



Temple Baptist Church
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Dying to Know Christ
Philippians 3:1-16

He had everything going for him.

Earlier in his life, he was known as Saul of Tarsus (his Jewish name), an up and coming young Pharisee—a rising star, so to speak. He was a young man who, from the perspective of Jewish religious leaders, was on the fast track to prominence.

He was smart. He had the best education of his day. He came from a good family that was highly respected. And he was passionate about pursuing what the Pharisees understood to be righteousness according to the law.

Saul was born in Tarsus in Cilicia, the southeastern part of Asia Minor (today's Turkey). This was a fairly prominent city. By his own testimony here in Philippians, while his parents lived outside Palestine, they were careful to teach him the Jewish traditions and language (Aramaic), and they carefully maintained their faith. At an early age he went to Jerusalem to study at the feet of the highly regarded Rabbi Gamaliel.

Paul had quite a résumé (3:4-6): **circumcised the eighth day**¹ (as the law prescribed); **of the people of Israel; of the tribe of Benjamin** (from which his namesake, Saul, the first king of Israel, came); **a Hebrew of Hebrews** (in ancestry, tradition, and language—he was a Hebrew's Hebrew, so to speak); **as to the law, a Pharisee; as to the righteousness under the law, blameless**. Paul was determined to be the best Jew and Pharisee that he could possibly be. That was the passion and pursuit of his life!

A radical change . . .

When this new movement called the Way had come about, made up of the followers of Jesus, like many others of the Jewish elite, Saul saw it as a threat. So in order to protect his religion, he added another item to his already long résumé—a **persecutor of the church**. The word he uses here is literally “one who pursues”; in this context, it is pursuit in order to persecute.

So there he was, as Luke tells us in the book of Acts, keeping the cloaks of those who stoned Stephen. Then he began going from house to house in Jerusalem to search out and arrest followers of Jesus. It was becoming almost an obsession for him. Finally, it was no longer sufficient to pursue the Christians in Jerusalem and the surrounding area; he asked for letters from the Jewish officials that would empower and authorize him to go all the way to *Damascus* in *Syria* to pursue and search out and bring back Christians from there for punishment.

But Saul had no idea what was about to happen. As he neared Damascus, suddenly he and those with him were struck to the ground by an awesome light from heaven. A voice said, “**Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?**” Saul asked, “**Who are you, Lord?**” And the voice answered, “**I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do**” (Acts 9:3-6).

There was no singing of *Just As I Am*, no invitation given, no attempt to persuade him. No, Saul had just been *arrested*! As I heard an eloquent and beloved elderly Baptist preacher,² drawing on the old King James Version's rendering of verse 12, put it one time, "The High Sheriff of heaven came down and apprehended Saul on the road to Damascus." While Saul had been pursuing Christ's followers, Christ had been pursuing him. And now the risen Lord Jesus had laid hold of him! And things would never be the same again!

A radical commitment . . .

When Christ laid hold of Saul, everything was redefined! He made *a radical faith commitment to the crucified and risen Jesus as Lord*.

That is what happens when we become believers in Jesus, isn't it? It's more dramatic for some than others—for instance, the adult who turns to Christ from a life in sin, than the child or teenager who's been nurtured into the kingdom. But either requires a faith commitment to Jesus as Lord that goes to the very root of who we are.

You see, the fact is that with the claims of the gospel and the conviction of the Holy Spirit, we are called to a decision. It's a decisive moment when we make the radical move of turning our lives over completely to God and his control. It's the initial commitment, when we abandon all our own efforts and idols and cast our lot with Jesus, denying ourselves, taking up our cross, and following him, losing our lives for Jesus' sake in order ultimately to gain them (Matthew 16:24-26)!

A radical journey . . .

As the apostle to the Gentiles, Saul would become better known as Paul (his Roman name).

When Paul did his spiritual bookkeeping and looked at his balance sheet, what he had previously considered his profits or gains—his Hebrew heritage and his Pharisaic achievements—he now counted as loss when he compared them to, as he put it, **the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord** (3:8). Now the passion and pursuit of his life was *to know and become like Christ*, to lay hold of that for which Christ had laid hold of him!

He described this pursuit this way:

"Everything that was a gain to me, I now count as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. I have suffered the loss of all things, so that I might gain Christ, and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own based on the law, but rather the righteousness which is through the faithfulness of Christ, the righteousness of God based on faith. I want to know him, and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, so that somehow I might attain to the resurrection of the dead.

"I'm not there yet, but I am pursuing it to lay hold of it, because Christ has laid hold of me. I'm doing this one thing—forgetting what is behind, and straining forward like a runner in a race to what is ahead, I am pursuing the goal of the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus—to know him and to become like him!"³

You see, Paul understood that following Jesus was not only a radical faith commitment; *knowing Jesus Christ as Lord is also a radical faith journey*. He wasn't satisfied just to know *about* Christ. He wanted *to know Christ*. He wanted to become like him, attaining to the resurrection, knowing full well that he had to suffer and die with Christ in order to be raised with him.

Paul knew now that whatever righteousness we humans can achieve by our own efforts is like rubbish in comparison to the righteousness of God that comes through Christ's faithfulness. God's righteousness is his faithfulness to his covenant promises, by which he justifies us or sets us right with him, removing our guilt and delivering us from bondage and enabling us to be faithful to him.⁴ And it's through faith in him that we receive and share in that righteousness.

By far, the most important thing in life for Paul was to know Christ. Ever since Jesus, the risen Lord, had apprehended him on the road to Damascus, Paul was consumed and controlled by a passion to know Christ more and more and to be made like him! You might say that in a very real sense, he was *dying to know Christ*.

But many of us who are Christians today seem to have lost sight of this truth that knowing Christ is a journey. It's a pilgrimage. We must *follow Jesus*, and grow in his grace and knowledge. It's not a one-shot deal! Salvation is past, present, and future—we *have been saved, are being saved, and shall be saved!* It's a continual journey that we live by faith in Jesus Christ, who was absolutely faithful to the Father! It's a way of life that's radical—it goes to the very root of who we are and how we live.

It's ultimately a call to die to ourselves and our way of life, so that in knowing him we also know the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings, **"becoming like him in his death"** (3:10). It's *dying to know Christ*.

A radical call . . .

Isn't that what Jesus calls us to do—to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow him? To give ourselves up to him completely to live for him fully?

In the ancient Mediterranean world, a cross was designed for one thing, and one thing only. It was an instrument of *execution*. It was for *dying*.

Jesus was saying that if we want to follow him, we must be willing to die to ourselves, certainly spiritually, and if necessary, physically. We are to be so trusting in him and so loyally committed to him, that if remaining faithful to him means giving up our physical life, we are willing to give it up.

In his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor-theologian who was executed for his resistance to Hitler and the Third Reich during World War II, wrote:

The cross is laid on every Christian. The first Christ-suffering which every man must experience is the call to abandon the attachments of this world. It is that dying of the old man which is the result of his encounter with Christ. As we embark upon discipleship we surrender ourselves to Christ in union with his death—we give over our lives to death. Thus it begins; the cross is not the terrible end to an otherwise godfearing and happy life, but it meets us at the beginning of our communion with Christ. When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die. It may be a death like that of the first disciples who had to leave home and work to follow him, or it may be a death like Luther's, who had to leave the monastery and go out into the world. But it is the same death every time—death in Jesus Christ, the death of the old man at his call. Jesus' summons to the rich young man was calling him to die, because only the man who is dead to his own will can follow Christ.⁵

In his book *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis put it bluntly:

Christ says, "Give me All. I don't want so much of your time and so much of your

money and so much of your work: I want You. I have not come to torment your natural self, but to kill it . . . I will give you a new self instead. In fact, I will give you Myself: my own will shall become yours.”⁶

That is indeed Christ’s intention—that we die to ourselves so that he might live through us.

Don’t lose sight of this reality: *we must die to ourselves to know Christ*. As one of my teachers likes to put it, “You can’t have a resurrection until somebody dies.” So if we want to participate in the life Christ gives, we must die to ourselves, just as we must die physically to share with Christ in the resurrection of the body at the last day (unless we’re living when Jesus returns—and then our bodies will be transformed). When you think of it from that perspective, then the words of another of my teachers comes to mind: “If you know that you’re going to live again, then it really doesn’t matter if you die.”

The 19th century Anglican minister Henry F. Lyte has expressed it well in one of his hymns:

Jesus, I my cross have taken
All to leave and follow thee;
Destitute, despised, forsaken,
Thou from hence my all shalt be.
Perish every fond ambition,
All I’ve sought and hoped and known;
Yet how rich is my condition:
God and heaven are still my own!

It was true for Paul; it’s true for us. Indeed, *to know Christ we must die to ourselves in a radical faith commitment and a continual faith journey*.

†MEG

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (2011 text edition).

² Rev. Boyd Williamson, preaching on this text at the Jones Street Baptist Church, Tabor City, NC in the late 1970s.

³ My paraphrase.

⁴ Charles H. Talbert, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary: Romans (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2002), 35-41.

⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Touchstone/Simon & Schuster, 1995), 89-90.

⁶ Cited in Wayne Martindale and Jerry Root, eds., *The Quotable Lewis* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1990), 571.