

Seeing Stars Through Prison Bars

## INTRODUCTION

The apostle Paul was obsessed with someone and something, just as everybody else is obsessed with something or something in life. “If anybody had a right to brag about how good they are,” Paul says in Philippians, “it’s me. I was circumcised the eighth day. I’m of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin. I’m a Hebrew among Hebrews. I’m a Pharisee. When it comes to the law, I am blameless. I am full of zeal for Judaism.” But then he says that all he moved whatever he had gained with these credentials from the “gain” column to the “loss” column. And they became as nothing, worthless.

Paul makes an even greater statement in Philippians 3:8-11:

<sup>8</sup> What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ <sup>9</sup> and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. <sup>10</sup> I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death,<sup>11</sup> and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.

The word is “rubbish” or “dung” in the King James Version. It’s the word “skybala” and literally means “sewage.” Paul said, “I gave up some things, but I gained some things.” What are the three things we gain in Jesus Christ?

### I. WE HAVE RIGHTEOUSNESS IN JESUS (3:8-9)

Paul is talking about two different kinds of righteousness. You’re under either the umbrella of self-righteousness or the umbrella of God’s righteousness. One or the other. Most of the people in the world are still living under this umbrella of self-righteousness. They believe that’s what makes them acceptable to God. Walk up to a stranger and ask them this question, “What do you think it takes to go to heaven when you die?”

Most people are going to answer something like this, “Do good, be good. Keep the commandments and be honest.” But Paul said, “I came to the place in my life where I’ve folded up that umbrella of self-righteousness and threw it on the garbage heap. And now I am under the protection, the righteousness, of Jesus Christ.” Underneath self-righteousness there’s the law, and there’s legalism. Some

believers are still trying to live under the umbrella of legalism. Paul had problems with Judaizers who said one could come to Jesus, but then they had to be baptized, keep all the laws, attend all the festivals, etc. Paul had trouble with those people who were still living under legalism. And the sad fact of the matter is that there are many people today who are still living under the umbrella of legalism, instead of the umbrella of God's free grace.

They think Christianity is a bunch of do's and don'ts. In the Soviet Union, we discovered that the Baptist churches over there sadly are very legalistic. You can't much blame them because during the time of the communist rule, you could be arrested for being a Christian. So that tends to make very introspective, self-centered Christians. Women in the churches don't wear makeup. It's a sin. They don't wear jewelry. It's a sin. They cover their heads. It's very legalistic. One of our translators from the Ukraine lives in Texas today, but she said she still struggled with legalism in the church. She was looked down upon because she might wear a cross around their neck or might have on a little bit of makeup in church.

Many of us have been brought up under a system of legalism that says, "If you're a Christian, you don't smoke. You don't cuss. You don't chew, and you don't go with boys who do." We were taught that there are certain things that, if you're a Christian, you just don't do. We were taught that you don't play cards. (I haven't found that in the Bible yet!) That's how Domino's got started, by the way. A bunch of Baptists got together a number of years ago and they couldn't play cards. So they just figured out a card game of dominoes! You know what that is? Legalism! It will dry up your Christian life quicker than anything. And there are a lot of you thinking that's what Christianity is a bunch of do's and don'ts. It's not; that's legalism. That's under the umbrella of self-righteousness.

But there's another umbrella: God's righteousness. And if legalism is under the umbrella of self-righteousness, grace is under the umbrella of God's righteousness. It is God's grace. And we receive it by faith. We'll never be good enough to earn acceptance with God. And so we've got to let go of our own righteousness and grab hold of God's righteousness.

One of the ways to catch monkeys in South America is to hollow out a coconut, cut off the top, tie a rope through the coconut and tie it to a base of a tree. Inside the coconut, they'll put a little morsel of food as bait. Monkeys are curious by nature and will smell that food. When they reach their little hand in that hole, they'll grab a fist full of food, but their fist is too big to pull out of the hole in the coconut. Their fist. Those monkeys are so stubborn and so selfish that they won't let go of the food and free themselves! All they have to do to escape is let go, and their hand slips out, but they hold onto it until their captors come up and put them in a cage.

Silly monkey! But there are a lot of silly people today still hanging on to legalism, thinking that they're going to get into heaven by what they do or what they don't do. The only thing that will determine whether or not you spend eternity with Jesus

in heaven is if you come under the umbrella of his righteousness. We receive it by faith.

What is faith? If you want to fly in an airplane from one destination to another, there are several things that you must do. You must buy a ticket. You must get to the airport on time. But that doesn't put you on the plane. You can believe the plane will be safe. You can believe the pilot can fly. But until you actually walk into the plane, sit down, and take off, you're not putting your faith in the plane.

Many people say, "I believe Jesus *can* take me to heaven." But they must put their faith in Jesus. When you become a Christian by faith, and that's how you receive God's righteousness. Do you have the righteousness of God, which is in Christ? Paul said he had it because he was a Christian.

## **II. WE HAVE A RELATIONSHIP WITH JESUS (3:10)**

This is the "magnificent obsession." Phil Collins sang a song about talking to Jesus "all" his life. He says Jesus knows him and everything's alright. I just wonder if Phil Collins knows that there's a lot more truth in the course of that song. The apostle Paul knew Jesus. I know Jesus. Many of you who are Christians, you know Jesus. You have a relationship with him. And Paul says, "I'm obsessed with this relationship. It's what I live for.

There are three things you can say about this relationship.

### **1. A personal relationship**

What is eternal life? If you had to write down a definition, what would you say? eternal life dash, what would your definition be? A lot of people would say: "living forever" or "being in heaven" or "life that never ends." Do you want to know what the answer to that question is? Jesus gives the answer in John 17:3-4 where Jesus says eternal life is to know God. It's not living forever. Eternal life is knowing God and knowing Jesus personally. Knowing *about* Jesus is not the same thing as knowing Jesus. Everyone knows about George Washington, but nobody living today knows him. How many people really know Jesus Christ?

People are obsessed with the strangest things. What is your obsession? I read a very interesting article about a guy whose obsession is being an Elvis Presley fan. He's 49 years old, a former house painter. And he claims to be the world's number one Elvis fan. His home in Holly Springs, Mississippi, has a big sign out front called "Graceland Too." And he charges \$3 for people to come to his house and look at all of his Elvis memorabilia. I want you to listen to some of his own words to describe his obsession. He says, "We only sleep four hours a night. We're on shifts. We're working 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year for Elvis." This man's son is 19 years old, and he's named Elvis Aaron Presley McLeod. Mr. McLeod is a large, overweight man who dyes his pompadour hair and sideburns black once a month. He likes to wear the kind of jumpsuits Elvis

used to wear. And one gold suit is his favorite. He plans to be buried in that gold jumpsuit. This is what he says: "I'll go out wearing that. And my tombstone will read 'The world's number one Elvis fan.' I think it's the most important thing I could be doing. And I gave up everything in my life to do what we're doing here." It cost him his marriage because his wife couldn't put up with his obsession. He brushed it off, saying, "Well, it happened to Priscilla and Elvis too." But the saddest part of the whole article is that his devotion to Elvis Presley never gained him an audience with Elvis. Eight times he got close to Elvis, but never met him. He admits that his life's obsession is unusual, but then again so was Elvis. What is your life's obsession? What is thing or person that dominates your thoughts, your conversation, your money? Is it a habit? Is it a hobby? Is it something that you'll go to the ends of the earth to do? What is your obsession? Poor Paul McLeod is obsessed with Elvis, and he never met him. The apostle Paul says, "I'm obsessed with Jesus, and I've met him. And I'm getting to know him better."

Since Paul had already met Jesus on the road to Damascus, why does he say he wants to know him? You can know him, and then you can know him better. I like the way the Amplified Bible translates it in verse 10: "...that I may progressively become more deeply and intimately acquainted with him, perceiving and recognizing and understanding the wonders of his person more strongly and more clearly." Do you have that kind of spiritual appetite? Or are you content just to go to heaven when you die? Do you possess a spiritual appetite that is hungry and thirsty to know God better?

You get to know Jesus better the same way you get to know people better: by spending time with him and talking with him. If you'd asked me two years ago if I know Dennis Parrott, I would have said I just know about him. I'd read about him in some of Paul Powell's books. But now after spending time together playing golf and talking all this time, I know him better. A year from now, I'll know him even better. We get to know Jesus better by spending time with him the same way.

If you claim to be a Christian, but there is not at least a desire in your heart to spend time alone with Jesus, something is wrong. You'll want to know him better. A little boy in Sunday school told his teacher, "I know what God's name is." She said, "What is it?" And he said, "God's name is Andy." And she said, "What do you mean?" He said, "Andy walks with me. Andy talks with me."

You can really know Jesus intimately. Paul says that I may "know" him, and he uses the word "ginosko," which describes the way the Bible says Adam "knew" his wife and she gave birth to a child. It's a word that means to know someone intimately, personally. Do you know Jesus that way?

## **2. A powerful relationship**

Paul says, "...that I may know him and the power of his resurrection." Paul says the reason he knows Jesus is just not so that he can feel good. He needs the power that

Jesus gives. Spending daily time with God is not just a nice thing to do; I couldn't go through life without it. I need that kind of daily power—power to love people who are very unlovely, power to forgive people who seem to be unforgivable, and power to endure the trials and tribulations of life. I need power to serve the Lord. The only place we receive that power is from an intimate relationship with Jesus.

### **3. A painful relationship**

Paul also says he wants the “fellowship” of Jesus’ suffering. We like to talk about going to heaven when we die. We like to talk about all the spiritual blessings of God. But what about the suffering? We don't like to talk about that! A lot of the health and wealth preachers say that if you're right with God and you have enough faith, you'll never be sick. You'll never have problems. Your bank account will always be full. That's not what the Bible teaches. Paul says, if you really know Christ, you're going to understand what it means to really suffer.

I'm talking about suffering physically. Some people live with pain, and so did Jesus when he suffered on the cross. Your pain can connect you with the pain of Jesus. When I was in high school, I worked at a sawmill in South Alabama on the “green chain,” pulling fresh green lumber off the line and stacking it. I wore thick work gloves, and it was hard work. One afternoon as I was pulling off a piece of lumber, a splinter went right through my glove, into my hand, and between my two fingers. It was sharp as a nail, and I screamed in pain. When I went to the doctor to remove it, it was excruciating, but I remember God saying to me, “Now, you know a little of how my Son felt when they drove those nails in his hands and feet.” That’s just a baby step of suffering compared to the suffering of Jesus.

Some people know what it is to experience the emotional pain Jesus suffered on the cross. He was rejected, and some of you are living with rejection right now. Maybe your spouse has walked out on you. They don't want you anymore. Maybe you feel like nobody loves you. Jesus knows what it is to suffer the pain of rejection. All the disciples left him. The very people to whom he was sent said, “We don't want you. We want to crucify you.” If you'll use your suffering as a connecting point with the suffering of Jesus, you'll get to know him better. When God really wants to teach you something, he sends you to the university of affliction. The tuition is high, but the degree is very valuable.

### **III. WE WILL HAVE RESURRECTION THROUGH JESUS (3:11)**

Paul says he wants to somehow attain the resurrection from the dead. Now that word “resurrection” is different than any other word for “resurrection” in the Bible. Paul puts an article on the front of it and says “one way or another” he wants to experience this. Is he expressing doubt? No, he knows resurrection is certain. But what he doesn't know is exactly how it's going to happen. First Corinthians chapter 15 says it's a “mystery... we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed.” The word “sleep” means death—we will not all die. But we will all be transformed in a

flash, in the twinkling of an eye at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. Every Christian is going to meet Jesus one of two ways. One way it could happen, Paul says, is that I die, they bury me, and my spirit immediately goes to be with Jesus. But then when Jesus comes back, my body's going to be resurrected. But it may happen another way, Paul admits. He is saying, "If I am alive when Jesus comes back, then I won't die. I'll be caught up. And instantly I'll be changed."

I believe the Bible teaches that when Jesus comes back, every Christian who is alive is going to face Jesus. First Thessalonians chapter four says we who are alive and remain shall be "caught up" together. The Greek word is "harpazo," the Latin word for "rapture." Jesus is going to come and rapture the church. So, Paul says, one way or the other I'm going to experience resurrection. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 13 about this mystery that it's like looking through a smudged piece of glass. But one day he'll see Jesus personally and all will be clear.

## **CONCLUSION**

What is your obsession? If it's a hobby, if it's a job, if it's a bank account, when you die you will say goodbye to it. But if your obsession is knowing Jesus Christ, when you die it will become even sweeter and even greater. So I encourage you to do like the apostle Paul and make knowing Jesus your greatest goal in life.

## **OUTLINE**

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**2. A powerful relationship**

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