

# Knowing Christ

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[ 0 : 00 ] Our gracious God, thank you for all that you have given us in the Lord Jesus Christ. And we pray that as we read together Philippians 3 and think about the whole of the book, that you'd help us to reflect on the Lord Jesus and on his great worth and what it means to live for him.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, friends, as you know, for the past few thousand years, gold has been the treasure of choice in societies across the world.

People have hoarded it, fought over it, wooed with it, worried about it, divided the depths of the oceans in search for it, made their crowns out of it and numerous other things.

Gold has been the mineral of choice in many ways, particularly round about the GFC and so on.

Now, people ran to gold. Now, gold, as you might know, occurs in two forms.

On the one hand, it can be found as reef gold in veins or in loads of quartz. Now, reef gold often finds its way into the waterways of this world after being exposed to water action and is often then found in that context.

[ 1 : 16 ] On the other hand, gold can also be alloyed with the silver and copper or iron. In the earliest times, it was used unrefined. But as time passed, various methods of refining gold have been developed.

And the oldest method that we know of, of separating gold from base metals, was to use heat, lead and a porous crucible. That process oxidised the base metals, which were then blown off when air from bellows was blown across the crucible.

That process was largely successful except where silver was present. To get rid of the silver from gold, you needed another rather more complicated procedure involving further heat and salt and sulphur.

At the end of that process, the silver was converted to silver sulphide and it just floated on the surface of the molten mass. It formed a scum or dross that could then be raked away from the surface, leaving the unalloyed gold.

The process of refining gold crops up in the Bible every now and then. And it seems to me a good analogy for many aspects of the Christian life.

[ 2 : 31 ] So today, what I want to do is for us to hold that image of alloying gold and to think about how Paul appears to be approaching the Christian life and to see whether we can, as it were, mix the two and learn some things about the Christian life.

At the end of this sermon, I want to use that process of alloying gold to help us think about how we should think about living as Christians. So let's see what we can make of this passage and then we'll finally get back to our image right at the beginning, right at the end.

Have a look with me, open your Bibles at Philippians chapter 3. We're going to look all the way through to chapter 4 verse 3. First thing I want to say by way of preparation for this passage is that scholars have often struggled with the fact that the book of Philippians, you know, to just a cursory reader, seems to be so disjointed.

And nowhere is that more of a worry than Philippians 3. You see, many of them can't see how Philippians 3 fits with what Paul has said already. For example, they can't see how Paul's words in Philippians 3, 2 to 11, fit with anything that he's said so far.

It just seems to come, as it were, out of the blue. And as a result, lots of scholars have wondered about whether we're dealing with more than one letter here. My own reading of Philippians is that the letter should be read as a well-constructed whole.

[ 3 : 52 ] I think it makes sense as a single integrated letter. Now, for some time ago, I spent some time thinking about Philippians and this issue. And I think I now understand it in a way that I never had before.

I think that there is a way of reading Philippians that can make sense of it. And what I want to do today is to explain that. First thing we need to realize about Philippians is that it is written by Paul in prison.

Now, we know from chapter 1 that Paul, we know this from chapter 1, where Paul mentions the fact that he is in prison. We get the impression that he's waiting for the results of some sort of trial or perhaps something similar to that.

We also know from chapter 1 that this present situation has caused Paul to reflect upon life and death. We know that from Philippians 1, 19 to 26. My own feeling is that the possibility of death has caused Paul to reflect even more than usual on where life is heading and on the final judgment. Let me show you. I want you to, in your Bibles, just flip back a page or so to Philippians 2, verses 1 to 11. And look at the end of that little section where Paul talks about the final judgment where every knee shall bow to Christ.

[ 5 : 10 ] Then notice in verse 12, he urges the Philippians to work out their salvation with fear and trembling. Now look at verse 16. He talks about the day of Christ and whether he will have run or labored for nothing.

And that theme of reflecting on life, death, judgment surfaces again in chapter 3. Let me show you. Look at verse 11 in chapter 3. Paul talks about attaining the resurrection from the dead.

Look at verse 14. He tells us about how he's pressing toward the goal of being called heavenward. Then look at verse 20. He mentions that all of those who are Christians are eagerly waiting for the second coming of Jesus Christ when they will be made like him.

And you could go on. Chapter 4, verse 5. He says that the Lord is near. See, my conviction is that Paul's imprisonment has caused him to reflect on his own life.

And it's caused him to reflect on the judgment that he and the world will face before Christ. His own imprisonment has caused him to consider in a very personal way, in other words, where he and all world history is heading.

[ 6 : 24 ] And he knows that he and all human history is heading toward an encounter with God on the last day. Now, if you know these things, if you know that the world is heading toward a day of judgment, then where do you reckon your focus will be?

Your focus will obviously be on the things that are important for that day, won't they? You'll focus on the things that matter on that day of judgment. And Paul knows that above all, the thing that will matter on that last day will be Jesus and our relationship with him.

Paul knows that what matters is Christ, who he is and what he has done. And if that matters most, he knows that this matters most on the day of Christ.

And if the world is heading toward judgment, if Christ alone matters on that day, then the question arises as to what matters now.

In the light of that day that is surely coming. In other words, if Jesus is what matters eternally, then how can we be best prepared for that day and that confrontation?

[ 7 : 34 ] How can we be prepared? I consider that what Paul is doing here is he's helping the Philippians prepare. As he is helping himself prepare.

He's urging them to align themselves up with Jesus now so that they will be found aligned with Jesus on that last day. You see, being aligned with Jesus on the last day will affect every part of your life now.

It affects how you think about your neighbor. It affects how you think about the gospel now. It affects how you relate to God now. It affects how you treat false doctrine now.

And it affects your whole attitude to life now. For Paul, being focused on the heavenly things means being focused on the earthly things. Since Christ will be exalted at the end time in heaven, we should be working toward the things that will exalt him that day.

We should focus on the things that will exalt Jesus that day. And that's what will matter in life now. That is what is important in life, the things that will exalt Jesus. And if that attitude to life, sorry, and this attitude to life also shows up what is not important in life.

[ 8 : 50 ] And what is not important is that which does not exalt Jesus. And so throughout the letter, Paul not only tells the Philippians what it is that they should be concentrating on, but he tells them what it is that they should reject.

So here's my general thesis, friends. My view is that Paul's imprisonment has refreshed things Paul knew. It's renewed his commitment to see life in proper perspective.

And it's renewed his commitment to help the Philippians to do the same. And I think that renewed commitment saturates nearly everything he says in his letter. And it holds the letter together and explains its individual elements.

So with that in mind, I want you to come with me to Philippians 3 and look at what Paul says to his friends. Now, I'm just going to skim over it. And I'm doing that for a reason.

I want you to get the big picture of this in our translations of the Bible. Verse one begins with finally. That literally means ask for the rest. And in the time that Paul wrote this letter, it probably means so then, you know, given what I've said so far.

[ 9 : 57 ] Listen to this. Paul is continuing his argument. And the first plank in his argument is the one that he said time and time again in his letter. The Philippians should rejoice in the Lord Jesus Christ.

And I think that fits with what I've said so far about Paul and his focus on Christ and the last day. You see, Paul knows, doesn't he, that Jesus alone matters.

So he wants the Philippians to find their joy, their focus in Christ alone. He wants them to be able to say with him, for me to live is Christ. And to die is gain.

And if they find their joy in Christ alone, what will they not need? Well, they will not need earthly religion.

And that's what verses two to nine are about. Have a look at them. Paul reflects on an early group of Christian heretics who were telling Gentile Christians that they needed to be circumcised if they were to be real, true, proper Christians.

[ 11 : 03 ] In other words, they needed to become Jews in order to be real and proper Christians. And Paul will have absolutely nothing of this. You see, his arguments are clear. He had been a Jew.

In fact, he still was a Jew. But he had been a Jew religiously. He'd gone through all the trappings of being amongst the best Jews. He had been circumcised on the eighth day.

He had been from one of the elite Jewish tribes, Benjamin. He had been, as he says, a Hebrew of Hebrews, from the pure sect of the Pharisees, blameless under the law.

And then he met Jesus, or should I say Jesus met him? And he realized that being a Jew and keeping Jewish laws didn't bring him near to God, had not brought him near to God.

Jesus brought him near to God. And so Paul learned that he needed to glory in Christ and not in his Jewishness. Only Jesus, you see, would make him righteous.

[ 12 : 06 ] Only Jesus would make him right with God. Can you hear what Paul is telling the Philippians? He's telling them that what matters for now and eternity is being related to God, being righteous before God.

And Paul knows that there is only one way for that to happen. And that is through Jesus Christ. He is therefore the most important person in life.

Gaining Jesus, that's the word he uses, is therefore the most important thing in life. Gaining Jesus is all that life is about in many ways. He, this Jesus is so important, so glorious, so surpassingly great, that everything else is rubbish beside it or beside him.

Everything else is like dung beside him. He, Jesus, is so important, so glorious, so surpassingly great, that it is worth losing everything else in life in order to gain him.

That's what verses 7 and 8 are about. And what Paul said here was something that he lived out in his own life. You see, because he wanted to face God on the last day with Jesus at his side, he had lost nearly everything that mattered in life.

[ 13 : 23 ] His Jewish status, his prestige, his pedigree. He lost relationships with various friends and intellectual peers. He lost the security of a home.

He became a constant traveler with no fixed abode. Instead of being a persecutor of others, he became the one who was being persecuted. He endured sufferings of the most extreme sort.

Read about them in 2 Corinthians 11 and 12, if you like. But he was no grumbler or complainer about these things, was he? Can you hear what he said?

He had gained the one thing in life and death worth gaining. He had gained Jesus Christ and for him to live was Christ and to die was gain.

In verses 10 to 16, he presses on and he goes on to tell us that Jesus has become the central focus of his life. Let me read 12 to 14. You see, for Paul, daily life is pressing on to know Jesus.

[ 14 : 48 ] It's seeing the power of Christ and his resurrected life manifested in his daily life. It is him becoming like Jesus.

That's the goal toward which he presses on. And that's the goal that all Christians, all mature Christians should have. You see, Paul's clear that what matters is how he and the Philippians will be found on the last day.

And on the last day, Christ alone will matter. And only these people and these things that exalt him will remain. And so Paul presses on toward making Christ central in every corner of his life.

Let's now turn to that final section, verse 17 through to chapter 4, verse 3. Here, Paul develops the other side of the coin. You see, he's mentioned his own pattern in life, a life focused on Jesus and things eternal.

Now he mentions others who have left aside that focus. They're focused on themselves. Their God is no higher than their own stomachs, their own bellies.

[15:54] You might have met people like this. Life never gets above that sort of level, does it? Their glory is not on Christ, but focused on earthly things, verse 19.

They've forgotten what really matters is not their earthly citizenship, but their heavenly citizenship, verse 20. On that day, you see, when Christ comes, only those who have lined themselves up with him and who glory in him will remain.

And those whose lives have been focused at belly level, as it were, will not. You see, the one who's focused on Jesus will become like the one they've spent all their life and their effort in emulating.

For he will transform their lowly bodies to be like his glorious body, verse 21. And then in verse 1 of chapter 4, Paul emphasizes that that's what he wants for these Philippians.

He wants them standing firm in this Christ. He wants them to be his crown on the day of Christ. And with that in mind, Paul then turns to just the final comments of this section, which I think may be integrated with this section.

[17:05] In verses 2 and 3, he turns to two women who are divided, and he urges them to be reconciled. Can you see what he's saying? He urges them to turn away from being focused on earthly disputes between them.

And he urges them to agree with each other. I think he wants them to agree in the sense of Philippians 2, 1 to 5, which sort of sets this whole pattern in focus.

He wants them to be focused on Christ's likeness, to look out not only for their own interests, but for the interests of others. For when they're focused on Christ and his purposes, they'll rightly work out differences.

Now, let me see if I can summarize by asking a series of questions and giving some answers.

Question 1. Where is history headed?

Well, answer. Toward the end. Toward judgment. Question 2. What's going to matter on that day?

Well, the answer is clear, isn't it?

[18:06] It's Jesus, who he is, and what he did. So, question 3. So, what then matters now? Same thing. Jesus. And aligning yourself to him and God's purposes in him.

Question 4. So, how does that realization affect my life now? Well, answer. In the area of faith, it means finding your joy and confidence in Jesus alone.

In the area of faith, it means rejecting anti-Jesus forces and influences. It means promoting things that promote Jesus, such as gospel proclamation and gospel relationships and reconciled relationships.

It means becoming more and more like Jesus in every aspect of our lives. In other words, it means that anything that does not exalt Jesus is to be rejected.

And anything that doesn't conform to Christ is to be thrown aside. Question 5. So, what does life look like now for the person facing life now?

[19:12] Well, a life lived in this way is a life that might look like the life of Timothy, Epaphroditus and Paul. That shuns the downplaying of Jesus and exalts Jesus.

It might look like a life that actively discards false religion as Paul rejects it. And false glory, that is glory in the here and now. It will be a relationship, a life that builds peace and reconciliation.

That presses on to Christlikeness. That puts aside our own interests for the interests of others. That finds joy in Christlikeness rather than my circumstances.

That centers on eternal relationships and realities and heavenly citizenship rather than on belly level. Can you understand what Paul is saying? He is telling us that the Christian life is about a constant, unrelenting, pushing aside of the rubbish of life.

It is a constant, unrelenting grabbing of the life and eternity of Jesus Christ that is offered in Jesus Christ. Do you remember that analogy right back at the beginning about refining gold?

[ 20 : 28 ] I want you to come with me in your imagination. Not to a modern smelter, but to an ancient one. Come to some sort of ancient refiner's workshop with me.

And there he is. He's in front of this vat of boiling liquid metal. He knows what's in it. And as it's heated up, as it comes under pressure, the dross rises to the surface.

And as it does, it is systematically pushed aside to reveal the gold underneath. That's what we are often doing in the Christian life.

It's a good analogy for the Christian life. As we wait for Christ, our life is a constant task of pushing aside the dross and letting the gold of Christ shine.

A life of constantly concentrating on the gold of Jesus Christ. Knowing Christ. Pressing forward to lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus laid hold of us.

[ 21 : 37 ] Forgetting what lies behind. And straining toward the goal that lies ahead. The prize for which God called us heavenward in Christ Jesus.

Living life like this, friends, will not only make our eternal life the richest possible one. But it will make our personal lives and our congregational lives the richest possible.

So I want to ask you this morning, will you commit yourself to this? And will you commit yourself to it in our personal lives, in your personal life?

And will you commit yourself to it in our life together? Will we together commit ourselves to this task? Because that's what Christian church is all about. Helping each other in this.

And I hope you'll agree to do this. And with the assumption that you will, I want you to join with me and everyone else in this task. And pray for God to help us in it.

[ 22 : 36 ] So let's pray. Father, as we think about our own personal lives, we too want to press on to lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of us.

We too, like Paul, want to forget what lies behind. And we want to strain toward the glory that lies ahead. The prize for which you have called us heavenward in Christ Jesus.

Father, help us to live life like this. Please, we pray for our congregational life. That we'll all have this focus.

And therefore make our personal and congregational life the richest possible one. Please help us to do this together. Please help us to help each other press on toward the prize for which you have called us heavenward in Christ Jesus.

Father, we pray this in Jesus' name. Please be at work amongst us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen.