

## THE GREATEST AMBITION

Phil 3.10-11

### Introduction to reading

Will you turn to Philippians 3 with me please?

- Two weeks ago, from verses 7-9, we looked at Paul engaging in some spiritual accountancy. He was presenting us with his spiritual balance sheet, having worked out some profit and loss calculations.
- All his human credentials and achievements - his impeccable pedigree as a Jew; his privileged upbringing by Hebrew-speaking parents; his outstanding religious zeal – *all amounted to nothing*, he had worked out. In fact, they were worse than nothing. They were a liability to him, so long as he was relying on them for his acceptance by God.
- He had come to realise that there is *only one way for anyone to be put right with God*, and that is by us trusting ourselves to God's Son, the Lord Jesus Christ – unconditionally – as our own personal Saviour and Lord.
- And so Jesus is the supreme *gain* in life. He alone outweighs everything else that we might achieve, or strive to attain, or accumulate throughout our days on earth.
- If we have Jesus, we have everything we need for spending eternity with God. But if we lack Jesus, we possess nothing of lasting value whatsoever.

And so in the verses we are looking at this morning, verses 10-11, Paul moves on from his accountant's profit and loss account to something much more personal. He moves on from a judicial judgement, about how we can be declared right with God, to the joy of experiencing a deep and personal relationship with God's Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

**Read: Phil 3.7-11; Acts 22.1-16**

### INTRODUCTION

Paul had come to reckon everything in his life as no more valuable than a pile of garbage *compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord*, he has told us in v8. But what does it mean to know Jesus in the way Paul is speaking about here? You see, Paul not only speaks about having come to know Jesus as a one-off event in the past, in verse 8 – a reference to his Damascus Road conversion, when he encountered Jesus in all his risen and exalted glory. Paul also expresses his on-going desire to come to know Jesus better and better, day by day, in verses 10-11. *I want to know Christ – now and every day, better and better - and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow [by whatever route God has in mind], to attain to the resurrection from the dead.*

## 1. TWO TYPES OF KNOWING

There are two types of knowing, two levels at which we can know someone. We could call the first

### 1.1 Head knowledge or *informational knowledge*.

This is the kind of knowledge we gain about someone from books, newspaper articles, TV documentaries and the like.

- In the run up to the General Election this Thursday, all the prospective parliamentary candidates have been careful to put leaflets through our letterboxes to tell us as much about themselves as they can, in the space available. They will probably have told us where they live, what ideals they cherish, what plans they have for the future, if they are elected – and there may be some information about their background: whether they are married and have children; where they went to school; what jobs they have done in their lives so far. And from reading a leaflet, or better still a book, about someone – or watching a documentary about them on television – we may feel that we have got to know a person really quite well.

And it can be like that with us and Jesus. As we read the Gospels, we discover all sorts of truths about him: - the circumstances of his birth; his early upbringing; the amazing miracles he performed; the

compassion he showed to the downtrodden; the extraordinary authority with which he spoke about God and how we should be living our lives. We read about the values he espoused, and the followers he trained. And then we learn how they all deserted him; how he suffered a mockery of a trial; how he was tortured by Roman soldiers, and eventually put to death by crucifixion. We read of his burial, his triumphant resurrection on the first Easter Sunday morning; his numerous resurrection appearances to his followers; and his timely return to his Father God in heaven, from where he reigns as God's supremo over the cosmos he brought into being at the beginning of time.

- Now, such information about Jesus is invaluable. Without the authoritative record of the Scriptures, we wouldn't know anything for certain about Jesus, nor in any depth.

*Illustration.* It would be like trying to get to know Winston Churchill without any access to his official wartime papers, or biographical writings. At best our knowledge would be patchy; at worst, quite inaccurate.

- This is why it is so important for us to read the Scriptures on a regular basis, and especially the four Gospels.

*Illustration.* I was quite struck by something the new Pope said, shortly after his election. He spoke of a priest's first duty, namely, to read the Gospels everyday to get to know Jesus better and better. And so we should pray that the new pontificate will be wholly Christ-centred, and Christ-exalting, and Christ-glorifying, to the exclusion of all would be rivals or distractions.

But I want to suggest that this kind of knowledge – informational knowledge, or head knowledge – whilst being invaluable, is not sufficient. You see, we can know a lot about a person without every enjoying a real relationship with them.

- Historians pour over the official records and biographies of their heroes from the past, and may feel they come to know the characters they are studying, quite well as they eat, sleep, and breathe their past. But the fact remains, they never come to know their heroes interactively, or personally, because they are long since dead.
- And of course, some people make that same mistake as far as Jesus is concerned. They view him as a person to be studied, analysed, examined, and perhaps even imitated.

But Paul is speaking about a much deeper level of knowing Jesus than that. For he is speaking here, not simply of us have a head knowledge of Jesus on an 'information only' basis. He is speaking about us enjoying a

**1.2 Personal Knowledge** of Jesus- what we might call 'an *experiential knowledge*', the kind of knowledge that comes about through *interacting* with someone – meeting them, talking to them, listening to them, and engaging with them. And we can do this with Jesus because he is a *living* Lord and Saviour, not just a figure from history.

- There is much truth in the saying, "*Nothing is truly known until it has been experienced firsthand.*" We can't know what a strawberry tastes like until we are prepared to sink our teeth into one. And that reminds us of the invitation of Psalm 34.8, to *taste and see that the LORD is good*. Find out for yourself how good he really is, is how one version paraphrases that verse.
- And this is the kind of knowledge Paul is speaking about in verse 10, when he declares, "*I want to know Christ.*" "I want to get to know him better and better, interactively, as a living person, in my daily experience," he is telling us. And it's this kind of 'knowing Jesus' that is *surpassingly great*, to borrow Paul's expression from verse 8. There's nothing anywhere near like it! It eclipses anything and everything else that we could ever achieve, or aspire to, or accumulate in life – enjoying an interactive, living, daily relationship with God's Son, no less – the One who laid down his life for us, to purchase our acceptance by God, his father in heaven!
- So let me ask you if you know Jesus like that. You see, there was a time when Paul didn't. He knew a lot *about* Jesus. He had studied his life and teachings intently. He had become an expert in the life and teachings of Jesus, as if it were his specialist subject on the Mastermind Quiz show. And Paul hadn't liked what he had discovered about Jesus. He had come to regard him as a heretic. That's why he had

hounded so many of his followers to their deaths. He had tried to stamp out every memory of Jesus – right up until that moment when he encountered Jesus for himself on the Road to Damascus. He had read all about him; but now he had come face to face with Jesus, as a real living person, in his risen and glorified state. And having discovered that Jesus wasn't merely a figure of history, but a real, living person – alive forevermore – Paul did the only thing he could have done in those circumstances. He submitted himself to Jesus Christ as his personal Lord and Saviour - unconditionally.

- And that's how we come to know Jesus too, as a real living person in our own experience too. You see, when we submit to him unconditionally as our Saviour and Lord, he comes to take up residence within us by his Holy Spirit; and so we begin to experience the reality of his presence in our lives day by day. He becomes, not simply a character we read about in the Bible; but someone we know interactively in our every day experience. He's real to us, for he's living within us by his Spirit. We know him as our living Lord, our constant companion, our ever-present friend. And when we come to know Jesus like that, everything else in life seems like a pile of garbage in comparison!

But as well as there being two levels of knowing, these verses also set out

## **2. TWO PATHWAYS TO KNOWING** Jesus better and better in our everyday experience.

The first is through us experiencing

### **2.2 his transforming power at work within us.**

That's the thought behind Paul's phrase *I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection*. Paul says, "I want to know the power of Christ's resurrection life flowing within me, the power of the new life God imparted to his Son that first Easter Sunday morning."

- Paul is echoing here what he has written in Eph 1.17-21. *I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come.*
- The power of Christ's resurrection is the power of his resurrected life working within us, to transform us to be more like himself. You see, coming to know Jesus personally and interactively involves us undergoing a radical change. God grants us Christ's resurrection life – his very own divine life – to live within us and reshape us from within.
- It's what Paul has spoken about in 2.13 – *God working within us* both at the level of our *will* (What we want to accomplish with our lives) and our *actions* (being able to accomplish what we desire). To know the power of Christ's resurrection within us is all about our innermost attitudes and desires being changed so that they are brought into line with Christ's. We start to want what he wants. Our desires become his. Our values, and ambitions, our goals and aspirations, are changed so they are brought into line with his.
- And our actions are also empowered so that we start to achieve what God desires from us. We find that we have a new power to overcome the downward pull of temptations. We find we can '*break the power of cancelled sin*', as Charles Wesley puts it in his great hymn, *Oh for a thousand tongues to sing my great Redeemers praise*. And we are empowered to tell other people about Jesus. We are granted a new boldness for our witnessing; and we find our words carry the convicting power of the Holy Spirit, such that other people are drawn to put their trust in Christ too.
- Knowing Jesus is about us experiencing a life-changing dynamic at work within us, and that's something truly wonderful.
- There's only one condition for getting to know Jesus in this way, and that's a willingness to be changed by him, by his resurrection power. We must be prepared to discard all our old assumptions and ambitions, the values and goals we have constructed for ourselves. They must be chucked out, like an

old set of clothes that we wouldn't be seen dead in, ever again! And in their place, we clothe ourselves with all the magnificent qualities of Jesus himself. *You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires*, Paul writes in Eph 4.22-24. *You have been taught to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.*

- *Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature*, Paul tells us in Col 3.5-17: *sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. ... But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. ... As God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.* This is how we experience the power of Christ's resurrection at work within us – and this is what it is for, to make us more like him in our characters and personalities.

But there's a second way in which we grow in our knowledge of Jesus, and that's

## **2. through our experiences of suffering.**

*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.* Many Christians can testify that they have got to know Jesus best in the hardest times of their life. Why is that so? Why do we get to know Jesus best through times of suffering? Well, it's because his own life was characterised by so much suffering.

- He suffered **deprivation**. He knew what it was to leave behind the glory of his Father's home of heaven. He became a refugee when still a young baby. He experienced homelessness as an adult.
- He suffered **misunderstanding**, particularly by his disciples, which must have been incredibly frustrating for him at times.
- He suffered **rejection**, by those he had come to help, which must have been incredible hurtful for him.
- He suffered **loneliness**, as he was forsaken by his closest followers in his time of greatest need.
- He suffered **injustice**. He was tried before unscrupulous judges who washed their hands of him.
- He suffered **torture** as he was roughed up by Roman soldiers, before his execution by crucifixion.
- He suffered **spiritual abandonment**, as his father turned his face from him, as he bore the guilt of our sins at the cross.
- Isaiah tells us that *suffering was Jesus' closest acquaintance*. He was more familiar with suffering during his days on earth than with parties or loyal friendships. *He was despised and rejected by people, a man of sorrows, all too familiar with suffering* [Isaiah 53.3]. So how could we ever get to know such a person, in any kind of depth, except through experiencing a degree of suffering ourselves? It would be impossible. We wouldn't begin to have an inkling of what he went through on earth, were it not for the moments of suffering we experience. Alex Motyer expresses it well like this (p169). *How surprised we often are when life brings its trials to us. But what are we expecting? Are we wanting to become like Christ, or not? We must be ready for the downward path of the Crucified one. If the servant is to be made like his Master, it's unavoidable.*
- If we are to get to know Jesus better, our life will have to include its quota of suffering. It's something we naturally shrink from, because – by definition – suffering is something unpleasant and hard to bear. We would prefer our life on earth to be full of unclouded joys, as it will be in heaven. But if we are to get to know Jesus in any depth, we will have to experience something of what he went through during

his days on earth. *And so Paul's attitude to suffering is very positive, Alex Motyer continues (p161f). Everything he endured was a step forward in enjoying fellowship with his saviour, an experience through which Paul grew more personally conscious of some facet of his relationship with Christ. Often Christians look back on a time of trial and can testify how near and dear the Lord became to them in it; and how they learned lessons that couldn't have been learned in any other way. It was like that for Paul all the time – the pinpricks, the calamities, the smiles and tears, the sicknesses and pains – everything was a door into the richness of Christ.*

**Illustration.** I can look back to a very difficult time in the first church I pastored in Scotland. A faction within the leadership was very antagonistic towards my ministry and made life very unpleasant for me. But I happened to be reading through the second half of Isaiah at the time; and the way the famous servant songs of those chapters came to life for me in those circumstances is something I wouldn't have missed for anything. You see, the four servant songs (of chapters 42, 49, 50 and 53) are all about the sufferings God's Messiah would face when he entered our world.

- The songs speak of the sense of **despair** God's servants sometimes feel (Is 49.4). *"I have laboured to no purpose; I have spent my strength in vain and for nothing.*

- The songs speak of the **abuse** Jesus suffered (Is 50.6). *I offered my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard; I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting.*

- The songs speak of the **rejection** Jesus experienced by those he had come to save (Is 53.3). *Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.*

But throughout the songs, a tremendous sense of the Lord's presence and purpose pervades the terrible ordeal the Lord's servant is passing through. And there is as much about faith and hope in the songs as there is about suffering, in fact.

- The **first song** begins with the God saying (42.1,6-7), *"Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him. I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles, to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.*

- The **second song** sounds a similar note of hope and purpose (49.3-4): *"You are my servant, in whom I will display my splendour. And the response comes back from the servant, What is due me is in the Lord's hand, and my reward is with my God."* What a great example of faith and hope triumphing over suffering!

- Likewise in the **third song** (50.7,9,10b): *Because the Sovereign LORD helps me, I will not be disgraced. Therefore have I set my face like flint, and I know I will not be put to shame. It is the Sovereign LORD who helps me. Who among you fears the LORD and obeys the word of his servant? Let him who walks in the dark, who has no light, trust in the name of the LORD and rely on his God.*

- And in the **fourth song**, the best-known of them all, the Lord says of his servant (53.11), *after the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life and be satisfied.*

Those four songs really came alive to me during those hard times at Renfrew. Because Jesus himself suffered so much, it will be through our own times of suffering that we will come to know him best. It will be during our own times of suffering that we will best be able to appreciate just how much he went through for us; and that will draw out a greater response of love from us towards him than if our life were all plain sailing.

- And, of course, during our own times of suffering, it's not simply that we gain a better insight into everything that he had to endure during his days on earth. We also experience his living, upholding presence with us during the really hard times of life. That was certainly Paul's experience, and he speaks about it in 2 Tim 4.6,16-18. Towards the end of his life, he had the heartbreaking experiencing of being abandoned by all the other believers in Rome, when on trial for his life. But this is how he speaks of that trying time. *I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. ... At my first defence, no one came to my support; everyone deserted me. May it not be held against them. But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength, so that through me the*

*message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. And I was delivered from the lion's mouth. The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen.*

And that leads on to the last point these verses make.

- There are two levels of knowing Jesus – in our heads, but at arms length, through merely knowing about Jesus, being well informed about him; or we can know him personally in our daily experiences, interactively.
- There are two pathways to getting to know Jesus better – through the dynamic of his resurrection power at work within us; and through our fellowship with him in times of suffering.

And there are

### **3. TWO GOALS TO US KNOWING JESUS** better.

Paul speaks first about us

#### **3.1 Becoming like Jesus in his death**

I don't think that is referring so much to the physical circumstances of our Lord's death, but to the spirit with which he faced it. Paul wasn't looking to be martyred, as Jesus was, by crucifixion. That might have been his lot in life, but it wasn't something he sought out as being virtuous in itself (unlike modern-day suicide bombers or other forms of self-inflicted martyrdom). I believe what Paul is speaking about here is our Lord's submissiveness in death. Jesus was totally dedicated to carrying out his Father's will, even if that meant letting go of his own life for the Father's sake. And it's that sense of supreme sacrifice that Paul is speaking about here. To become like Jesus in his death is to become totally submissive to the Father's will for our lives – *not my will, but yours be done*, Jesus prayed as he faced the cross. that's our goal in getting to know Jesus better – complete dedication to the Father's will for our life, whatever that may be.

The second goal is

#### **3.2 Becoming like Jesus in his resurrection.**

- Paul was certain that beyond this life lay a place for him in God's glorious presence, forever. He was certain about his own bodily resurrection from death (literally *his resurrection from amongst the corpses*). He was as certain about his own resurrection as he was about Christ's; because it was Christ's resurrection that guaranteed his own, as he explains in 1 Cor 15.22-23. *For as in Adam all die, so in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him.* Of this, Paul was absolute certain. What he was not sure about was how his life would unfold between now and then. That's why he speaks about *somehow attaining to the resurrection from the dead* – by whatever route God might choose. The destination wasn't in doubt; only the route for getting there. And this was a further opportunity for trusting Jesus, and thereby getting to know him better as his guide and constant companion in life, right up to the point of his death. Indeed, Jesus would be there at the moment of death, and see him safe through it to the other side.

*Illustration.* For Paul, Jesus was like an expert mountain guide who had climbed the route before, and could be trusted absolutely to take him right to the summit. Paul didn't know what route the guide would take to get him there; but that didn't really matter, when he was sure of the guide's expertise.

- And it's like that for us. All the uncertainties of our future are an opportunity to get to know Jesus better as our guide and companion for life. If our life were all mapped out and revealed to us from the start, we'd miss out on so much that comes from that sense of being on an adventure with Jesus – never knowing where he might lead us next, but knowing it is all part of his carefully chosen route to the top for us.
- What we're assured of is our ultimate destination; and what we are also assured of is Christ's constant guiding companionship with us. And so, until the point of our arrival in heaven, we are able to say with Paul in 4.11-13, *I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every*

*situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength.*

### **Prayer**

*I do not know what lies ahead, the way I cannot see;  
yet One stands near to be my guide, he'll show the way to me.  
I do not know how many days of life are mine to spend;  
but One who knows and cares for me will keep me to the end.  
I do not know what course ahead, what joys or griefs are there;  
but One is near who fully knows, I'll trust his loving care.  
I know who holds the future, and he'll guide me with his hand  
with God things don't just happen everything by him is planned.  
So as I face tomorrow with its problems large and small,  
I'll trust the God of miracles, give to him my all.*

### **Song**

*For the joys and for the sorrows, the best and worst of times, for this moment, for tomorrow,  
For all that lies behind; Fears that crowd around me, for the failure of my plans,  
For the dreams of all I hope to be, the truth of what I am:  
For this I have Jesus, for this I have Jesus, for this I have Jesus, I have Jesus.  
For the tears that flow in secret, in the broken times, for the moments of elation, or the troubled mind;  
For all the disappointments, or the sting of old regrets, all my prayers and longings that seem  
unanswered yet: For this, I have Jesus, For this I have Jesus, For this I have Jesus, I have Jesus.  
For the weakness of my body, the burdens of each day, for the nights of doubt and worry,  
When sleep has fled away; needing reassurance, and the will to start again, a steely-eyed endurance,  
The strength to fight and win: For this, I have Jesus; for this, I have Jesus; for this, I have Jesus; I have  
Jesus.*