Philippians 3:1-11 *No Turning Back: Knowing Christ*

***Coffee Mug Verses***When we started our series on Philippians six weeks ago I said that this is a book filled with quotable verses. I called them “coffee mug verses.” The kind of verses that look good on a coffee mug or a wall-hanging or a t-shirt. And we’ve seen that several times already:

**Philippians 1:6:**

**6**being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

**Philippians 1:21:**

**21**For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.

**Philippians 1:27:**

**27**Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.

**Philippians 2:3-4:**

**3**Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, **4**not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

And, of course, the great Christ hymn that includes **Philippians 2:6-7**:

Who, being in very nature God,  
    did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;  
**7**rather, he made himself nothing  
    by taking the very nature of a servant,  
    being made in human likeness.

These are all very “preacher-friendly” verses. They take big ideas, and express them beautifully and memorably. And it is tempting, as a preacher, with each verse to say: this is the most important verse, this is the verse that gets at the whole idea of the book, this is the verse that you need to memorize and savor and meditate on and hold on to for life! It’s easy to get excited about these verses, is what I’m trying to say.

But, the thing is: we’re only halfway through the book, and there are a bunch more verses like that yet to come. Including this week. This week, our text includes **Philippians 3:10-11**:

**0**I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, **11**and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.

“I want to know Christ.” My friend Matt Mitchell, out in Pennsylvania, writes this about these verses:

These words are the beating heart of this Bible book and the beating heart of its apostolic author, so you don’t want to just pass over these words quickly or lightly. You want to linger…These words are sublime. They are beautiful, and they beautifully sum up the beauteous aspiration of the heart of the Apostle Paul. <http://matt-mitchell.blogspot.com/2020/06/i-want-to-know-christ-matts-messages.html>

I know that as preachers we have a tendency to say “this is the most important thing” or “this verse is the most important verse,”--and next week there’s a good chance I’ll say it about another verse—but these words really are crucial for getting a glimpse of what made Paul’s heart beat and thus what ought to make our hearts beat.

This is part of what I’ve tried to capture by calling our look at Philippians “No Turning Back.” It’s what our theme song for the series is getting at when it says “Christ is Enough for me.” This all-out conviction that all I’ll ever need is found in Jesus; that what He has for us outweighs anything else we could ever earn or be given.

Let me take you through the passage. We’ll move fairly quickly through the first 9 verses—which contain more than a few coffee mug verses in their own right—so that we can see the argument Paul is building that climaxes with verse 10 and 11. Then we’ll linger a bit longer on these two verses to see why there is no greater thing than knowing Jesus.

***No Confidence in the Flesh***Let’s start with **Philippians 3:1-3:**

Further, my brothers and sisters, 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. **2**Watch out for those dogs, those evildoers, those mutilators of the flesh. **3**For it is we who are the circumcision, we who serve God by his Spirit, who boast in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh—

This is the part of the letter where Paul takes on some of the false teaching that might be coming at the Philippians. I told you the first week that this is the only letter of Paul where he does not correct something the recipients have wrong theologically. It’s a joyful letter, an encouraging letter. It’s not that the Philippians have bought into this error, but Paul knows, it might be coming for them.

And that error is the crucial controversy that underlies so much of the New Testament: does a Gentile have to become a Jew in order to fully follow Christ? That is, if someone is born outside of Jewish faith and heritage—like most of these Greek Christians in Philippi have been—must they begin to follow the Jewish traditions and rules in order to be considered true followers of the Jewish Messiah Jesus?

And the symbol of this controversy is the ritual of circumcision. There were opponents of Paul—often following him from city to city—who were teaching that Christianity was dependent upon faith in Jesus, plus a little extra. Believe in Jesus, plus submit to circumcision. Believe in Jesus, plus follow the legal codes.

For Paul, this was a form of Christianity that depended on moral achievement while nullifying the work of Jesus. He has made it one of his life missions to say that we are saved by Christ and Christ alone. To argue that certain rituals and rules have to be observed in addition to what Christ has done is, in Paul’s opinion, to cheapen the price that Christ paid at the cross and to make ourselves the authors of our own salvation.

And so, Paul has some harsh words for those who are pushing circumcision. In verse 2 he calls them dogs, evildoers and mutilators of the flesh. No one ever accused Paul of being subtle.

Besides, Paul goes on to say, if it were all about Jewish rituals and adherence to the law, no one would be better positioned than him. **Verses 4-6:**

**4**though I myself have reasons for such confidence. If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: **5**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; **6**as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.

Spiritually speaking, Paul’s resume is perfect. He’s got the right lineage—born into one of only two tribes that stayed loyal to David. He’s got the right training—the Pharisees were like the Harvard of religious schools at the time. And he’s got the right work record—persecuting Christians and practicing legalistic righteousness. He’s like a trust fund baby that goes out and does even better than his parents. He was born into God’s chosen people and then he went out and worked as hard as anybody to keep God’s law.

Roll this into modern times. My parents and my grandparents and my grandparents were all Christians. From day one, I’ve been raised in the church—baptized and trained. Not only that, it was the right kind of church: a church with a solid commitment to the Bible and centuries of history. Beyond that, I rarely missed a Sunday morning, rarely missed Sunday School or youth group, joined a campus ministry the first day I set foot on college, I was trained at one of the best seminaries in the nation; I read my Bible, I memorize scripture, I give generously to charity, I don’t drink, I don’t swear (much)… Fill in your own spiritual resume.

If those are the sorts of things that it takes to be in good standing with God, then lots of us have all kinds of things we can point to and boast about. Paul says to the people who want to make it all about our achievement that if those are the rules of the game, then he’s going to win hands down!

But that’s not the point, that’s not the rules of the game. Paul’s reason for listing his spiritual resume is so that he can get to verse 7, and say as loudly as possible, to anybody who will listen: WHO CARES!?! **Verse 7:**

**7**But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ.

Take all of that which we might be tempted to boast about—and everything we might have gained from it—and recognize that it pales in comparison to what Jesus has done for us.

It’s not that those are bad things. You see that? He says they “were gains.” It’s not that there is something bad about the way I was raised or the things I’ve learned. There isn’t. There’s a lot of good that comes from that. I lot that I’ve gained. But if you’re putting them on a balance, if you are putting together a spreadsheet of credits and debits—the things earned by me are infinitesimal compared to what Christ has done. So negligible as to be counted not as profit, but as loss.

In fact, what Paul says in verse 7 he says twice more, each time in slightly stronger language, in **verses 8 and 9**. Each of these are coffee mug verses in their own right:

**8**What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, 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 is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.

Paul uses a rather coarse word in verse 8. The NIV translates it as “garbage.” That’s a rather polite way of rendering what was a slang word in the original language for “street trash” or “dung.” Think of a compost pile, a place where all the household refuse would be kept. All the food scraps and the animal waste sitting in a heap and stinking and gathering flies—and that’s how Paul thinks of “everything” in comparison to “the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.”

Everything the world has to offer—whether it be his spiritual resume or material wealth or the right network of friends or whatever—everything the world has to offer is rubbish compared to gaining Christ and being found in him. If we’re going to find glory--if we’re going to put our confidence in anything—it has to be in what Jesus Christ has accomplished for us.

***I Want to Know Christ***All this leads to our two key verses. Paul is repeating himself again and again so that we’ll not miss the point: nothing is greater than knowing Jesus. **Verses 10 and 11 again:**

**10**I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, **11**and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.

Do you hear Paul’s heart? Do you see how vital this is to him? The Greek construction here that the NIV translates, “I want to know Christ” emphasizes that this is Paul’s deepest purpose for everything he does. It literally could be translated, “TO KNOW HIM!”  
  
That is it! That is the goal! That is the ultimate experience. “To Know Him!” Everything else is loss. Everything else is garbage.

Now, notice that Paul doesn’t just say that he wants to know God. This is about knowing Christ. Verse 8 made it very clear. It’s “the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.”

Some people want to just know “God,” a generic God. A Creator God, perhaps. God in nature. God up there in the sky. Something like that. But Paul has a very specific God in mind. He wants to know the Lord Jesus Christ.

More than that, he doesn’t just want to know ABOUT Him. His goal is not just to gather facts about Jesus and have a good mental database of factual knowledge of Jesus. This is not just an academic exercise. This is relational. This is the language of personal relationship.

Paul wants to know Christ. Paul wants to relate to Christ. Paul wants to have fellowship and connection and personal knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And he wants more and more of it!

If scholars are correct in their understanding of when Paul wrote this letter, then at this point He has known Christ for about 30 years of his life. From the road to Damascus to this jail cell in Rome Paul has been on an adventure with Jesus that has put him into situations where he has had to rely on his Lord in ways we can hardly even fathom. For 30 years Paul has been walking with Jesus and studying Jesus and listening to Jesus’ spirit as he shepherds the church into existence. For 30 years Paul has known Jesus as well as any person who has ever lived. And he says he wants to know Him more.

He. Just. Wants. More.

Can that be said of you and me? Do we want to know Christ? Do we hunger for the all-surpassing greatness of knowing Him more?

In these 2 verses, Paul goes into two different ways that he wants to know Christ. Two different aspects of knowing Him.

***Knowing the Power of the Resurrection***Verse 10 says: “I want to know Christ—yes to know the power of his resurrection...”

That’s the first aspect of knowing Christ, and it’s worth throwing away everything else for: **To know the power of His Resurrection.**

Whenever Paul wants to talk about extraordinary power, he almost always turns to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. What kind of power does it take to bring a dead man back to life?

I know we didn’t get to have Easter together this year as a church—not only was there a pandemic, there was also a snowstorm—so let me remind you of the story:

Jesus Christ was executed, crucified on a Roman cross. And he was buried. He was really dead. Dead on Friday. Dead on Saturday. Dead on Sunday.

And then on Sunday morning, the third day, Jesus Christ came back from the dead!

What kind of power does it take to do that?! That’s what Paul wants to know! He wants to know the power of Jesus’ resurrection. Not just about it. He wants to know it. He wants that power at work in his life.

Why would he need that kind of power? Well, we’ll see in a minute that he will need it for his own resurrection after he dies. But he also needs it for the work that we often call “sanctification.” Which is becoming more and more holy. More and more like Christ.

Verse 9 talked about what we often call “justification;” which is being declared righteous, having righteousness–not of our own from the law but that which is through faith in Christ alone–the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. Justification is usually what we mean when we say we will go to heaven when we die. It’s how Jesus cancelled our debt.

But verse 10 goes beyond justification to sanctification. Not just being declared righteous but increasingly becoming more and more righteous. Not because we are going to earn our keep with God. Not because we are trying to pad our spiritual resume. But because that’s what should happen to people who are getting to know Jesus. It’s the power of God at work in us to change us in ever-increasing glory.

Are you becoming more and more righteous? In your heart, from your lips, at your hands, from your feet? Are you becoming more and more like Christ?

It takes power to do that. Extraordinary power. The kind of power it takes to bring the dead to life.

I want to know that power, don’t you? Not power without Christ, apart from Christ; but resurrection power from knowing Christ.

***Fellowship of His Sufferings***Before we can experience a resurrection, though, we have to experience a death. Look again at verse 10: “I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death.”

Here’s the second aspect of knowing Christ: **Knowing the fellowship of his sufferings.**

That one doesn’t sound as appealing, does it? I think we often forget this side of it, or at least we try. But Paul does not try to avoid it. He says that he WANTS to participate in Christ’s sufferings.

What does that mean? Well, that word “participation” is the same word from chapter 1, verse 5 that was translated as “partnership.” We said then that the word is “koinonia” and it is often translated as “fellowship.” That doesn’t mean coffee and conversation as much as it means a mutual commitment or “in-it-togetherness.”

As Christians we are called to partner together and have a mutual commitment to one another. Now, Paul is saying that he wants to have an “in-it-together” experience of Christ’s sufferings.

He wants to “become like him in his death.”

I don’t think that’s a death wish. Paul is O.K. if he dies, but he’s committed to living as long as he can for the sake of others. And I don’t think it’s masochism either. Paul doesn’t love pain for pain.

But he does want to have deep fellowship with Jesus even if it means going through hard things for and with Jesus. “If that’s what it takes to really know Christ, then count me in,” Paul says.

Of course, Christ’s sufferings were unique and one of a kind. He died like we never will. But mysteriously, we were united with Him in His death. Paul says that elsewhere. And as we are united to Him, Christ brings new meaning to whatever suffering you and I experience today.

We follow Christ’s pattern when we suffer in faith.

My friend Matt talks about a book I haven’t read. But it sounds interesting. It’s by a man named Paul Miller and it’s called **“The J Curve.”** He says it’s all about this concept of being conformed to the image of Christ through dying and rising with Jesus in everyday life.

The “J” in the title is for Jesus, but it’s also for the shape of our movement as we are conformed to Christ. There’s actually a connection here to the great Christ-hymn of chapter 2. Remember how Paul points to the mindset of Christ as the ultimate example of how we are supposed to relate to one another? Jesus went down, down, down—giving up his rights and privileges as God to serve us. Suffering for us.

And Paul calls us to do the same. Putting you before me. Looking to the interests of others. And that will mean some suffering, won’t it? That means not always getting your way.

So, when we live like Jesus, the J-curve looks like the short end of the J. Going down.

But, the great thing about the Christ-hymn is that Jesus was not left in humility. Rather, because of what He was willing to do, God exalted Him! God raised Him up and today He is in the highest place and has the name that is above all names. That’s the long side of the J. That’s the side going up.  
  
And that’s the pattern we are being called to follow. That’s what Paul wants to know. Down in suffering like Christ. Up in exaltation like Christ! You don’t get the one without the other.

So Paul says, in **verses 10 and 11**, “Count me in.” I want to know the fellowship of sharing in His sufferings, becoming like Him in his death.

Do you want that? Do you choose that?

Some people want you to think that you can know Christ without suffering. They say that Jesus just wants you to be happy, healthy, and wealthy—and so if that’s not your experience, the implication is that you don’t know Jesus.

There’s a big theological word for that, “Baloney!” Don’t listen to anyone who says that faith in Jesus means you’ll never have a bad day. Jesus said: “In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).

And Paul said, “I want to know that guy!”

Let me read the verses again, and this time pay attention to verse 11:

**10**I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, **11**and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.

That’s not just a metaphor. That’s a real, literal expectation. Paul expects someday, somehow to be resurrected from the dead himself.

Here’s where we move from justification to sanctification to glorification!  Down, down, down even to real death. And then one day up, up, up from the grave!

All because we know Christ.

*Do you know Christ?* Do you hunger to know him more and more, like Paul does? To the point where everything else stinks like garbage compared to the greatness of knowing Him?

Knowing Christ is worth giving up everything. Knowing Him is worth whatever sacrifice or suffering might be involved. Taking up your cross.

That doesn’t mean it won’t hurt. Following Jesus means embracing pain. Painful love, painful repentance, trusting God when bad things and trials come.

But you get to know Him better as you trust Him through those bad things. You get the fellowship of sharing in His sufferings. So it’s worth it!

And the suffering doesn’t last forever. After death comes resurrection. Somehow.

And knowing Him is worth it all.  
  
Do you know Christ that way?