

TO KNOW CHRIST

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Falling in love can be a torturous experience! Uncertainties fill the terrain like land mines.

With the passing of Martha's dad, and our recent weekend in Sonora, I've been reviewing our case again. It started as a friendly acquaintance. Martha came to visit our church on Cortland Street in San Francisco on a Sunday morning. That was when I was first introduced to her. I showed her to our Sunday School class. Then she stayed for the worship service. She had a big smile, and I could tell she was happy to know Jesus.

She continued to attend on Sundays, and began to join other weekly meetings, too, so we saw each other regularly. Other than that brilliant smile, three things attracted me to her: (1) she demonstrated unashamed love for Jesus, (2) she kept showing up, even to prayer meetings, and (3) she owned a car (none of the rest of us did).

So, I began Phase Two—the exploration phase—I sought to get to know more about her. I asked about her family, where she had grown up, what sparked her interest in nursing, who her friends were. We had lots of time to chat (and to listen in while she chatted with others), because she became the youth group's chauffeur, picking people up for church meetings and driving them home after a stop for an after-service dinner or dessert. I enjoyed talking with her; she was bubbly, without needing to be the center of attention, she spoke easily about her background, not evading my questions, and she was comfortable in her faith.

Out of those conversations arose Phase Three—the desire phase. I so enjoyed talking together, sharing our faith, and serving the church, that I wanted to spend more time with her—exclusive time. We started to date. There were lots of places in that big city to show her, so we walked at the beach and through the parks. This, however, became problematic. All this time together ate into my regular devotions and Bible study. And even when I did spend time with the Lord, my prayers were frequently distracted by the image of her smiling face. These frequent interruptions led me to rebuke the devil and plead with God for peace and greater focus.

Then came the Testing Phase. I was being tested concerning the attention I wanted to give to the Lord. So, I began testing myself, backing away from Martha, to see if I could bear being apart. And by revealing my own personality more and more, I began testing Martha to see if she could still stand me. You know, the closer you get to another individual, the more freckles and wrinkles and foibles you can see. You have to know if the attractions still outweigh the distractions.

This is the hardest phase, because it threatens an otherwise joyous experience, it demands compromise (if not surrender), and it visits repeatedly—for the rest of your life. This is where relationships run aground and break up—not because there is no love, but because love must weather these storms (both big and small) again and again, and ego must die a thousand deaths. Here you may discover in yourself powerful emotion, extreme unreasonableness, desperation, and overcoming faith. If you survive this phase, the relationship will not. The relationship will cost you your life.

See, you probably were not prepared for that. You probably hoped the relationship would improve your life. But it won't. No relationship will, that is, *until* you learn how to deny yourself, and die.

Jesus' words fit perfectly here: *"If you cling to your life, you will lose it; but if you give up your life for Me, you will find it"* (Matthew 10:39). Relationships, lasting relationships of the human variety, require death and resurrection—more than once.

The Right Attitude

Paul's words to the church in Philippi also have strong application here: *"You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had. Though He was God, He did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. Instead, He gave up His divine privileges; He took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being. When He appeared in human form, He humbled Himself in obedience to God and died a criminal's death on a cross"* (Philippians 2:5-8).

The result of Jesus' submission was His resurrection and glorification as King and Lord of all. This passage is often quoted and examined all by itself to help us know Christ better, to understand His motives and His behavior. It is also used to show us His example for our own faithful and obedient surrender to God.

But this passage is provided by Paul as an example for building and retaining fruitful relationships in our everyday lives. Listen to his introduction to the passage: *"Don't be selfish; don't try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves. Don't look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too. You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had..."* (Philippians 2:3-5).

This example of Jesus became, for Paul, the hinge on which all of life—daily life—turned. Everything else—his values, his habits, his aspirations—were measured against this. Listen closely to what follows in the very next chapter. Paul begins with a warning about some people who were testing the disciples' faith in Jesus by demanding *more than God Himself required* in religious performance.

Religion Can Kill You

Philippians 3 (NLT)

Philippians 3:2 Watch out for those dogs, those people who do evil, those mutilators who say you must be circumcised to be saved. ³ For we who worship by the Spirit of God are the ones who are truly circumcised.

The “mutilators” were those who insisted that the only proper way to follow Christ, was to enter through the door of Moses and become a rule-follower, starting with the rule to be circumcised. Paul ardently insisted that the Christian equivalent of physical circumcision was the spiritual circumcision of the heart—what I referred to earlier as “ego surrender to Christ.” Paul said those who are truly circumcised are those who “*worship by the Spirit of God.*” If you wonder just what Paul meant, you have only to read to the end of the verse:

“We rely on what Christ Jesus has done for us. We put no confidence in human effort” (Philippians 3:3b). He used the word “worship” to represent all that we do in following Jesus. And he insisted that our attitude or approach to following Christ must be both *reliant* and *wary*.

Reliant on what Jesus did for us—His death in our place—as sufficient to satisfy the demands of Holy God, sufficient to cancel our debt for sin, sufficient to restore us to an everlasting love-relationship with the Almighty.

Our reliance on Christ has to be matched by our wariness of human efforts that seek to supplant our faith through religious rituals and cause us to trust our own efforts to be holy, more than or instead of what Jesus did for us. *“Put no confidence in human efforts.”*

In the next three verses, Paul reflects on his own temptation to trust in his efforts to be religious (and he had some amazing credentials as a son of Abraham, according to the flesh!): *“Though I could have confidence in my own effort if anyone could. Indeed, if others have reason for confidence in their own efforts, I have even more! I was circumcised when I was eight days old. I am a pure-blooded citizen of Israel and a member of the tribe of Benjamin—a real Hebrew if there ever was one! I was a member of the Pharisees, who demand the strictest obedience to the Jewish law. I was so zealous that I harshly persecuted the church. And as for righteousness, I obeyed the law without fault”* (Philippians 3:4-6).

Paul discovered that his religiousness was insufficient for salvation, but more than insufficient—it was interfering clutter, worthless trash, that needed to be discarded from his life. Let’s take a closer look at his conclusion (from the New English Translation).

Philippians 3:7-9 (NET)

^{3:7} But these assets I have come to regard as liabilities because of Christ. ^{3:8} More than that, I now regard all things as liabilities compared to the far greater value of knowing Christ Jesus

my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things—indeed, I regard them as dung!—that I may gain Christ, ^{3:9} and be found in Him, not because I have my own righteousness derived from the law, but because I have the righteousness that comes by way of Christ’s faithfulness—a righteousness from God that is in fact based on Christ’s faithfulness.

What Are You Aiming For?

Out of this journey of growing faith, Paul settles on one aim for his life. Listen to him describe it:

Philippians 3:10-11 (NLT)

¹⁰ I want to know Christ and experience the mighty power that raised him from the dead. I want to suffer with him, sharing in his death, ¹¹ so that one way or another I will experience the resurrection from the dead!

Three goals come into sharp focus here:

1. To know the person of Christ.
2. To experience the power of the resurrected Christ.
3. To share the sufferings of Christ.

Let me unpack these three for us.

Know the Person of Christ

Paul’s first goal was “*to know the person of Christ.*” What does that mean, and how is that to be lived out?

I cannot overemphasize the importance of this theme! It is the start of your relationship with God, and it is also the ultimate goal of your salvation.

The Amplified Bible puts it this way: “*[For my determined purpose is] that I may know Him [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].*”

Far too many have chosen to ignore the person of Jesus. They have reinterpreted the Bible’s content, or substituted another religious figure for Jesus, such as Confucius, Buddha, Lao Tse Tung, Krishna, Ram, Allah, Baha’u’llah, Sun Myung Moon, or Benjamin Creme. It is not just some holy figure, but Jesus Christ alone, who can save us and bring us home to God, our Creator.

For many others, who retain the mere vestige of Christianity, Jesus Christ has become a mere symbol of godliness or holiness or righteousness. Stripped of personhood beyond His historical visit, all that remains are so-called “divine principles” of spirituality. Knowing the physical parts and systems that make up a human being, does not create a relationship with that human. Faith in spirituality is not faith in Jesus Christ.

How are we to truly know Him?

First, be introduced to Him by someone who already knows Him. Ask them to pray with you—that’s how you meet Him.

Second, explore His background through the Bible, the trustworthy record of His birth, life, death, resurrection, glorification, and future return. No other record has survived the scrutiny of time and scholarship. This is the Exploration Phase. Read the Word. Ask your many questions. Look for Jesus’ fingerprints in every book. Get to know the Person, not just the principles. See how He embodied them and lived them out with others.

Experience the Power of the Resurrected Christ

As you explore the Word of God and begin to get to Know the person of Jesus Christ, your desire will begin to grow for personal experience with Him. This is the third phase of your relationship.

The Amplified Bible expresses it with these words: *“That I may in that same way come to know the power outflowing from His resurrection [which it exerts over believers].”*

Jesus once said, *“The water that I will give you will become in you a well of water springing up to eternal life”* (John 4:14). And also, *“He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, ‘From his innermost being will flow rivers of living water’ ”* (John 7:38).

This power of the Resurrected Christ flows *in* to you through prayer—breathing in His grace—and flows *out* of you in worship—breathing out His praise.

Learn to practice prayer and worship. These will seem unfamiliar at first, and you will feel awkward—embrace the awkwardness (it’s only a *perceived* hindrance, not really a barrier at all). Praise and prayer will lead you into many experiences of Christ’s grace and power, and the awakening of deeper delights in His love.

Share the Sufferings of Christ

Finally, comes the old, familiar Testing Phase of the relationship. Jesus told a story about getting to know Him (and about *failing* to get to know Him), in which He described the various ways that people received His message:

Mark 4 (NLT)

³ *“Listen! A farmer went out to plant some seed. ⁴ As he scattered it across his field, some of the seed fell on a footpath, and the birds came and ate it. ⁵ Other seed fell on shallow soil with underlying rock. The seed sprouted quickly because the soil was shallow. ⁶ But the plant soon wilted under the hot sun, and since it didn’t have deep roots, it died. ⁷ Other seed fell among thorns that grew up and choked out the tender plants so they produced no grain. ⁸ Still other seeds fell on fertile soil, and they sprouted, grew, and produced a crop that was thirty, sixty, and even a hundred times as much as had been planted!” ⁹ Then he said, “Anyone with ears to hear should listen and understand.”*

¹⁰ *Later, when Jesus was alone with the twelve disciples and with the others who were gathered around, they asked him what the parables meant.*

¹³ *Then Jesus said to them, “If you can’t understand the meaning of this parable, how will you understand all the other parables? ¹⁴ The farmer plants seed by taking God’s word to others.*

¹⁵ *The seed that fell on the footpath represents those who hear the message, only to have Satan come at once and take it away. ¹⁶ The seed on the rocky soil represents those who hear the message and immediately receive it with joy. ¹⁷ But since they don’t have deep roots, they don’t last long. They fall away as soon as they have problems or are persecuted for believing God’s word. ¹⁸ The seed that fell among the thorns represents others who hear God’s word, ¹⁹ but all too quickly the message is crowded out by the worries of this life, the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things, so no fruit is produced. ²⁰ And the seed that fell on good soil represents those who hear and accept God’s word and produce a harvest of thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times as much as had been planted!”*

So many tests!

Testing from Satan, the thief, who comes only to steal, kill, and destroy.

Testing from problems and persecution created by believing God’s Word.

Testing from the worries of life, the lure of wealth, and distracting desires.

Everybody gets tested. And the testing is repetitive, over the course of your lifetime.

That’s why Paul asserted a third major goal: *“That I may so share His sufferings as to be continually transformed [in spirit into His likeness, even] to His death”* (Amplified Bible). This is where

transformation takes place—first inwardly, then working its way outward into your relationships and reactions, your aspirations and actions.

Elsewhere (1 Corinthians 10:13), Paul affirms this reality: *“The temptations in your life are no different from what others experience. And God is faithful. He will not allow the temptation to be more than you can stand. When you are tempted, he will show you a way out so that you can endure.”*

With every test, God will show you a “way out.” Don’t expect to time warp through that exit the moment you see it; it’s purpose is not your immediate escape. He shows you a way out *“so that you can endure.”* So that you can make it through the test. So that you can endure the pain or hardship. So that you can work your way to the end of the test (not bolt in the middle), and pass it.

This is the way of testing. Get used to it. Learn to trust Christ through it, the way He trusted the Father through His tests—*for your sake!*

People are watching how you manage the tests in your life. This is your strongest witness for Christ.

Press On

Paul wraps it up (and so will I) with these words:

Philippians 3:12-14 (NLT)

¹² *I don’t mean to say that I have already achieved these things or that I have already reached perfection. But I press on to possess that perfection for which Christ Jesus first possessed me.*

¹³ *No, dear brothers and sisters, I have not achieved it, but I focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴ I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us.*

Press on. FOCUS! Press on.

Forgetting the past. Looking forward to the future.

Press on to win the prize. To meet Jesus and the Father. To fulfill His call.

Focus. Press on.