it is a gift, it's the gift that just keeps on taking.

Coping with relentless assault and the accumulating damage is not easy. Nobody would ever choose to have this visited upon them. Still, this unexpected crisis... was unquestionably a GIFT - and [apart from] this neurophysiological catastrophe, I would never have opened it, or been so profoundly enriched.

So for him, the great gift of suffering was that it took him out of the Hollywood rat-race, and made him much closer to his family.

Similarly, Paul wants to “share” in the sufferings of Christ because it increases his closeness, his intimacy, his *koinonia* with his elder brother, Jesus Christ.

How exactly does that work? Joni Eareckson Tada says that “Suffering is the text book that keeps on telling us who we are.” It tells us how much we need Christ. It makes us rely on him more and more. It makes us huddle closer to him. And the closer we get to Christ, the more like him we become. But of course, you can’t draw near to a crucified Christ without getting blood on you. It requires suffering.

Eleven years ago, for various reasons, I had an experience of depression which - to borrow a phrase of Paul’s - made me despair of life. I’d never known anything like it. But something happened as a result of it. It drove me to pray as I never had before. I prayed like my life depended on it, because it kind of did.

Depression taught me to pray. And in that sense it was a gift.

Not one I would have chosen, not one I went looking for, but one which, in God's kindness, caused a spiritual resurrection.

This is what I meant by the mini-resurrections that come to us through our mini-deaths. The way we come to know Christ more fully, and experience the power of his resurrection, is when we share in his sufferings. Paul says:

...we 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. 9 Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. (2 Cor 1:8-9)

So how can you experience the power of his resurrection in your life? You experience it when you stop relying on yourself, and rely entirely on God.

And suffering enables you to do that, more than anything else. Because when we suffer as believers, we come to the end of ourselves. And we can do nothing except cry out to God, the One who raises the dead. And he

answers. Psalm 34 says the Lord is near to the broken hearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.

The 19th century pastor Charles Spurgeon was someone who went through significant physical and mental suffering, and in later life, he came to recognise a pattern in it. He wrote:

This depression comes over me whenever the Lord is preparing a larger blessing for my ministry; the cloud is black before it breaks, and overshadows before it yields its deluge of mercy. Depression has now become to me as a prophet in rough clothing, a John the Baptist, heralding the nearer coming of my Lord's richer blessing.

Have you seen that pattern in your life? Death before resurrection. That was the pattern of Paul's life as well. Think of the way his Damascus road blindness led to his trusting in Christ. Think of his thorn in the flesh, which kept him from being conceited. The mini-death leads to the mini-resurrection.

And this pattern, of going down before going up, of suffering before glory, was very much the pattern of Jesus' own life, of course.

A few weeks back we were marvelling at that passage in Philippians 2 where Paul describes the descent, and then the ascent of Christ. God the Son becomes a man, becomes a servant, and humbles himself, even to death on a cross. That's the going down.

And then, as a result of that going down, you have the going up: "God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name."

The author Paul Miller calls this pattern in Jesus' life "the J curve". It's the shape of a letter J. Going down first before going up.

And you and I, if we are in Jesus, will experience that same J-curve, again and again. We taste his death in our suffering, but in it and through it, we taste his resurrection.

I wonder if you've ever thought of your suffering in those terms: As a kind of death that leads to a kind of resurrection.

That's what Paul means by "sharing in his sufferings" so that he would know the power of his resurrection.

Jesus said:

Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. (Jn 12:24)

If you're feeling that your Christian life isn't bearing much fruit, could it be because you haven't died yet?

That takes us to our third heading. Knowing Christ more deeply means...

3. Becoming like him in his death

So far we've talked about knowing Christ through our suffering. Things that happen TO us. Afflictions and even persecutions we probably wouldn't volunteer for, if we were given the choice.

But there's another way of dying in the Christian life that is more voluntary. This is what Paul is referring to in Philippians 3:10 when he says "becoming like him in his death".

I don't know if you've ever thought about it in these terms. But all true love - including Christ's love for you, and your love for Christ, and your love for others - requires a kind of death on the part of the lover.

Parents have to sacrifice and die to themselves for the sake of their children. Husbands and wives have to die to themselves in order to love one another well.

You die to your habits, your independence, your preferences, your ego, your pride, your hurt feelings. They are repeatedly and painfully sacrificed for others.

That is what love is, and that is what love does. Jesus' life was one long demonstration of what true love looks like.

The Apostle John tells us: “By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us.” (1 John 3:16)

In other words, true love looks like a kind of death.

In love, he substituted heavenly courts for hardship and homelessness. In love, he substituted royal glory to be a foot-washing servant. In love, he willingly experienced punishment for sin, in our place, so that we never have to experience it ourselves.

Another way to say it is this: all TRUE love is substitutionary. Just as it was for Jesus, you and I cannot truly love others without dying to ourselves.

But of course we don't just follow Christ into his tomb. When we love others like this, we follow him into the joy of his resurrection too.

And so, when you really believe the gospel, you become the gospel. Your self-sacrificial life begins to portray the death and resurrection of Christ Himself. His life maps itself onto yours, and becomes visible to others.

But there's another way to die in the Christian life. Not only must we die to SELF as we love God and love others, we must also die to SIN.

Paul says in Romans 6, "You... must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus". You hear the death and resurrection there? It's also there in Romans 8, when Paul says:

13 if you live according to the flesh you will DIE, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will LIVE. (Ro 8:13)

What exactly do we put to death? Colossians 3 says:

Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion [in other words "lust"], evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. 6 On account of these the wrath of God is coming. 7 In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. 8 But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. 9 Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices 10 and have put on the new self [death and resurrection!], which is being renewed

in knowledge after the image of its creator. (Col 3:5–10)

As we die to our sin, we're being renewed after the image of our creator - just as it says in Philippians, we are becoming like Christ in his death.

Could it be that the reason we don't experience resurrection power in our Christian lives is because we avoid - or run away from - dying to self and dying to sin? It's not easy. It's often painful. But resurrection joy waits on the other side. We are made new.

You know the story of the 4th century church leader Augustine? As you may know, he led a pretty promiscuous life, had a number of romantic partners - before he became a believer.

And apparently he was walking down a street one day when he saw in the distance coming towards him, one of his old girlfriends. So he turned on his heels, and started walking off in the opposite direction.

So she calls out after him, "Augustine! It is I!" And he calls back over his shoulder, "I know, but it is not I."

He died to his former life. He's not the man he once was. He's a new person. That was the power of Christ's resurrection in his life. And it can be ours too.

Let me conclude.

Conclusion

What is Paul's ultimate goal? It's there in verse 11.

He says he wants to do all this "that by any means possible I MAY attain to the resurrection from the dead." Now that IS a reference to the final resurrection of the living and the dead that will happen when Christ returns.

Some people read that word "may", and read into it the idea that Paul was doubting whether or not he would be raised with Christ, as if he's saying (v11) "I MAY attain to the resurrection... but I'm not sure..."

But there's no doubt in Paul's mind. Remember Philippians chapter 1 verse 23 where he says, "My desire is to depart and be with Christ" - he has no doubts at all about where he will be after he dies.

The "may" in verse 11 is not an expression of doubt. It's a recognition of the incredible privilege of being resurrected to life and glory on the last day.

If you ask the King if you can come to Buckingham Palace, he might if he was feeling particularly gracious, say "you MAY". He's not saying "you MAY, or you may not". He's saying "yes, you may", he's granting

permission! It's an amazing privilege being extended to you.

It's the same with "I may attain the resurrection" - or "I may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death" or "I may know him and the power of his resurrection". They are all stunning privileges that are granted to every single believer in Christ.

Is that how you see your present suffering? Is that how you see your dying to self, and your dying to sin? As a way of experiencing the power of his resurrection?

Let's pray.