

The Great Prize (Philippians 3:1-6)

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon emphasizes the importance of pursuing the prize of gaining Christ, which involves being conformed to the image of God's Son and experiencing moral and spiritual perfection.

Scripture: Philippians 3:1

Topics: "Pursuit of Christ", "Conformity to His Image"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the pursuit of knowing Christ as the ultimate prize in the Christian life, drawing from Paul's declaration in Philippians that to live is Christ. He explains that gaining Christ involves being conformed to His image, which is the goal of salvation and requires active pursuit. Sparks contrasts Paul's choice to prioritize Christ over earthly possessions with the rich young ruler's decision to turn away from Jesus, highlighting the transformative power of Christ's resurrection in enabling believers to overcome worldly distractions. He encourages believers to embrace suffering as a pathway to glory and to recognize that true fulfillment comes from aligning with God's purpose of conformity to Christ. Ultimately, the sermon calls for a deepening relationship with Christ, where He becomes everything to the believer.

Transcript

Reading: Philippians 3:1-16

The Philippian letter begins with Paul's statement, "For to me to live is Christ", and then goes on to express his ambition to know the Lord more and more, with his determination to pursue that knowledge as a coveted prize. If we desire to know what is meant by gaining Christ we have to turn to Romans 8:29, where we find that God's intention is that we should be conformed to the image of His Son. This being conformed is gaining Christ, this is the prize; it involves an attaining unto the fullness of Christ in moral perfection, which is to be the glory in which God's sons will be manifested. It is simply this, that to come to be morally and spiritually one with Christ in His place of exaltation is the goal and prize of the Christian life. We do well to keep in view this glorious end, "the manifestation of the sons of God".

When Paul spoke of gaining Christ and of reaching out for the prize, he was expressing his earnest longing to be conformed to the image of God's Son. This is something which is the issue of salvation, it is God's end in salvation, but it is clearly something which needs to be pursued. It is plain that we do not have to win salvation, and we certainly do not have to suffer the loss of all things to be saved. We are saved by faith, not by works, salvation is not a prize to be won, not something for which we must reach forward, but a present, free gift. Beyond this, however, Paul still aspired to heights as yet unreached, and

he wrote that he counted all things as loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus his Lord. If the power of the same Spirit is working in us, this will surely produce the same effect of making us realise how little is the worth of everything else compared with the great prize of Christ.

THE SUPREME ISSUE

It is interesting to compare Mark 10 with Philippians 3, as each passage tells of a young man and his momentous decision. The two men were very similar in many respects, they were both rich rulers, men of high standing socially, intellectually, morally and religiously among their own people. They were probably both Pharisees, and were both loved by the Lord. Of the one it had to be said "One thing thou lackest", while the other could affirm "One thing I do". The nameless young man turned away from Christ; he did so sorrowfully but nevertheless he did it, and the reason was that he was not prepared to part with his great possessions. Paul had great possessions also, but they lost all their attractiveness in the light of the vision which he had of Christ; to him it was the alternative of earthly prizes or the one great heavenly prize, and he gladly made his choice of the latter.

There is a sense in which we may say that he had a great advantage and a different vision of Christ, for he saw the Lord in the full power of resurrection. He not only saw Jesus of Nazareth as the young ruler did, but he was able to appreciate something of the exceeding greatness of God's power in raising from the dead this One who, despised and rejected of men, had on the cross been reduced to helplessness and apparent despair only to be lifted from death and the tomb and exalted to the right hand of the majesty on high. It was resurrection power which made Paul decide to pursue the prize.

THE POWER OF HIS RESURRECTION

That which makes everything possible in the spiritual life is the fact that the same resurrection power which raised Christ to His heavenly goal is the power that works in us (Ephesians 3:20). While it is true that our justification rests upon the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, the whole scope of that resurrection goes far beyond the realm of personal salvation, for its power is the means whereby all the realisation of God's eternal thought may be accomplished. Probably one of the greatest needs of our time - which I believe to be the end time - is for a fuller experimental knowledge of resurrection life, for the final triumph of the Church with its ultimate breakthrough to the throne, with the consequent dispossession of the satanic kingdom, can only be achieved by this means. This life is something which has met all the evil power of the universe, and proved that it cannot be touched or corrupted, so that morally as well as physically it is the life which has triumphed over death.

Resurrection life is not some abstract idea or mystical sensation, but it is a very practical expression of victory over sin and Satan. If this life could be tainted or corrupted then Satan would have won the ultimate victory, but there is no fear of such a tragedy, for the life of Christ is that which has fully and finally conquered death; and inasmuch as His resurrection life has placed Him in an unassailable position, "far above all", it is destined to bring His Church through to share His victory and His throne. So, in his quest for the prize, Paul first mentions his need of knowing "the power of His resurrection".

I believe that this attitude of Paul's tests our own knowledge of Christ. I cannot understand how a Christian who really knows the indwelling of the resurrection life of Christ can hang on to things, having a controversy with the Lord about the letting go of this and that, when the alternative is full abandonment to Christ. What should settle all disputes and questions is the realisation of the royal nature of our high calling in Christ, and the determination to let nothing stand between us and the full outworking of His

resurrection life.

THE FELLOWSHIP OF HIS SUFFERINGS

Paul's pursuit of the prize made him desire not only to know Christ in the power of His resurrection, but also to be ready to enter into suffering for and with Him. This puts suffering in its right place, and relates it to a leading on to glory. Very often suffering gets out of its place with us, and so causes us trouble by being the thing which pre-occupies us and blots out everything else. The Lord would have us see suffering in its right place, that is in relation to something which should make the suffering very much smaller in our estimation than it would otherwise be. "I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed", that glory being the glory of the children of God. It was this glory which Paul described as the great prize of gaining Christ.

If we ask what it means to gain Christ we have to consider Romans 8, where we find that God's intention is that we should be conformed to the image of His Son. This being conformed to Christ is really gaining Christ: this is the prize. It involves an attaining unto the fullness of Christ in moral perfection; for this moral and spiritual perfection is His glory. So for us the simple issue is that to come to be spiritually and morally where Christ is in His place of exaltation is the goal, the prize. We do well to keep in view this glorious end, "the manifestation of the sons of God", when we shall be revealed with Christ and made like to Him. For the present we groan, and if we can truly analyse our groanings we may discover that they represent our longing for deliverance from the old creation life, with its bondage to corruption, sin and death, so that we may know moral perfection in Christ. One day the groanings will cease, and that will be the moment of our arrival at perfect conformity to Christ.

This is what God foreordained, for we notice that God's work in a groaning creation is related to foreknowledge, and therefore to His fore-ordination. Such predestination was not connected with the simple matter of salvation, but rather with the issue of salvation. This makes all the difference. The issue of salvation is conformity to the image of God's Son, for whom He foreknew He also foreordained, not to be saved or lost but to be "conformed to the image of His Son". The work of the Spirit of His Son in us, constituting us as sons and enabling us to cry "Abba, Father", is the commencement of God's work in the groaning creation, the work of securing in secret those sons who will provide the key to its deliverance from the whole state of vanity or disappointment which obtains at present. The whole creation is to be delivered into the enjoyment of the liberty of the glory of God's children, for this is to be the issue of the power of resurrection working in us. We are linked in our very sonship with the whole creation's emancipation from the vanity imposed upon it. But note, the creation is not only to be delivered at the time of the manifestation, but is to take its character from Christ revealed in the sons of God. It can only find its true glory when the power of Christ's resurrection has had full expression in the glorification of God's sons as they receive their redeemed bodies, made like to His.

You may feel that this vast conception does not help you very much when you come up against personal difficulties, but it is for this very thing that Romans 8:28 links such practical experiences with the whole range of God's purpose in Christ. That calling and purpose govern every detail of our spiritual history. If, of course, we take things as purely personal incidents, then we cannot find any good in them, whereas if we appreciate their relation to God's determination to make us Christlike, then we have the clue as to their meaning. This is more than personal, inasmuch as the trial, difficulty, perplexity or provocation holds the secret of developing in us the life of the Lord Jesus, the resurrection life which carries with it the ultimate issue of God, which is the glorification of the whole universe. The New Testament is very practical, the

vast things of the eternities are brought down into the most intimate details of our spiritual life, so making all things work together. These "all things" will be made to contribute to ultimate good provided they are considered in the light of divine purpose. God's meaning must not be missed. It may seem that we suffer contradiction; we ask for one thing and get just the opposite; but this is because God is not relieving us of responsibility, but using the contrary experiences to draw out and develop in us that moral strength which only the Holy Spirit can provide.

CONFORMITY TO HIS DEATH

It was the Holy Spirit who made Paul write things in this order, first the power of His resurrection, then the fellowship of His sufferings, and finally the being made conformable to His death, but in fact we can only know the power of His resurrection by sharing with Him in this experience of death which involves the setting aside of everything that is personal in order to make the things of Christ our only objective. Is it not true that the basic, foundation sin is pride? And what is pride, this root sin? Really it consists of personal interests, self will and self seeking. This was how sin entered God's universe at the beginning, for Satan fell when he said, "I will exalt my throne.... I will be like the Most High", and subsequently he persuaded Adam to grasp at the opportunity of being "like God" (Genesis 3:5), so causing self interest to enter the human race. Such pride is native to us all, and only a practical experience of conformity to Christ in His death can deliver us from it.

Satan's continual attempts to work on our self interest are so subtle that he will even seem to patronise Christ if he can do so in a way which will ensnare God's servants. It was in Philippi, the city to which this letter was directed, that one of his demons publicly proclaimed that Paul was a servant of the most high God who was showing men the way of salvation. What more could Paul have wished for? Here was free publicity! Well, the fact is that we may be sure that there is some subtle plan of the devil when he begins to patronise the Gospel and make its preachers popular. The apostle realised this, and having waited on God he rebuked the demon, with results which seemed calamitous for him and Silas, for it brought them into prison with all hell raging against them. Paul, however had been delivered from a satanic trap even though he was in prison, and although for the moment he was being conformed to Christ in a new experience of His death, this inevitably brought him a new experience of God's resurrection power. He lived to write back to these Philippians from a prison in another city, and was able to assure them once more that the things which had happened to him had turned out for the furtherance of the Gospel. When human ideas, preferences and desires are set aside, it may involve deprivation for the moment, but as self interest goes down into death Christ is given a new place in our lives and we get nearer and nearer to our great prize.

CHRIST MAGNIFIED

It seems clear that as the apostle moved towards the end of his life he was pressing ever more eagerly towards the prize of likeness to Christ. I believe that it is a point of real advance when we come to the place where we can live without the thrill of outward signs of success or obvious miracles, and can be perfectly happy with the Lord Himself. What I have in my heart is that you and I may come more and more to the place where the Lord Jesus Himself is everything to us. We do not seek even conformity to Him for its own sake or for our satisfaction, but only that He may find joy as we move closer to Him. This is the mark of spiritual growth and maturity, to desire only that Christ may be magnified, and to press on resolutely to this objective. "Christ is the path, and Christ the prize!"

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