

## **KNOWING CHRIST**

### **“...the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings....” – Phil.3:10**

(Part 4 of 5 Messages)

Paul’s deepest longing and desire – his highest priority in life: to know Christ – present tense = continuous.

To know Him in truth (not just sentimentally), in spiritual ways (not just in human ways), and in his daily experience (not just as some rational truth that is only understood in the rational mind).

We need to ask the question: What were the sufferings of Christ? What did they include? And from this question we can ask ourselves: What are the sufferings that we will experience in our service for Christ?

All of Christ’s earthly pilgrimage involved “sufferings” – suffering the imperfections of this world after having lived for eternity past in the perfection of the relationship of the Triune God – suffering the stubbornness and unbelief of His own disciples – suffering the physical hardships related to His itinerant ministry – suffering the scourging and torture at the hands of the Roman soldiers – suffering the emotional pain of rejection from His very own people.

What does this mean to us? There are several kinds of sufferings that are a part of our serving Christ:

- Passive – those we experience by the very fact that we are identified with the Suffering Servant – because we are His followers, hated and rejected by many in whom the enemy dwells in order to accomplish His evil purposes
- Active – those we experience because of deliberate choices we make – including hardships we suffer, deprivations, even persecutions because we go out with the Gospel of Jesus, ie that we would not have suffered had we chosen to remain at home in our quiet, peaceful surroundings, in our safe environment

Paul longed to know the power of Christ's resurrection operating in his life – that divine power at work in him and also through him.

Question: From where comes a resurrection?

Answer: From or because of a death.

So as we talk about knowing experientially the power of Christ's resurrection, then it is not astounding that Paul's mind would then focus upon an experience of death.

You cannot have the experience of Christ's power in the resurrection without also or first experiencing His power through weakness. See 2 Cor.12:10.

You can't have a genuine experience of sharing in the life of Christ without also sharing in His death.

Paul also longed to experience a deeper fellowship with Christ = sharing in His sufferings – he realised that there was more to know about Christ than can be known and experienced by just learning good doctrine, even experiencing God's amazing grace, forgiveness because of Christ's death for us – the deeper level of knowing Christ is to be found in sharing in His sufferings – suffering on His behalf – experiencing a small measure of the sufferings of Christ – only in this way, and in no other way, could he reach the depths of knowing Christ.

And obviously he had been experiencing a depth of joy in all his experiences of suffering that he longed for more and more of the blessedness and the fruit that came through the suffering.

Now we need to understand the "sufferings" that we are referring to here – these aren't the sufferings of the body, eg physical ailments or sickness, or the troubles of life = the frustrations, the annoyances or inconveniences of normal living etc. Paul is referring to all those experiences that he endured because of his calling as a servant of Christ, as an apostle – the rejection, the deprivations, the persecutions, the threats upon his life, the physical hardships that he endured as a part of his calling to take the Good News of Jesus to the Gentile peoples. See 2 Cor.11:23-28.

Paul's whole experience in Philippi was bathed in suffering – see Acts 16 – the church was birthed through suffering. Having disturbed the economy – upset the local trade – false charges – seen as an intruder – a “nuisance” – a disturber of the peace – sudden and unexpected backlash (yet for Paul, not unexpected because he knew that the Gospel when it is faithfully proclaimed always disturbs the peace as it challenges the very foundations of a society – so what else is new???)

Now Paul wrote these words from a stinky prison cell. He wrote this letter “in chains” (1:17). This is one of his “prison epistles”. He was presently experiencing suffering for the sake of Christ – not theory, or theology, but reality. He was fully aware that soon he could lose his life – hence he speaks about his readiness to be poured out as “a drink offering” – 2:17,18.

Phil.1:29 – “given” = a gift from God – an honour, privilege – “given on the behalf of Christ to suffer for His sake”

Sharing in the sufferings of Christ in Paul's Philippian letter is also associated with "glory" and honour - as it is clearly manifest in the life of Christ - see 2:8-9 - death, then comes exaltation and glory, and eternal rewards.

Paul's own experience – see chapter 2: poured out as a drink offering

Hardships – chapter 4 – “I can do all things through Him who empowers me.”

Paul's calling – Acts 9:15,16

Paul's conviction – 2 Cor.4

“on the behalf of Christ”

Sharing in His sufferings

Rom.8:17

Jesus' own words: “Take up your cross and follow Me!”

In other words, be willing to die.

The world around us idealises a life without pain, difficulties, suffering – of luxury, peace and happiness – perfect health – this is the “ideal” life – utopia.

This is coming for God’s true people – but not in this world – rather in the world to come – unceasing joy, peace, unbroken and perfect relationships, beautiful surroundings – no more death, dying, sickness, pain, tears – in the heart of every human being is found this longing, but it can only be fulfilled in God’s heaven.

In this world, you will have tribulations, trials, sufferings

- as believers
- as God’s servants

The “marks” of an apostle – Gal.6; 2 Cor.4:10

Paul’s teaching is established on the biblical principle that “life” (ie true spiritual life) comes through dying/death; that “gain” comes only through “loss” – this is totally outside of the realm of the normal person’s comprehension – see Phil.3:7-9.

Paul realised that all that normal people consider as “advantages” or “gains” (eg in the eyes of the Jewish people – see vs.5-6) are worth nothing in comparison with the surpassing greatness and wonder of knowing Christ = in fact, he considered these “gains” to be like “dung” or “rubbish” in comparison with the greatest privilege and honour of all = knowing Christ and being clothed with Christ’s righteousness.

Other Scriptures: 1 Peter 1;4

Jesus Himself set the way – He brought us life by giving up His life – by laying down His life – He became poor so that we (the many) might become rich – He did not hold on to His own life but gave it up so that through His death, we might inherit His riches. This is the apostolic or missionary principle – we lay down our lives so that through our dying, we may give the gift of true life to others.

We belong to a very different religious Leader – One who calls us to follow Him on the way to dying for Him – not One who promises us lots and lots of earthly riches and prizes – only heavenly ones. All He can promise us in this world is His presence that goes with us, His love, His care, His peace – with sufferings. See Mark 10:17-31 (\*\* v.30)

Am I willing to travel this path with Jesus? This is a choice that we must make. Jesus invites or calls us to take up our cross as His disciples and follow Him wherever He leads – having only one security: His promises & His presence. He doesn't force us to follow Him – or drag us into this pathway.

He offers to us:

- the great honour of sharing with Him in His sufferings – not our sufferings alone but His and ours together = hence a “fellowship” or koinonia (Phil.1:29);
- the true blessedness that Christ promised for those who suffer for righteousness sake (Matt.5:10,12). This way that Christ sets before us is full of temporal struggles but even more so, of eternal rewards. See 2 Cor.4:16-18.
- the rewards of sufferings, the fruit of the dying = the eternal life that then becomes the joy of many. The “glory” that Christ gives – see Eph.3:13. But also the “fruit” of our labours = note Phil.4:22 – the saints in Caesar's household, the result of Paul's being imprisoned for the sake of Christ and the Gospel – the Gospel had reached all the way into Caesar's household. See Phil.1:12-14. Also 2 Cor.4:

Christ's call:

- Based on His dying for us, on our behalf.
- He calls us to lay down our lives on the behalf of others so that they might come into His kingdom.
- Our answer: Are we prepared for this?

Willingly ready to forsake all earthly comforts, ease, securities, “the good life” – dying to “self” and what “self” craves – all that the world offers – in order that others might experience God's riches forever.

In the eyes of the world, this is like throwing away something most precious and valuable = our lives, our earthly privileges, our rights – what everyone else can have. It seems like utter foolishness – a total waste. And the words and comments of even Christians who are not prepared to go this route can influence us.

There is a great sense of joy or delighting in sharing in the fellowship of Christ's sufferings – even though these cause physical pain, and the pain is felt, nevertheless Paul delights in them because they bear fruit: the glory of Christ. See 2 Cor.12:10. See also verse 9 – in this way, the POWER of Christ rests upon Paul. The same power that raised Jesus from the dead.

We will never plumb the depths of Christ if we shun or run from sufferings.

Paul saw his sufferings as an apostle on the behalf of Christ – not just so that unbelievers would become followers of Christ, but also so that God's people might be encouraged and receive life and comfort in the midst of their own sufferings – see 2 Cor.1:3ff; 4:8-12. “For your benefit” – 2 Cor.4:15. As if Paul's life as an apostle was like an “arena” and the believers in the churches were like the “spectators” looking on – as they watched him suffer and saw how God was comforting and blessing him, then they themselves would be encouraged to remain true no matter what suffering God planned for them.

The result of seeing all his sufferings in this way meant that Paul did not lose heart. See 2 Cor.4:16. Many obstacles in his ministry for Christ, much frustration and opposition – all to be expected – never caught by surprise.

He was able to keep pressing on, not losing heart (a very real threat – so badly knocked about by the sufferings and heartaches, the discouragement that the Christian worker gives up and goes home). The reason? Because he kept his eyes on the end of the race – not fixing his eyes on temporal things, the immediate rewards, but on eternal things, that never fade or perish.