

(4) For Christ's sake

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[0 : 00] The reading is from Philippians, it's chapter 3, verses 1 to 11, you'll find it on page 1181.

Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you. Look out for the dogs. Look out for the evildoers. Look out for those who mutilate the flesh.

For we are the real circumcision who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh. Though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also.

If anyone else thinks he has reason for 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.

As to the law, a Pharisee. As to zeal, a persecutor of the church. As to righteousness, under the law, blameless. But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ.

[1 : 20] Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake, I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him.

Not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ. The righteousness from God that depends on faith.

That I may know him and the power of his resurrection and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death. That by any means possible, I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Well, the grace of Grace Church was tested the last time I was due to be here. And Simon's patience and ingenuity.

I don't know if you heard the story, but unfortunately we had a child born. And I was booked to come and completely went out of my head. I blame Filofax. You know, sometimes they have the pages organized one way.

[2 : 27] I got one of these Filofaxes and the Sunday was on the first page of the next, you know, and so I just didn't look at it. And apologies. Grace Church is very gracious and it's very nice of you to have me back.

And I say also, just before we get going, that on the notice at the back is the outline of the talk. And the first two points need to be reversed. So, point two should be point one, point one should be point two.

Well, let's pray. Heavenly Father, thank you very much for your word. We pray to you that you would open it to us and us to what you're saying. That you would change our lives and enable us to grow in Christ-likeness through what you say to us today.

We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. But what do a farmer, a train driver, a pilot and a bus driver have in common?

The answer is that they're all things I wanted to be as a little kid. And we all have our ambitions, don't we? I'm sure that you have your ambitions at the present time. Different from the ones that you had as a child, but I'm sure you've got them.

[3 : 34] And here in this passage we have Paul, the Apostle's ambition. There in verse 10, in the ESV, that I may know him. That is Paul's ambition, to know Jesus Christ.

Ever since he had met him on the Damascus Road, Christ Jesus had been the centre of Paul's life. And his greatest ambition was to get to know him better and better.

And it was a dynamic relationship which gave Paul a fixed point of reference. Jesus Christ was his north star. Everything revolved around him. And so, the points this morning follow from that.

The first is that knowing Christ means putting no trust in ourselves. Verses 1 to 6. If you know the letter to the Philippians, the theme, or one of the themes, is standing firm.

It's there in chapter 1, verse 27, and chapter 4, verse 1. Stand firm in trusting and proclaiming Jesus Christ as Messiah. The only one who brings us into relationship with God.

[4 : 40] Now, Paul made it clear to the Philippians that they would suffer if they believed that. He said back in chapter 1, verse 29, It's been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him.

And Paul himself, as he wrote, was in chains under the threat of death. And friends, I have to say that it may mean that for us, or it will mean that for us in some measure.

But despite of that, despite the fact that the Christian life will involve some suffering, it's a life of great joy. So he says in verse 1, Rejoice in the Lord. But they had to stand firm in the face of persecution and in the face of false teaching.

And that's what's introduced in verse 2. He says, Watch out for those dogs, those evildoers. It actually is wild dogs, not sort of nice domesticated ones.

So who is he talking about in this strong language? Is he talking about Ian Huntley, the soul murderer? Talking about a mutilator?

[5 : 46] A horrible person like that? And the answer is, surprisingly, no. He's talking about his fellow Christians. He said that Jesus alone was not enough.

He wanted to change the true message of God's grace into something else. In Paul's day, these dogs were Judaizers. They're very religious people, very moral.

They were saying to the Christians in Philippi, You have to get circumcised and keep the Jewish law if you're going to be real Christians. No doubt they're saying it from good motives.

They're concerned that the Philippian Christians may drift back into the paganism out of which they had recently come. And if they get circumcised, well, it'll be a reminder that they're to live differently. It'll help them. And certainly if they follow the Jewish law, they'll be different in all sorts of ways. But Paul denounces them fiercely. He says, in a language that is very, very shocking.

[6 : 49] I find it shocking. I don't know if you do. But look out for the dogs, the evildoers. Look out for them. And the reason that it's so shocking to us is that it's foreign to our 21st century culture, isn't it?

To speak like this about anybody apart from the most blatantly obvious sort of Adolf Hitlers of the world. Because, you see, our culture is summed up in the line of the manic street preachers, tell me your truth and I'll tell you mine.

The unspoken rule of our culture is never say that anybody else's beliefs are wrong. And of course that's very foolish. Because what we believe shapes our lives and determines our destinies.

Belief matters. It matters more than money and lifestyle and location and everything. You see, if somebody is promoting wrong beliefs in our church or in our denomination, it's very serious, Paul is saying.

It needs to be firmly and clearly opposed. But it won't be easy. Because what the Judaizers was teaching was popular and attractive for three reasons.

[8 : 05] This circumcision was something that the Philippian Christians could begin to trust in. It's something that they could do themselves. And let's face it, we all like doing things ourselves, don't we?

It appeals to us. Here's something that they could see to trust in. As opposed to Jesus Christ, who was not visible and not present. But most of all, it was appealing because it was a way of avoiding suffering.

You see, Judaism was a more acceptable form of religion than Christianity in the first century. It attracted less opposition. And Paul says in Galatians 5, verse 11, Brothers, if I'm still preaching circumcision, why am I still being persecuted?

You see, offering something in addition to Christ to trust in, is a way of escaping the offense of the cross.

If we stay with the cross of Jesus Christ alone, it sets us apart in an uncomfortable way from the rest of our contemporaries. Christians who believe that all religions are equally good, and that whichever one you follow, you'll get there somehow, they're never going to come under any pressure, are they?

[9 : 21] And, of course, Christians who think that they're slightly better than other people, and all they need is a bit of a hand, rather than being totally depending on what Jesus did on the cross, again, will fit in perfectly well.

Because the cross attacks our pride. It puts all people on the same level. It puts you and I, whose lives are relatively well organized, on the same level as the people who do really awful stuff, you know, prostitutes and drug pushers.

We're all the same, is what the cross is saying, isn't it? And there's something in us that finds that uncomfortable. The Dowager Duchess of Buckingham, writing about the preaching of Wesleyan Whitefield, said in one of her letters, their doctrines are tainted with impertinence and disrespect towards their superiors, in perpetually endeavoring to level all ranks and to do away with all distinctions.

It's monstrous to be told that you have a heart as sinful as the common wretches that crawl upon the earth. It's highly offensive. It is, isn't it?

But that's what the cross is saying. And as soon as we take the focus off the cross in any way, we take the focus off us and the amount of pressure and suffering that will be involved in living the Christian life on the foundation of the cross alone.

[10:49] So their teaching was appealing. But did you notice in verse 3 what Paul calls them? Dogs. That is to say, it's the word that the Jews used of Gentiles.

And Gentiles were the people who are not God's people. You see, these guys, these Judaizers, were claiming that the Philippians were not fully Christian without being circumcised.

And Paul is turning the argument on them. And he's saying, no, it's you who say that you have to be circumcised in addition to believing in Jesus Christ, who are not God's people.

It's you who are the Gentiles. See, it's a very striking argument, isn't it? So who really are God's people? Because it really matters, doesn't it?

Well, by contrast to the Judaizers, Paul is saying it's only those, in verse 3, who put no confidence in the flesh. End of verse 3.

[11:50] No confidence in what man does. They are the ones, the only ones, who have the Spirit of God, who are part of God's people, who are clean in God's sight. And Paul goes on to use himself as an example.

In the second half of verse 4, his credentials are very impressive. He has a CV to die for in the Jewish religious world of the day. And in terms of his upbringing, he says that he was circumcised on the eighth day, exactly the right day.

He was born and bred an Israelite. His mother was Jewish. His father was Jewish. And he was of the tribe of Benjamin. The only tribe, in fact, the only one of two tribes, not to rebel against great King David.

He had all the advantages of birth that would have got him into the royal family of spiritual elitism. And today, for us, the equivalent is this, isn't it? It's trusting in the fact that we've come from a Christian family, that perhaps our parents and our grandparents are Christians, and perhaps even our great-grandparents were missionaries.

It's saying, I'm a Christian, of course, because my father is an archdeacon, or whatever it is. It's thinking along that line. And as for his own achievements, Paul says in verse 5, he was a Pharisee.

[13:08] He dedicated his life to keeping the law. You remember Jesus' parable about the Pharisee and the tax collector? The Pharisee stands up at the front and says, thank goodness, I'm not like that tax collector.

I fast twice a week. It's better than most of us, isn't it? Which of us has recently fasted twice a week, let alone regularly? I give a tenth, ten percent, of every single thing that comes into my possession. For which of us achieves giving like that? Probably a lot of us do, but it's impressive, isn't it? He's doing a lot. And yet he is saying that it's not enough.

The equivalent for us is of course saying I've been baptised, I've been confirmed, I'm on the PCC, I've been a member of Grace Church since it was planted, and of St. Helens before that.

I give generously, I serve sacrificially, I'm a Sunday school teacher, a home group leader, I'm a member of Reform. You know, I do all the things that are the right things to do. Look at my credentials.

[14:10] But Paul is saying if he had any reason for confidence in the things that he had done, his standing before God would be much more guaranteed than anybody else's.

So he's saying, look, put no confidence in any of those things. By contrast, in the second point, knowing Christ means trusting in him alone.

That's what he says in verse 7. Whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. All of these human credentials he had, all of the things he used to treasure and trust in, he considers now, in verse 8, garbage.

The word is a very strong word, worse than valueless. It's actually offensive, contaminating, vile, like human excrement. Garbage.

Well, you know the way we feel when there's a really stinky smell in the garbage tin, when it's full of nappies as well as of rotten food, and it's a hot summer's day.

[15 : 17] That is how Paul thought of his human pedigree and his human achievements. That's what he thought about the very foundation of his old life.

Bit extreme, you might think. why should he have that extraordinary view? Well, because he'd come to see that none of that that he once built his whole life upon would put him right with God.

It might have given him status in the world. It might even have made him be envy of most of his contemporaries. But when it came to being right with God, it left him high and dry.

It appeared to give him credit with God. Other people assumed that it did. It was how he was brought up to think. It was how most of his contemporaries and our contemporaries think.

But it was a way of thinking that was fatally flawed. Why? Well, because every act that we do, even the best of them, is contaminated by sin and selfishness. George Whitefield once said, I cannot even pray without sinning.

[16 : 31] To God, without Christ, we're like the smelly bin on the summer's day. And this is what theologians call the doctrine of total depravity.

It doesn't sound very complimentary, does it? It's not saying that we're as bad as we could be, but it's saying that there is no good in us. It's not saying that there's no good in us, but it's saying that in every part of us, even the best part, we are imperfect.

There's a fundamentally wrong attitude towards God. In verse 9, he makes the point by contrasting two types of righteousness. Be found in him not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ.

There's the righteousness which comes from what I do, and there's the righteousness which comes from trusting in Christ Jesus. One that comes by the law, one that comes by faith in Christ.

And it actually amounts, friends, to two different religions. I'm sure you've met Vijay Menon, a number of us probably have, and you'll probably be familiar with the way in which Vijay describes these two religions. One is like a ladder in which we try to climb up to God.

[17 : 48] The other is like a helicopter in which God comes down to us, lowers the winch, winches us up, and carries us back home. If you like pictures, it's the picture of the lost sheep which the farmer goes out and searches high and low to find and then puts it on his shoulder.

Have you ever wondered why he puts it on his shoulder? Well, it might have got a bruised leg or a broken leg or something. It might be, but isn't it probably A, because he wants to have the sheep close to him and B, because the stupid sheep is very likely to get lost unless he makes sure that it gets home by carrying it home himself.

You see, that's the point. That's the religion of grace. Not only does God find us, he brings us home. It's all done by him.

And that's the righteousness that Paul wants. That's the righteousness that he relies on. It's what the reformers, Luther and Calvin, call justification by faith, which is being described there in verse 9. Justification by faith in Christ alone is both the way into the Christian life and the way on in the Christian life. The first step to being accepted by God is trusting in Christ alone.

[19 : 11] And so too is the second and the third and the fourth and all of the subsequent ones. You see, once we've been a Christian for some time, by putting our faith in Jesus Christ, we start to think like this, don't we?

I actually deserve God's friendship a bit because my regular Bible reading, my regular church going, the work I do for the gospel, because of the moral Christian life I lead.

I'm careful with my language. I'm faithful in my marriage. Well, they're all good things and pleasing to God, but Paul says they're rubbish, stinking rubbish as a foundation for our relationship with God. None of them can make us acceptable to him because even our best acts as Jeremiah says, of filthy rags in his sight. Have we grasped this?

One way of testing whether we have or not is to ask whether Jesus Christ is the foundation on which we build our lives today in the same way that he was the foundation on which Paul built his

life.

[20 : 25] You see, if we ask ourselves the question, what is my greatest ambition? is my greatest ambition the same as Paul's ambition? Is my greatest ambition to know Christ?

How much are we like him compared to the value we attach to the prizes of this world? Its success, its comfort, its money, the esteem of the world.

How much do we value Jesus Christ? How much time do we spend on those things and gathering them? And how much time on him?

What is our driving ambition in life? It's a good way of working out what we're really trusting in, isn't it? And the third point is, verse 10 and 11, that knowing Christ means sharing his resurrection and his suffering.

Paul puts it the other way around, the way I've got it on the notice sheet there, I'm sorry. Knowing his resurrection, sharing his resurrection, and sharing his suffering. Having Paul's value of Christ in mind helps us to understand these verses because he's been saying that all the advantages that he had in this world were just so much rubbish compared with knowing Christ Jesus because there are potential distractions from trusting him alone.

[21 : 59] What he wanted more than anything was to know him more and more. He wanted to know the power of his resurrection. Why? Not so that he could do miraculous things, but so that he could know him better, and so that he could bear the suffering that would come with knowing him better and being closer to him.

He wanted to know the power of the resurrection so that he could suffer with Christ on the road that led to the guarantee of his resurrection of Paul's.

What's the suffering that he had in mind? Well, as we thought at the beginning, chapter 1, verse 14, he's in chains. He's facing the very real possibility of execution.

He says to the Philippian Christians, it's been granted to you on behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him. Knowing Christ could mean sharing in the rejection that Jesus experienced.

It could mean sharing in the same kind of death that Jesus died. It certainly means day by day, dying to myself in order to serve my king and other people.

[23 : 19] Paul wasn't a masochist, but he wanted to serve Christ and he was willing to suffer anything that that entailed. He was convinced that suffering with him now would lead to reigning with him and being with him then.

You see, we've come to expect in our part of the world the resurrection part of the Christian message, haven't we? but not many of us have had to have too much to do with the other part, the suffering part.

May I say that we're unusual in our part of the world. In Eritrea, for example, 2,000 people I'm told are in prison, 95% of them for being Christians.

Some of them are being locked up in containers and left in the desert in which the heat is intolerable in the day and the cold intolerable at the night. Well, Paul knew what it was to suffer with Christ and for Christ.

But he was ready to do it because he was confident about the resurrection and the life to come.

Well, as you look at verse 11, that may look a bit discouraging that by any means I might attain the resurrection.

[24 : 40] Is it that Paul was a bit uncertain about the resurrection to come? his resurrection? Well, it wasn't that he was uncertain about it. He was just uncertain about how he was going to get there.

He wasn't certain about whether it would be through his execution at the hands of the Romans or through his death by natural means.

He wasn't sure how it would happen. It may even have been that it would be through Jesus' return. He wasn't sure how it would happen, but he was absolutely sure that it would happen.

And that's why he was prepared to suffer whatever was necessary in order to fulfil his great ambition, which is to be near and to know better the Lord Jesus Christ.

And as we were saying at the beginning, those two things are very likely to go together. The nearer we are to him, the more likely we will be to suffer, and the more important it is that we know confidently the resurrection is coming.

[25 : 46] Well, as we end today, are we resolved as Paul and resolute in our opposition to people who teach wrong things? Because that's where in our culture some of the pressure of suffering is

likely to come, isn't it?

It won't be people speaking against Jesus, but people adding to what Jesus has done. and the majority of people will say to us, what on earth are you getting so excited about?

We still are proclaiming Jesus, we're just proclaiming Jesus and one or two other things is alongside. What's the problem? Nobody will understand why we begin to get excited and to use the sort of language and to express the sort of passion that Paul is expressing here.

They won't understand it. They certainly won't encourage it. But are we prepared for that? And secondly, is our ambition the same as Paul's ambition?

To know Christ more and more? Or have other ambitions begun to creep in and take his place at the centre of our hearts?

[27 : 00] Let's pray as we end. Amen.

Heavenly Father, we thank you very much that your word is so encouraging and also so challenging to us. And we, none of us, wish to give up comfort and security, but we see that Paul was willing and did.

and we pray that as you have presented the Lord Jesus to us as the only way of knowing you and staying in friendship with you, that we may be prepared to set aside and to suffer whatever is necessary, that our friendship with him may deepen as you work in us.

Amen. Thank you. Thank you.

And — Thank you.