

Partners Confident in Christ

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 06 November 2010

Preacher: Chris Ashton

[0 : 00] Thanks for reading Joe and Gus. It would be great if you could keep Philippians chapter 3 open, that's what I'll be preaching from.

Hopefully you might have all received a sermon outline as you came in. Has anyone not got a sermon outline? Or is anyone not able to look on with a sermon outline? I think that's everyone. Well, I trust that most people here are becoming reasonably familiar with Paul's letter to the Philippians, as we not only have it preached to us, but also studying it in our small groups. And if you're not in one, can I just say that you should consider joining one. Come and have a chat with me afterward. The most Elise and I have ever had in our lounge room for small group is about 18 people.

But if we take out some of the furniture and stand, then we could probably get 50 or something. So there's plenty of room for you in a small group. And Elise is looking a bit concerned, so if you come to me, then I'll actually refer you to another small group.

[1 : 12] There's plenty of good ones going around. But my point is that we're studying Philippians, and hopefully you're beginning to understand it and to see why Steve chose this book to coincide with Vision Sunday two weeks ago and with Commitment Sunday that's coming up in a few weeks' time.

Paul's vision for the Philippian church is one not of church numbers and logos and ministry programs, as important as these things may be, but his vision is of the glory of God and the supremacy of Christ, the exclusivity of the gospel, the righteousness of God's people, and the suffering of God's church.

And that should be our vision as well. And particularly suffering. We live in an evil age. I'm not suggesting that it's necessarily more evil than 10 years ago or 20 or 50 or 1,000 years ago, but it's evil nonetheless.

And that realisation alone should convince us of the need to be ready to suffer. But it's more than that. The path of righteousness for God's people is costly.

If you haven't read Dietrich Bonhoeffer's wonderful book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, you should. You should read it. And I think the title says it all. *The Cost of Discipleship*.

[2 : 41] There's no place for cheap discipleship and cheap grace. It's costly. But it's more than that. The reality is, and this is the number one reason that the church should prepare to suffer, is that God promises that it will happen.

He promises that it will happen. This is my first point on the sermon outline. And our text of scripture really won't make any sense unless you believe this.

God has promised that his people will suffer, and nothing is more certain than a promise in God's word. And so you're a fool if you think that you can be a Christian and simply avoid it.

And you're a fool if you're a Christian and you fail to prepare for it. And let me just give you a couple of examples from scripture. In Acts chapter 14 verse 22, Paul teaches that it is through many tribulations that we enter the kingdom.

In John chapter 15 verse 20, Jesus himself says, If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. In 1 Peter chapter 4 verse 12, the apostle tells the churches in Asia Minor, Do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.

[4 : 10] Don't be surprised, Christians. It's not strange. It's not unusual. It's absolutely par for the course. And as Paul himself writes in 2 Timothy, chapter 3 verse 12, All who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

Now, you'll see on the sermon outline there, I've got a point, the prosperity gospel. I should say the prosperity so-called gospel. And sometimes people ask why I often mention the prosperity gospel, if we'll call it that, and why I preach against it and why I hate it so much.

And this is why. I hate any suggestion that the Christian life is about earthly prosperity because it is anti-Bible, it's anti-Gospel, it's anti-Jesus, and it fails to prepare God's people.

God's saints for the suffering that they will experience. And that they will experience more of the more they desire to live a righteous life that brings glory to God in Christ Jesus.

And so, after careful consideration, you'll be pleased to know that I've decided not to preach a prosperity message tonight, but rather I think my job, given this passage, is to prepare you to suffer.

[5 : 38] And our text, as I said, is particularly helpful in that regard. So, my second point is that God graciously prepares his people to suffer.

And I want to show you that from the text. Look with me from verse 5. It's about Paul's life, and it was quite a remarkable life before he became a Christian, wasn't it?

Have a look with me. Circumcised on the eighth day, Paul had been sealed with the outward sign of God's grace. Of the people of Israel, he's of the correct religion.

Of the tribe of Benjamin, his pedigree is without equal. He's from the tribe that King Saul came from. A Hebrew of Hebrews. Now, this is an amazing statement, and I think it shows that Paul was no mere adherent to Judaism.

His life was actually the epitome of it. In regard to the law, a Pharisee. Paul was part of the highest category of law keepers that there was.

[6 : 47] And as to zeal, persecuting the church. He was so zealous for Judaism, so zealous he thought for God, that he led the persecution of God's enemies, namely, the church of Jesus Christ.

And as for legalistic righteousness, faultless. All of the above, as well as his meticulous keeping of the law, resulted in him being blameless before God, or so he thought.

It's arguably an incredible life, isn't it? And one that he describes, I think, without even a hint of modesty or exaggeration. But then, on the Damascus road, he met the resurrected and ascended Jesus Christ, Lord and Saviour of God's people, Messiah of Israel, Son of the living God.

And Jesus told him, in Acts chapter 9, verse 16, how much he must suffer for Jesus' sake. And Paul prepared himself to do so.

How did he do that? Well, he did it in the same way that Christians are to prepare themselves today, in the same way that we are to prepare ourselves to suffer. Look at verse 7. Whatever was to my profit, I now consider loss for the sake of Christ.

[8 : 07] This, friends, is how Paul prepares to suffer. This is how God wants us to prepare to suffer as well. He takes those things that are gains to him, all that are benefits, all that he bases his life on, all that he takes joy and pride and pleasure and fulfillment and value in, all that he considers profit, but instead of counting them as profit, he counts them as loss for the sake of Jesus Christ.

And this is no small thing. It's a total paradigm shift and it turns Paul's world upside down. It's like the financial ledger.

Do people know about financial ledgers? One of my, in fact, my only academic claim to fame is that in year 12, I came in the top 10% of two and three unit business studies. And I can't remember much of it now, but I do remember that that there's two columns happening here.

There's profit and there's loss, right? Can we agree on that? There's a few people nodding here who I'm sure have just been polite and know a lot more about financial statements than I do.

But before Paul was a Christian, the profit column included human glory and Jewish citizenship and diligent law keeping.

[9 : 29] And the loss column, at least for Paul, consisted exclusively of the church of Jesus Christ. And he would do all that he possibly could do to alleviate further losses.

But when Paul met the risen Christ, everything changed. That which was loss, namely and exclusively Jesus Christ, became profit.

And that which was gain and profit and reputation became loss. And more than that, it's not just that which had previously been profit that he put in the loss column.

It's everything. Look at verse eight. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Jesus Christ my Lord, for whose sake I've lost all things.

I consider them rubbish. He considers everything rubbish that I may gain Christ. Paul's single-minded mission to destroy Christ had now become a single-minded mission to gain Christ.

[10:41] And that mission is costly. Now I think we need to be careful about speaking of costs here. Sometimes I hear people, sometimes I hear ministers who were once lawyers or doctors or bankers, speaking about the sacrifices that they made to become a minister of the gospel.

And I'm not really sure that such, I'm not really sure that such talk is appropriate and I'm not really sure it's in accord with God's, the Bible's idea that calling is the work of God.

Ministry is a calling. It's something that comes from God. So what I'm talking about here is not a way to describe a particular thing or a job or an income that a Christian has lost or that being a Christian has cost you.

What I'm talking about is what actually should be normative for all Christians. Have a look with me in verse 17. Paul says, join together in following my example, brothers.

This is the Christian life. He's calling us to follow his example of putting that which is profit and making it loss and that which is loss making it profit.

[11:57] It's not that as a Christian there is a slight chance that you might be called to consider everything loss for the sake of Christ. Rather, that is precisely what every Christian life should look like.

And so, what does it mean to join together in following Paul's example? Let me just suggest a practical framework of three things that this might possibly mean.

In fact, that this definitely means. Firstly, it means that if ever I have to choose between Christ and anything else, I need to choose Christ.

If I ever have to choose between Christ and anything else, I need to choose Christ.

Secondly, I need to deal with the things of this world in such a way that they show themselves to be a loss and Christ to be my only prophet.

[13:02] I know a few of you are writing them down so I'm going to say it again. I need to deal with the things of this world in such a way that they show themselves to be loss and Christ to be my only prophet.

And thirdly, the third thing of this practical framework is if and when I lose any or all of the things of this world, I need to remember that in Paul's words, I'm losing rubbish and my prophet is still in Christ.

If and when I am called by God to lose any or all the things of this world, I'm losing rubbish and I need to remember that.

Because Paul says, I consider everything loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. Now it's worth reiterating here that I'm still on, is it the first or the second point?

I think I'm still on the second point. And that is that Paul prepared himself to suffer and that we must do the same thing.

[14:22] Every Christian must count as loss all that is not Christ for he is their only gain. And that is preparation for suffering.

How do you prepare for suffering? You count everything as loss and make Christ your only gain.

And so you should count as loss those things which are pleasurable and which bring you glory and in which you find your identity.

Everything is loss apart from Christ. Money, jobs, friendships, university degrees, qualifications, marriage, family, children, health, strength, sex, sports, hobbies, possessions or if you like Paul, religion, Anglicanism.

Not that Paul was an Anglican but the traditions here at St. Paul's Church, your Bible study group, the church music you like, you need to count it all as loss for the sake of knowing Jesus Christ.

Now losing some of these things is never a big deal, it's never a great loss. But losing some of them really is. And I don't want to in any way trivialise the loss of a family member or a friend.

[15:54] I would never suggest that the end of a marriage, however that end occurs, is anything less than tragic. Even losing the ability to participate in a hobby or a sport that you love, that can be a painful occasion and an occasion for tears.

But the Christian should be prepared not only for the loss of the things of the world, but also for the gain of Jesus Christ. And we'll look at that shortly. Now up to the middle of verse 8, it looks like there's a lot of preparation going on, but not a lot of suffering.

As I thought about that, it reminded me of this kid at my primary school who was in the Scouts and who took the motto of the Scouting movement very seriously.

The motto is be prepared, and he took it very seriously indeed. Despite living only one street away, he never came to school without a compass and two analogue wristwatches so that even if a compass and one of the watches failed, he could still find due north at least in daylight hours. He wanted very much to be prepared even if this was to his social detriment. Although I must say that the social detriment no longer existed when a few of us worked out that being prepared also included carrying emergency flares and an array of hunting knives as standard issue.

[17 : 29] But the point is that not much was going to happen to this boy in the bad lands of Neutral Bay, not so the Christian life.

Being prepared for suffering, being prepared for suffering rather, is not just an abstract concept like being prepared to need to kill your own dinner at Neutral Bay.

It's something that the Bible for the Christian promises will happen. And the Apostle Paul experienced it. He speaks in more detail elsewhere, doesn't he, about his suffering.

But even in the passage that we're looking at tonight, we get a glimpse of it. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things.

I consider them rubbish that I may gain Christ. Paul really did suffer. For Jesus' sake, he lost all things. So friends, the godly life is one of suffering.

[18 : 36] It happened to Paul and it happened to Peter and it happened to Job. It happened to Stephen. It happened to James. It happened to Jesus. And so, if nothing else, the Christian is in excellent company when he suffers and prepares to suffer.

But the Christian can also suffer not only prepared to do so, but in the knowledge that suffering has a goal and a purpose. Through our suffering, we know Jesus.

Jesus. And when we suffer as a Christian, we don't just know Jesus, but we know him in a unique and special way. Think back with me to Acts chapter 9 when Jesus says to Saul, who becomes Paul, who wrote this letter to the Philippians, Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me, says Jesus. Now, Jesus wasn't personally suffering, but his people were. And Jesus identifies with and knows his suffering people in a really special and unique way.

Or in Acts chapter 7 when Stephen is about to be stoned to death for his witness to Christ. Verses 55 and 56 say, but Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.

[20 : 00] Look, he said, I see heaven open and the son of man standing at the right hand of God. There's a special revelation of God's care and comfort and compassion to those who suffer.

Or in 1 Peter chapter 4 verse 14, if you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed for the spirit of glory and of God rests on you.

And in tonight's text, Paul makes it clear again and again that in suffering we can know Christ more. And that's something that every Christian should want and that's why every Christian should prepare.

But have a look at Paul talking about this deep relationship with Jesus. Verse 7, I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. Verse 8, the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.

Verse 8, again, I consider all things rubbish that I may gain Christ. Verse 9, Paul suffers so as to be found in him, so as to be found in Jesus. In verse 10, Paul suffers the loss of all things to know Christ.

[21 : 13] Are you seeing a pattern here, friends? It's all about knowing Christ and knowing him more. And in verse 10, Paul explains what that means.

It's about knowing the power of his resurrection, knowing the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and somehow to attain the resurrection from the dead.

It's only in Christ Jesus that we may attain the resurrection from the dead, and that is Paul's goal in suffering and God's purpose in suffering, to know Jesus that he might live forever.

And it's only by the grace of God, through faith in Christ, that we are made righteous and able to share in Christ's resurrection, and in any of these things. Just before we finish, let's have a quick look at verse 3, where Paul talks about confidence in the flesh, which essentially means being saved by works.

It's ironic that we even use the term saved by works, because no one's works have ever saved them. The opposite, of course, to saved by works is the gospel, saved by grace.

[22 : 26] And that's what Paul wants you to know in verses 1 to 4, and in verses 9 and 10. Even your faith in Christ is by the grace of God. And because it is from God, Paul is able to say to the suffering Christian, and to those who prepare to suffer, and I'll close with these words from verse 13, and then we'll pray.

Paul's able to say to the suffering Christians, brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it, to have taken hold of the resurrection, but one thing I do, forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead.

I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. Dear God, we thank you for your word, and that it contains not just that which is required for salvation, but that which you require of those to whom salvation has been given.

Please, God, please, God, prepare us to suffer as Christians. Help us count as loss all that brings us pleasure and meaning and satisfaction and happiness.

Help us count as loss everything that is not Christ. And in doing so, please prepare us for the suffering that you promise to your people.

[23 : 53] And help us count only Jesus as prophet, that we may be found in him, knowing him and the power of his resurrection, and somehow, somehow by your grace, attaining the resurrection of the dead.

In Jesus' name, Amen.