**I Want to Know Christ**

(What is my master passion and life goal?)

January 26, 2014

Philippians 3:1-11

Key Verse 3:10 “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death.”

What is the greatest desire of a Christian? Throughout the Bible, the great men and women of God say that their passion is to truly know him. Moses said to God: “Show me your glory” (Exodus 33:18). David prayed: “As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God” (Psalm 42:1). And Paul says that his heart longs to “know him and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings”. The greatest desire of a true Christian is to know God. Every other desire pales in significance to this one. Did you know that it is possible to be a Christian and not really know God? John 14:8-9 tells us that Phillip, after following Jesus for three years, says to him, “Lord, show us the Father.” And Jesus replied, “Don’t you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time?” Maybe the problem is the word “KNOW.” When the Bible talks about knowing God, it is not referring to a merely intellectual exercise. Knowing God does not mean knowing facts about God. To know God is not just reciting his biblical resume or hearing testimony of what he has done in someone else’s life. Knowing God involves encountering him and finding out who he is. It might seem surprising that Paul says he wants to know God even though he was a very mature Christian at the end of his life. Paul says, “What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.” Paul uses the present tense verb “consider” here, indicating that this is occurring in his life at the time of his writing. This shows that even after believing in Jesus, Paul continues to put the things of the world far below his priority of knowing Jesus Christ. This is what it means to “work out your salvation,” “growing in the Lord.” Christ becomes a Christian’s greatest passion; knowing him is the Christian’s number one priority.

Look at verse 1. “Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord! It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you.” Paul was in prison. In chapter 2, he speaks of the real possibility of his death. But still he said, “I am glad and rejoice with all of you. So you too should be glad and rejoice with me” (2:17-18). One thing we can learn here is that one can rejoice even in the worst of human circumstances. We also learn that, “rejoice in the Lord,” is a command, and not a suggestion. We must obey this command to rejoice because it is a spiritual safeguard. Joy and thanksgiving are the best safeguards for our faith. A complaining spirit is an open door to the devil. We must learn from Paul how to rejoice always and be thankful in all circumstances (1Th 5:16-18). The source of the believer’s joy is Jesus. Verse 1 says, “rejoice in the Lord!” Our joy is “in the Lord.” Our union with Christ makes us richer than the richest billionaire, more powerful than the prime minister, wiser than all the faculty members of the University of Toronto, and it gives us something more valuable than all the wealth of the world--eternal life. Therefore we must rejoice in the Lord. He warns the Philippians not to rejoice in their own righteousness, and not to be tempted by the spiritual highs or by the false joy of those who try to add something to the gospel.

Look at verse 2. “Watch out for those dogs, those men who do evil, those mutilators of the flesh.” Paul is talking about certain legalistic Jews who insisted that salvation by God’s grace through repentance and simple faith in Jesus was not enough. They insisted that men--especially the Gentile believers--must be circumcised and must follow Jewish customs in order to be real Christians. There are always people around who try to add something to the gospel. They say, “You need Jesus + alpha.” Such people are putting their confidence in the flesh--in their own righteousness and good works rather than in Jesus.

What did Paul say about these people? Paul did not mince words. He called them “dogs” and “men who do evil.” He called them “dogs” because they were not spiritual. They trusted the flesh. Dogs are not spiritual, either. They are only interested in eating and chasing cats and running after other dogs. He called them “men who do evil” because they were hindering the work of God for political purposes. They used circumcision as a political tool to attack Paul’s leadership and to discredit Gentile Christians. Men whose inner motivation is political cannot be spiritual men. Paul condemned those who put confidence in the flesh--in outward rituals, ceremonies, organizations, or their own good works. We are not saved by works. Those who trust in Jesus alone for salvation are God’s true covenant people, and real circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Holy Spirit. Romans 2:29 says that our hearts are circumcised by the Holy Spirit when we repent and accept Jesus as our Savior.

In verses 4-7, Paul gives his own testimony on how his value system changed. He had many things that were to his profit. Look at verses 4-6. “...though I myself have reasons for such confidence. If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless.” In modern terms, it is like, “I have Christian parents, I’ve gone to church my whole life, memorized lots of the Bible, I’ve been involved in ministry. I have not done anything bad such as drinking or partying. I recycle. I have been a good person in my whole life.”

Paul was born into a wealthy and strict Jewish home in Tarsus of Cilicia. His parents were Roman citizens. He received the best possible education, for he was sent to Jerusalem, where he was trained as a Pharisee. He kept the law and expected others to do the same. When he was a young student in Jerusalem, he became convinced that the “sect of the Nazarene” was a cult. He devoted all his energy to uprooting and destroying the weak and struggling Christian church. He stood by watching and approving as Stephen was stoned. He entered believers’ homes and dragged them off to prison. His zeal made him famous. He was young and ambitious and recognized as a scholar and a leader among his people. He could have gotten a Ph.D.; he could have risen to a position of power and honor in his nation.

Then one day, Paul left on a journey to Damascus in Syria. His purpose was to search out and arrest Christians. There, on the road to Damascus, he met the Risen Jesus. Jesus embraced this enemy of God with redeeming love and forgave all his dirty sins. He called him to be a missionary to the Gentile world. Paul’s spiritual eyes were opened. He saw who Jesus really was and, for the first time, he saw himself as the worst of sinners. He realized that his righteousness was filthy rags. He accepted Jesus’ unconditional love and the grace of forgiveness (Ac 9:1-6). His life was turned around 180 degree. He was changed from a zealous and angry murderer into an apostle of love. He accepted God’s calling to be an apostle to the Gentiles, even though this meant breaking many of the rules he had once regarded as sacred. The things he once considered so valuable and precious, he gladly gave up. His value system changed.

Look at verse 8. “What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ.” Here English translation of “rubbish” is a little mild. In Greek, it is “skubalon” - the excrement of animals, rubbish, dregs of things worthless and detestable. In Korean Bible, it is translated as excrement. We are happy to get rid of excrement. We don’t hold on to it. Likewise, Paul was happy to get rid of all his accomplishments and his old way of life. Paul had struggled to live as a righteous man by keeping the law. He was a Pharisee and he knew the law. But he found that his knowledge of the law and disciplined life as a Pharisee did not make him righteous--only proud. Paul tried to keep the law; he tried to serve God. Even though he seemed to succeed, he knew that his heart was corrupt. He was proud; he had no love for others. When he met Jesus, he also met himself. He wept over the corruption of his own heart. He knew that he was a sinner. He repented and received forgiveness through faith by God’s grace. He was clothed in Jesus’ righteousness and could begin to grow in Jesus’ character. He had no grounds for pride. He said, “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners--of whom I am the worst...” (1Ti 1:15)

Look at verses 10-11. “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.” This was Paul’s master passion. He wanted to know Christ fully, in every way: to know Christ himself and his character, the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings even to death.

First, Paul wanted to know Christ himself and his character. For a believer, the moment of meeting Christ and receiving justification is just the beginning of knowing him. We need to grow in the knowledge of Christ. Specifically we need to know Christ’s humility, love, patience, compassion, and so on. We are frustrated because even though we have believed in Jesus for a long time, our bad habits have not changed. Is it possible to really be changed? Paul was a narrow-minded, bigoted man who did not mind the killing of Christians. But after meeting the Risen Christ, he became the most broad-minded person who could embrace any kind of person. As he followed Jesus, Jesus changed him into a most exemplary man of love. No matter who we are, when we really follow Jesus like Paul did, he changes us into his likeness.

Second, Paul wanted to know the power of Christ’s resurrection. Death has been a master over man ever since Adam sinned against God. People are suffering from fear, anxiety, sorrow, meaninglessness, despair, and powerlessness which are rooted in the power of death. Moreover, we suffer from helplessness due to our stubborn sinful nature. But Jesus defeated the power of death through his resurrection. So we too can defeat the power of death. Romans 6:8,9 says, “Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him.” Only the power of Christ’s resurrection can give us victory over all the elements of the power of death. The power of Christ’s resurrection enables us to live a joyful, meaningful, powerful, and dynamic life.

Third, Paul wanted to know the fellowship of sharing in Christ’s sufferings. Everybody is perfectly willing to experience the good stuff-the benefits-of knowing Christ. But only a true follower will understand and experience the fellowship of His suffering. The reality is that living for Jesus isn’t easy. The closer you get to Christ, the greater an enemy you become to Satan. As you go down the road of knowing Christ, you will run into challenges that are tough, awkward, and painful. At these times, the decision you face is crucial: Do you really want to know him? At the place of suffering there is also always the simultaneous call to intimacy. In trials we often ask, “Why is this happening to me?” Very often, the reason behind our trials is that God will take us to the next level of intimacy with him as we trust him and grow in him. Think about a shirt being ironed; a hot, heavy iron presses down on that shirt, moving over every inch with its pressure. But this process is required to get out all the wrinkles. College students sometimes decide to audit classes rather than take them as registered students. Auditing means that they can sit in on the classes and listen to the lectures, but they don’t have to do any of the homework. Auditing students simply listen and observe. One tendency of half-hearted Christians is to audit the Christian life. They might attend church or Bible study, but they don’t put those lessons to use in their daily lives. They might profess to follow Christ and even go through the motions of obedience, but they don’t really know God or live in his power.

May God bless you with master passion of knowing Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings.