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Philippians 3:10-14

Tenth Message

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FUTURE VISIONS FOR PRESENT LIVING

In a couple of months my wife Liz and I will celebrate 35 years of marriage. When we met over 36 years ago, the attraction was magnetic. We stayed up long into the night like so many young couples, talking about everything under the sun. After a few months, we felt we knew each other well. When we got married, however, we realized we didn't know each other at all. Knowing each other has been a long process. We each have peeled away the layers that hide the true inner self and have been willing to see what is rather than what was hoped for or desired. Just a week ago, Liz told me about something that had dawned on her out of the blue, something she didn't even know about herself. Every day brings a new discovery. We haven't arrived at fully knowing each other but we have let go of most of the unfulfilled expectations that distracted us for so many years. Now our goal, our delight, our joy is simply being together and knowing each other. We have a common history of joy and sorrows that no one else can fully share.

Our relationship with Jesus is like that. We say, "I do" before we fully realize the cost. We have many expectations of God and what life will be like as a Christian. We occupy our time with Christian activities. We try to live a moral life, wear badges and symbols, bumper stickers and crosses that validate us as followers of Jesus. But somewhere along the line we realize our expectations are not going to come true and that God doesn't fit into our neatly arranged boxes. We need a theological framework that fits our life. We sense that we don't really know Christ deeply. Our hearts hunger for what Paul calls "the surpassing value of knowing Christ." This is what the apostle is trying to convey to the Philippians in chapter 3 of his letter.

I. Review

As we have already seen, it's hard to find a convenient stopping place in chapter 3 since each verse flows into the next. Last time we ended in verse 9, and today we will pick up Paul's argument again. He is warning the Philippians to be on the lookout for Judaizing teachers who were attempting to put them under Torah observance by adopting the identity markers of the Jews, mainly circumcision. Becoming Jewish was an attractive proposition since it provided an escape from the persecution and suffering that believers were beginning to face in Philippi. These Judaizing teachers haunted Paul and the churches that he planted. Both here and in the book of Galatians he has some very harsh words for them.

The issue raised by Torah observance is: What qualifies someone to be a member of the covenant people of God? The

danger of coming under Torah is finding confidence in the symbols and rituals of Judaism rather than Christ. Believers always face this temptation from formal religion. We love to define our spiritual life through external symbols or activity.

Paul tells the Philippians that if anyone could find confidence in Torah, he could. But when he came to Christ, he saw the surpassing value of knowing Christ. As a result, he stopped counting the advantages of his Jewish status as gains in the same way that Jesus did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped. (Paul uses the same word in 3:7 that he used in 2:6.) In the ledger of his life, Paul took all the things listed in the gain column from his Jewish background and advancement in Judaism and moved them over to the loss column. There was only one item in his gain column and that was Christ. In fact, he counted all things—wealth, status, accolades, successes, education, abilities—to be a loss, to be rubbish, when compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ his Lord. Here is what he says in verses 7-9:

But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ and may be found in Him (Philippians 3:7-9 NASB)

Gaining Christ and being found in him are the same thing. This is a reminder of what Paul told the Galatians, "Now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God" (Gal 4:9). As Christ found Paul on the Damascus Road, he must find all of us if we are to become members of his covenant people. Redemption is the work of God. We are lost until Christ finds us wandering through life. And when he finds us, he brings us home to be sons and daughters. Nothing else is required, as Paul goes on to say:

not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith--

What qualifies us for membership in the family of God is faith in the work of Christ on the cross, not a Jewish ancestry, not a denominational pedigree, not inclusion in a certain camp of people, and not Torah. We are given the gift of a relationship with God that comes from God. The symbols of Torah are eliminated in Christ.

Prior to being found by Christ, Paul was in Torah, but now he is in Christ. The only thing that matters is knowing Christ. To gain Christ means the loss of all things. To be rich in Christ means to be rich in him alone. To gain Christ means that everything else is insignificant. Paul sold everything in order to buy the field that contained a hidden treasure. The gospel extends that invitation to each and every person.

II. Knowing Christ

But what does it mean to know Christ? Generally speaking, it means to know him personally, intimately, and relationally. We know that he is with us and for us. We don't come to Christ just so we can reserve a room in heaven. Christ finds us so that we can know him now in a deep way. But Paul also has some specific things in mind. After a slight digression in verse 9, he returns to the idea of "knowing," in verse 10:

that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead. (3:10-11)

To know Christ in the present means to know the power of his resurrection and participate in his suffering. To know him in the future means resurrection from the dead. We might note the chiasm here: ABBA. The first and last lines mention resurrection, while the middle two lines mention suffering and death.

First, the future. The Jews expected that some time in the future, some time after they died, God would vindicate his people and they would be raised bodily from the dead. As a Jew, Paul had this expectation, and he continues to have it, but now through Christ, not Torah. This is the ultimate goal for Paul, the place he wants to attain to or arrive at, like the destination of a journey.

Literally, Paul says, "if somehow I might attain." This doesn't mean that a future resurrection is in doubt, but that he does not know when it will happen. If Christ comes before he dies, then he would expect to rise and meet him in the air. (He writes more about this bodily resurrection in 3:21.) Knowing Christ in the future will mean being with him in a new body in the new heavens and new earth. That is Paul's goal.

Knowing Christ in the present means knowing the power of the resurrection, but also participating with his sufferings. Knowing Christ means both of these things; it is a two-sided coin. Knowing Christ means to be fully identified with both the life and death of Jesus. There is no other way to get to glory. As Jesus told his disciples, a slave is not greater than his master.

Knowing Jesus in the present means resurrection life. When Christ was raised from the dead, something very dramatic changed. His resurrection assured believers of a future resurrection, but the future also became the present. The resurrection of the dead and the vindication of God's people became "already, but not yet."

When God found us, we became a new creation in Christ. Our bodies became a living temple indwelt by the Spirit. What became a reality in the present is the life of the age to come. The same power that raised Jesus from the dead began to work inside of God's people through his Spirit. Resurrection life is what transforms us, changes us, and molds us into the image of Jesus. Each day we become kinder, gentler, more other-centered people. We now have the power to control and defeat sin so that we can live as God intended.

Torah observance does not come close to resurrection power even if, like Paul, we can keep all the rules and be blameless. Law will eventually lead to self-effort, pride, and condemnation. Law can never give life. Law can't transform our hearts. Law can't make us holy people from the inside. There is something so much better than Law, and that is resurrection power, life in the Spirit.

But knowing Jesus also means participation (*koinonia*) in his sufferings. This was Paul's concern for the Philippians: that they would seek to avoid suffering by becoming Jewish and taking on the badges of Torah. The nature of suffering is being conformed to the death of Christ. We saw the root of this word in the Christ hymn in chapter 2: Christ who was in the "form" of God took on the "form" of a slave and humbled himself to die on a cross. As believers we are new creations, but we become conformed to his death. To know Christ means to follow his example and his willingness to suffer and die.

By participating in Christ's sufferings, and even his death, we see our suffering in light of his suffering. We bring them into the sphere of his suffering. The suffering isn't our own, nor does it add to the suffering of Christ, as if Christ's suffering wasn't enough. We don't just suffer in general, like enduring unpleasant things, but like Christ we become obedient unto death. We live sacrificial lives in the midst of suffering. We become like seeds that fall to the ground and die in order to produce much fruit—the fruit of the Spirit that sprouts through our suffering. We pick up our cross, give up our life, humble ourselves, and seek God's will instead of our own.

A Christian faith that seeks to exclude suffering is bogus. Many speak of resurrection and blessing but forgo the dying part, leading people astray in the process. We can't have the life of Christ without the death of Christ, without our participation in the cross. We must have both a theology of resurrection power and suffering. We cannot know Christ and participate in his life without both sides of the coin, both life and death.

Many of you are suffering from financial setbacks, unemployment, health issues, losing a loved one and family tensions. Some of you may be facing some persecution for your faith from your family or your place of work. These are painful and difficult situations and they hurt.

I don't want to minimize the pain that we all feel at some time in our life. But neither do I want us to turn away, to hide, to escape or pretend that these situations don't arise or, more importantly, that they are outside of God's sovereignty and his

design for your life. The things we suffer are a gift if we see them in the light of Christ. God asks us to face them and to see ourselves as co-sharers with Christ, to follow his example of laying by down our lives so that we might also be co-sharers of resurrection life. This is Christian faith: life out of death. And this is why Paul can exhort the Philippians to rejoice, because even in the midst of suffering we can experience joy as a result of the power of the resurrection. As he says in 2 Corinthians:

we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. (2 Cor 4:8-10)

The resurrection changed everything for the apostle. He is no longer interested in Torah. Why would anyone be interested in Torah or religion or belonging to the right group when the new age has already come as an already but not yet? All he is interested in is gaining Christ, knowing Christ, and participating with Christ in suffering and resurrection. This is what defines the path of Paul's life as he looks forward to the ultimate goal of the bodily resurrection. Keeping this goal between the cross hairs is what pushes him forward, as he goes on to explain.

III. Living in Light of the End

Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. (3:12-14)

These verses have two parallel sentences. The main verb of each sentence is to pursue or press on. Each sentence has a disclaimer about not having arrived. Each says something about the goal of the apostle's pursuit. The second sentence adds a note about forgetting or disregarding what lies behind.

The disclaimer is that Paul has not arrived yet. One of the signs of maturity is knowing that you are not fully mature. Paul says that he has not obtained or received the final prize or become perfect. The word "perfect" here does not imply perfectionism but rather the idea of being brought to completion or fulfillment. In the second sentence he says that he has not laid hold of the final prize. The destination is still in the future.

Paul uses several words or phrases when he speaks of the final goal. He says that he was laid hold of by Christ, as we all must be if we are to be saved. The word means to be caught, apprehended or seized. It occurs three times here and is a more intense form of the word "obtained." Paul, like us, had a divine calling or invitation by God to become part of his family. The calling of God, the being caught by Christ, has a goal or pur-

pose: to take hold of what God intended for us when he found and took hold of us, and that is to gain Christ fully, to know him fully and share in his glory. In the end we gain the prize of being brought to completion, fully enveloped by the age to come. All of creation is longing for this glory to be revealed.

In the meantime, as Paul lives out his earthly existence he presses on, pursuing the final prize. This is the main thought of these verses. But in the second sentence he employs an athletic metaphor that gives a picture of what he is talking about: forgetting what lies behind, reaching forward to what lies ahead. The metaphor features a runner who doesn't get distracted by looking around at his competition but keeps straining to the finish, leaning out for the finish line in hopes of winning the prize.

In August of 1954 a very famous race was run. It was known as "The Miracle Mile," with Roger Bannister and John Landy competing. Earlier that year, Bannister, an Englishman, was the first man to break the four-minute mile barrier. But 46 days later, John Landy of Australia broke Bannister's record. In August they competed for the first time during the British and Commonwealth Games in Vancouver, B.C.

Landy led for most of the race, building a lead of 10 yards in the third of four laps. The crucial moment of the race came on the last bend, when Bannister decided to try and pass Landy. The Australian looked over his left shoulder to gauge Bannister's position and Bannister burst past him on the right, winning the race by 0.8 seconds. There is a larger-than-life bronze sculpture of the two men at the crucial moment of the race that stands by the entrance to Pacific National Exhibition fairgrounds. Referring to this sculpture, Landy quipped, "While Lot's wife was turned into a pillar of salt for looking back, I am probably the only one ever turned into bronze for looking back."

This is how Paul views his pursuit of the final prize, the gold medal. He lives for the ultimate goal, for his moment on the gold medal stand. He encourages us to have the same pursuit. Forget what lies in the past. For the apostle, this meant forgetting about Torah or taking confidence in the symbols of Judaism. For us it means forgetting about trying to fit into the perfect Christian mold or finding confidence in religious activity. It also means that we forget about what has happened or not happened in our life. We forget our pre-Christian life, our sins, our failures, our earthly accomplishments, our regrets and shattered dreams. We forget about being approved by our appearance or our performance. If we live in the past and keep looking over our shoulder, we will get distracted and our eyes will no longer be focused on the finish line.

We strain towards what lies ahead, reaching for the glory that lies in the future, the upward call of God in Jesus. When life gets tough we are tempted to quit, to drop out of the race. Paul urges us to persevere no matter how hard it gets or how great the suffering. The problem most of us have is that we keep trying to make this life eternal. We live as if death is

nonexistent. We keep trying to perfect our earthly bodies as if they will last forever. We think if we have the dream house with the dream family and the dream job with fat bonuses, we will have arrived at glory. But everything of earth is corruptible and perishable. Earthly prizes are not what we strain for. Rather, we strain for the heavenly prize, the heavenward call of God in Christ Jesus. And while we reach forward we are never alone. The life of the Spirit gives us what we need to persevere and carry on.

What are your goals? What are you pursuing? Our goals determine everything—how we use our time, our moods, how we see events, how we react to success and failure. If our goal is to shot par in golf, we spend a lot of time practicing. If our goal is to get married, then we pursue dating with gusto. If our goal is to gain power and status, we become workaholics. If these goals are not realized, we can be frustrated when we play golf, devastated by the breakup, and angry when we don't get the promotion.

Think about your goals for marriage. If our goal is to have a perfect marriage, to have our spouse be everything we need and never have any arguments, we are in for trouble. We will grow resentful and frustrated. We will think that our marriage is a failure or that we married the wrong person. But if our goal is to know each other fully and become one flesh as God designed, then God can use everything in our life, all our joys, sorrows, and pain to accomplish this goal. We will love sacrificially and suffer willingly and gladly for the sake of something greater.

And so it is with the Lord. We are his people. He has caught us and called us to himself. Life is difficult, and we suffer greatly at times. But our destiny is glory—the prize of gaining Christ and knowing him fully. And even though we have not arrived, we have the power that raised Jesus from dead within us to transform, comfort, and strengthen us to live cross-centered, sacrificial lives.

**“Come, let us return to the LORD.
For He has torn us, but He will heal us;
He has wounded us, but He will bandage us.
“He will revive us after two days;
He will raise us up on the third day,
That we may live before Him.
“So let us know, let us press on to know the LORD.
His going forth is as certain as the dawn;
And He will come to us like the rain,
Like the spring rain watering the earth.”
(Hos 6:1-3)**

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