



Kirknewton and East Calder Parish Church of Scotland

Scottish Charity No. SC006973

Reading Philippians 3 : 1-11

Sermon: 18 October 2009

Thank you for your many kind prayers for Helen. Spending a month with her about ten weeks after her appalling accident, she amazed me with the joy she shared with everyone. I wondered, "How does someone rejoice after sixteen bones have been smashed?"

When Paul wrote to the Philippians all his bones were intact, but his experiences would have broken the spirit of many. He lay in a Roman jail, chained to a soldier on each side. News reached him that outside his prison jealous preachers were trying to *stir up trouble for me while I am in chains* (1:17). How many of us could say with him in 1:18, *Because of this I rejoice. Yes, and I will continue to rejoice?* In these four brief chapters he writes the words *joy* or *rejoice* no less than fourteen times. One of these is in v 1 of this passage

G.K. Chesterton wrote, *Joy is the gigantic secret of the Christian*. How can we rejoice when circumstances are tough? Paul shares his secret with us in this passage. He tells us first that joy comes from KNOWING CHRIST and then secondly, it is sustained by GROWING IN CHRIST.

JOY FROM KNOWING CHRIST.

Paul looked back on a long experience of seeking God, 3:4-6. He had longed for a righteousness which would merit the favour of God. He counted all the credits he had thought would commend him to God: presented to God as an infant by circumcision, a member of God's chosen people Israel, born into a great tribe of fine Hebrew parents. Reaching an age of discretion he chose the strict obedience of the Pharisees, became renowned for zeal by persecuting the church and, perhaps most important of all, he could measure himself faultless by all the standards of religious practice he knew. Surely God would be pleased with that sort of righteousness.

This hero of the religious establishment, on his way to arrest Christians in Damascus, suddenly met with the Lord Jesus - risen from the dead, glorious in majestic holiness and passionate in forgiving love - and his righteousness suddenly collapsed. All his profits became losses; in fact he says they stank! The word *rubbish* in 3:8 refers to foul-smelling street filth; some old versions translate it as *dung*. *I consider every thing as loss compared with the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord*, 3:8.

A lady told us last week, *As a child my mother took me to church. Later I taught Sunday School. Although I no longer attend church, surely I have done enough to ensure entry when I stand at the pearly gates*. Paul would tell us, *even if you are meticulous in obeying God's laws - worshipping in his house and serving mankind - you can never earn enough merit to please God. In fact all your good works can hinder you from humbly placing your faith in the Lord Jesus*

Christ for forgiveness and new life. Isaiah had the same understanding when he wrote, *all our righteous acts are like filthy rags.* (64:6)

Complete this sentence, *I am going to heaven because.....* Some will say *...because I...* and list their merits The Christian begins, *...because God...*

and speak of His gift of Christ.

What is this *surpassing greatness of knowing Christ?* he knew Him because he had met Him, listened to Him, believed and submitted to Him.

When he calls Him, *my Lord*, he is not simply making a theological statement but rather describing a personal relationship to someone closer and more precious to him than anyone else in the world.

Knowing someone in the Bible means a loving relationship - a deep understanding, an overriding affection, a mutual self-giving in a warm bonding together. Sometimes Scripture sees it as the close union between a man and woman in the ideal marriage. Paul found that *knowing Christ* in this way made him righteous and gave him joy.

Jonathan Lamb at Keswick spoke of a TV presenter who asked some children, *How do you get to heaven?* They answered, *by being good.* He then asked a girl if some don't get there. She replied, *perhaps.* He enquired, *Who?* The girl said, *My brother, because he broke dad's window.*

the presenter went on, *Then he has no chance?* She responded, *Perhaps, if he pays for it from his pocket money.*

The boy might regain his father's favour but we can never pay God for our wrong deeds. We please God not by what we do but by accepting what He has done for us by giving His Son to pay the price for our sins.

JOY FROM GROWING IN CHRIST.

In 3:9 Paul speaks of his conversion experience, but that is not enough for him; he writes about the continuing ambition of his life in 3:10, *I want to know Christ.* He longed for a deeper, more intimate knowledge of his Lord. Although he could write of *the surpassing greatness* of his first introduction to Jesus, he longed to know him better.

He hungered for *the power of Christ's resurrection.* He wanted to live more uprightly, serve God more effectively, love others more deeply and only Jesus could give him that power.

Do you ever feel like a glove - floppy and useless on its own? Insert a hand and together hand and glove become powerful. When Jesus lives in you, He

Progressively changes you to become more and more like Himself.

Nail scars spoil that hand. Paul always treasured the cross. Even in jail, suffering for his loyalty to Christ, he rejoiced in the privilege of *the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings.* Do you remember Peter and John on trial for preaching about Jesus' death and resurrection? The leaders flogged them. The apostles went away *rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the sake of the Name.* Acts5:41

I remember sitting in a meeting where I felt people were attacking me unfairly. I doodled on a piece of paper a picture of the open grave with its mighty stone door rolled back and I prayed over this verse, *Lord give me your resurrection power, give me joy in experiencing rejection like you did, help me to delight in becoming like you in your death.* And do you know the answer? Peace and joy?

And Paul's final greatest joy: *and so somehow attain to the resurrection from the dead.* 3. 11. Paul knew that God planned to make him ultimately like the Lord. He wasn't sure exactly how this would happen. Would he die first and await the final resurrection; or would Christ return while he was still living here? Somehow, whatever happens, *God will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.* (3:21)

Have you heard the simple story of people lining up at the gate of heaven. A man asks, *Do you know Jesus?* Each one replies, *Of course* and then goes on to recount all their good deeds: *I served as an elder, I nursed the sick, I gave to the poor, I preached and so on.* Finally an insignificant-looking person answers, *Of course I know you Lord. You saved me from my sin, you walked with me all through my life and you have worked to prepare me for being here with you for ever.*

Amen

Readings for the week.

Mark 10.35-45

Oh dear; rivalry between the disciples is back. We saw it before (Mark 9.34), and when they were envious that someone else was casting out demons in Jesus' name (Mark 9.38). The story has particular irony for Christians who understand that Jesus enters his glory not on a throne but on a cross and that those who are to his left and right are also on crosses. For Christ the path to glorification is via humiliation; the path to exaltation is via humility. Whoever wishes to be first must become a slave of all for this is the example of Christ who came not to serve but to serve and to give his life. Christ is portrayed as the ultimate suffering servant. Though without sin (Hebrews 4.15) Jesus nonetheless is subject to suffering and through that experience is perfected, i.e. brought to an intended end. Those who seek to follow him and to be brought to completion as he is, ought also to expect to undergo suffering. Thus understood, suffering is not a sign of God's absence or judgment but rather of God's presence and love.

Other readings: Job 38.1-7, 34-41; Psalm 104.1-9, 24, 35c; Hebrews 5.1-10.

Prayer

God be within me,
God always surround me,
that the world that I see,
might be,
as you desire it to be.

Amen.

Next week's suggested readings.

Job 42.1-6, 10-17
Psalm 34.1-8, (19-22);
Hebrews 7.23-28
Mark 10.46-52