

November 22, 2009

THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL

Children of the Burning Heart

Philippians 3:1 – 11

I trust that your appetite for God, like mine, has been sharpened by this past week of prayer and fasting. I hope that your heart has begun singing along with David: *As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I [see the face of God] come and appear before God?* Psalm 42:1 – 2 And: *O God, You are my God, earnestly I seek You; my soul thirsts for You, my body longs for You, in a dry and weary land where there is no water. I have seen You in the sanctuary and beheld Your power and Your glory.* Psalm 63:1 – 2 I hope that fasting from the good, legitimate gifts of God has left you hungry for Him. I hope you are developing a holy dissatisfaction with where you are with God right now and where you want to go. I hope that you are beginning to live as one who waits longingly for His appearance and the cry of your heart is **'Come Lord Jesus.'**

It is a paradox that having tasted the goodness of God – simultaneously leaves us satisfied and wanting more. A.W. Tozer, in his book, ***The Pursuit of God***, entitles his first chapter, ***Following Hard After God*** – which he takes from Psalm 63: *My soul clings to [follows hard after] You; Your right hand upholds me.* Psalm 63:8 He says ***'To have found God and still to pursue Him is the soul's paradox of love, scorned indeed by the too easily satisfied religionist, but justified in happy experience by the children of the burning heart.'*** St. Bernard put it this way: ***'We taste Thee, O living Bread and long to feast upon Thee still; We drink of Thee the Fountainhead and thirst our souls from Thee to fill.'*** When we look at the passion of the saints who have pursued God with their whole being, we cannot help but be inflamed by their burning hearts. It was Moses who made his knowing God the ground of his wanting to know Him more: *"Now therefore, I pray You, if I have found favor in Your sight, let me know Your ways that I may know You, so that I may find favor in Your sight.* Exodus 33:13 And his prayer culminates in his passionate plea to the Lord: *'Show me Your glory.'* And the heart of God responded, as it always responds to the desire of the heart that just wants Him, by doing just that.

We see this burning heart passion in Paul most particularly here in Philippians. His life motto – **To live is Christ and to die is gain** – comes from a heart that follows hard after God, and is wonderfully expressed in this passage in chapter 3: *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,* Philippians 3:8-10 This says that nothing is better than Christ – He is worth every good thing in this life – worth any amount of affliction or suffering – worth more than all the riches of the world, and more than all the acclaim and all the glory men could give. Paul is of the company of the children of the burning heart and he aims to bring the Philippians into that company – and us, if we are willing.

Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you. Philippians 3:1 ***'Finally'*** here does not mean this is the end of the letter – in fact Paul goes on for another two chapters. By the way, this is the text that gives preachers the license to continue for another hour after they say ***'Finally'***. In Greek this really means something like ***'for the rest'***. For the rest – ***'rejoice in the Lord'***. We know that this letter does not spring from what we might call ideal conditions: Paul is writing from prison – he is writing to a church that is not wealthy and has suffered some afflictions. So the joy is not based on the circumstances but ***in the Lord. This is what only the children of the burning heart know. Our joy does not come from good things in our lives, but from Christ.*** That is why joy in Christ is constant. It does not vary with the apparently capricious winds of circumstances. If your joy is based solely on the good things in your life – what happens when the good things are taken away? Your joy goes flying out the window with them. Romanian pastor Richard Wurmbrand spent 14 years in prison for preaching the gospel. Although his captors smashed four of his vertebrae and either cut or burned 18 holes in his body, they could not take away his joy. He testified, ***"Alone in my cell, cold, hungry, and in rags, I danced for joy every night."*** Those who consider Christ more precious, more valuable than good things in life have joy whether they are free or in prison, in whether they are in good circumstances or affliction, whether they have money or they are in deep poverty.

Then Paul tells them to **watch out for those who would steal their joy**: *Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh.* Philippians 3:2 He says to watch out for the '**dogs**' – a reference probably to the wild packs of scavengers roaming the streets at that time, sometimes attacking people. A clear reference to those who prey on others, biting and devouring, freely indulging their fleshly lusts. He calls them '**evil doers**' implying that they actively oppose the gospel of grace. And he categorizes them as '**mutilators**'. These were those who took pride in their religious observance of the law but lacked any reality of its content. They prided themselves on the fact that they were circumcised and gloried in that rather than in Christ. Their mechanical, unscriptural approach to the sign of the covenant reduced it to mutilation.

And so he contrasts those with the children of the burning heart: *For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh--* Philippians 3:3 Paul uses the true term for circumcision here which is used in the New Testament for '**circumcision of the heart**' in Romans 2 and it refers to the breaking of the power of the fallen nature Paul describes in Colossians 2:11. In effect he says, '**We are not those who mutilate the flesh outwardly – we don't do this for show. But we are those whose hearts have been circumcised by the Holy Spirit as a sign that we are truly His.**' So rather than finding glory in any kind of moral achievement or work – **the real sons of God glory in Christ**, not in what they can do. In fact there is absolutely no confidence that they can do anything apart from Christ – they '*... put no confidence in the flesh*'. This is a great temptation for Christians. It is tempting to pride yourself on regular attendance at church – to glory in the fact that you read your Bible every day, that you pray so often and so long – that you don't do this and you don't do that. But it is the children of the burning heart that take all their achievements, any moral goodness, any spiritual maturity and point it to Christ.

Because if we just look at the exterior, we might have good reason to boast in ourselves. Which is why Paul writes: *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.* Philippians 3:4-6 All the outward signs of moral achievement and spiritual superiority were there for Paul. He doesn't give this list to boast but to show the absurdity and danger of trusting in any human merit. By the standards of the Jewish religion – he was tops – couldn't do any better. He did all the right things – came from the right people – had all the right doctrine – was passionate about all the right things – and couldn't be faulted in anything. But the truth is, Paul was a wretch. In his zeal to prove his righteousness and live up to the law – he had innocent people imprisoned and killed. No one is more dangerous than a true believer in the wrong thing. But his point to the Philippians was that the best of human achievement and performance is nothing compared to Christ.

But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Philippians 3:7 All the gain Paul is talking about came from privilege and performance and he says that **Christ is more precious than privilege or performance.** Paul had a ledger sheet as a strict Pharisee with one column titled 'Gains' and one titled 'Losses' He was not unlike the Jews of his time and like religious people everywhere, that believed that God had some sort of balance scale for weighing good deeds and bad – and so the more you could write on the 'Gain' side of the ledger, the better your reward in heaven would be. Every God-less religious system works like this. Tibetan Buddhists earn merit by doing good things and thus have a better chance as reincarnating as a human rather than a bug. Muslims depend on their good works to get into Paradise. And this is the kind of thinking Paul is referring to when he writes this.

But when the call of God came and Paul responded, he took that ledger and over the column he had listed all his gains – he wrote '**Loss**'. In other words, the things he had formerly considered advantageous to him with respect to God actually weighed against him in the court of Heaven. They were a detriment instead of an advantage for him. Trusting in those things would take him to hell, not heaven.

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 Philippians 3:8 We cannot miss the emphasis here – Paul counted everything – everything as ending up in the loss side of the ledger. Nothing apart from Christ – none of his privilege, none of his performance – was a gain. Those things hindered him from knowing Christ. They effectively barred the way to eternal life. Jesus declared in His high priestly prayer to the Father in John 17: '*This is eternal life; that they may know You, the only true God and Jesus Christ whom You have sent*'. John 17:3 Knowing God is eternal life. If you don't know this God – you don't have eternal life. Everything else pales in comparison to this – knowing God.

Don't make the mistake of thinking that Paul is talking about conversion here. Paul was converted on the road to Damascus – and yet his burning ambition is still to know Christ Jesus more. God is infinite and He has an infinite universe of discoveries about Him waiting for the children of the burning heart. Our Christian walk does not end with the sawdust trail – that is only the beginning. There is a limitless horizon of knowing God that waits to be discovered by those who seek Him out. Everything that doesn't contribute to our knowing God is worthless, and the loss of those things is only dead weight that we are better off without.

For His sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ. Paul uses a strong word here – **skubala** – which means something disgusting, filthy, abhorrent, fit only to be rejected or thrown out. Greeks used this word to describe manure and sewage – and so some translations rightly translate this as **dung**. Paul not only counted everything that he formerly considered an asset to be loss – they were below loss – they were dung. And in Paul's view, counting them loss only meant that he could gain Christ. The word gain is **kerdaino**, which means to acquire, to win, to make a profit. And in the context here one writer says that it means **to so practically appropriate Christ to oneself that He becomes the dominating power in and over one's whole being and circumstances**. That is, Christ is the circumference and sphere of the totality of living. Everything relates to Him – nothing in our lives is unconnected to Him. Because if it is, the next verse implies tragedy for us.

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-- Philippians 3:9 Children of the burning heart have as their ambition to be found in Christ. What that implies is that Christ is coming for His own one day and there will be two kinds of people – those who are found in Him, and those who are not. Those who are found in Him are those whose righteousness is Christ alone. That is they are not depending on anyone or anything apart from Christ to recommend them to the Savior. They are found in Him – not in other things. We see Christians today into a lot of other things – and many of them may be genuine good works. But those may not be in Christ. When we stand in His presence on that day – we don't want to have as our only covering a righteousness that we produced because all righteousness that is not Christ's own will be burned up in the heat of His presence and we will be left naked and ashamed.

The righteousness we own in Christ is a result of our believing in His finished work on the cross – taking away our sins and imputing His own righteousness to us when we believed – that is called justification. And praise God we are justified when we believe. But Paul's word here implies a lifelong pursuit of Christ, not just a one time event, which means I think that we must follow hard after God to confirm our justification. That is, the kind of faith that justifies is a faith that counts everything loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ, which implies a lifelong pursuit of Him. **It is an ongoing preference for Christ over all other things**. Pursuing Christ to gain Him is the evidence of genuine faith and membership in the company of the children of the burning heart.

Children of the burning heart long to know Christ

Paul not only wants to gain Christ and be found in Christ, but **he wants to know Him**. Specifically he wants to know Christ in three ways: in the power of His resurrection – in the fellowship of His sufferings – and being conformed to His death: *that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and may share His sufferings, becoming like Him in his death*, Philippians 3:10

Knowing Him in the power of His resurrection

Do we know Him in the power of His resurrection? That is, do we have the experience of a God who brings the dead to life? Do we know that kind of power? I am not talking necessarily about raising a dead person back to life – God does that, that is the kind of power He has. But most of us haven't had that experience or know anyone who has. I am talking about the kind of God that can take a marriage that has died on the rocks of selfishness and bitterness and anger, and resurrect it to life. I am talking about a God who can breathe new life into relationships that have died. I am talking about a God who can take a dead wreck of a life and make it new and living. I am talking about a God who can take nothing and make something out of it with just a word. That is what I am talking about.

Knowing Him in the fellowship of His sufferings

Children of the burning heart also know Christ in the fellowship of His sufferings. It is in the fellowship of His sufferings that Christ seems to be most near and present. John Piper wrote: *I have never heard anyone say, "The deepest and rarest and most satisfying joys of my life have come in times of extended ease and earthly comfort." Nobody says that. It isn't true. What's true is what Samuel Rutherford said when he was put in the cellars of affliction: "The Great King keeps His best wine there" -- not in the courtyard where the sun shines. What's true is what Charles Spurgeon said: "They who dive in the sea of affliction bring up rare pearls."* Suffering helps us value what is most valuable – and Christ is the greatest value of all. That is why suffering is built into the Christian life. If all we had were great extended times of peace and freedom from affliction – we would not pursue Christ with the abandon that comes from times of great suffering. I would be a poor pastor if I did not prepare you for suffering because as we saw in chapter 1, we have been granted the great and precious honor of suffering for Christ's sake, and children of the burning heart know that.

Knowing Him by becoming conformed to His death

Children of the burning heart know Him in the power of His resurrection, in the fellowship of His sufferings, and they know Him by becoming conformed to His death. To understand what that means we have to look back to chapter 2, verses 6 – 11. What kind of death did Jesus experience, what did that look like? These verses tell us it looked like an attitude of humility, of making Himself nothing. It looked like a life of serving not Himself but others. It looked like a cross-centered life, that is a life that puts to death every vestige of self: self-interest, self-absorption, self-pity, self-glory, self-seeking. It is a life that says no trial is too great, no cost too high, no service too hard, no loss too dear for us to bear for the sake of knowing Christ Jesus our Lord. **It is a life known only to the company of the children of the burning heart.**

The necessity of a life-long pursuit of Christ

Finally Paul says that he wants to know Christ in this way so *'...that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.* Philippians 3:11 Paul is not saying that he is trying to attain the resurrection from the dead promised to all who believe in Christ by some effort he is putting forth. But rather he was emphasizing ***the necessity of a life-long pursuit of Christ*** to know Him because only those who know Christ in this way will be among those in the resurrection. Because it is those who want to taste, to touch with their hearts, to see with their inner eyes the wonder and the glory and the joy that is Christ, and who are longing for His appearing with every fiber of their being.

*Our gracious Lord and heavenly Father,
We have tasted Your goodness and it has both satisfied us and made us hungry for more. We are acutely aware of our need of more grace. We are deeply ashamed of our lack of appetite for You and lack of thirst for heavenly things. O God, we want to want You. We long to be filled with longing; we thirst to be made more thirsty still. Show us Your glory we pray, so that we may know You indeed. Begin in mercy a new work of love within us. Say to our souls, 'Rise up my love, my fair one, and come away'. Then grant us grace to rise and follow You up from this wretched bed of comfort and apathetic ease where we have lain so long. Let us hear You say, 'Seek My face' and let our hearts respond 'Thy face, O Lord we will seek'. Make us children of the burning heart so that our passion spills out in everlasting joy to the nations for Your name's sake and for Your glory we pray in the precious and powerful name of Jesus our Beloved, Amen.*

***May the Lord bless you and keep you
and make His face shine upon you.
May the Lord be gracious unto you;
May the Lord lift up His countenance on you
and give you peace.
[And peace be with you also.]
Go in peace.***