

## Called to New Life

### Philippians 3:4-11

Dr. M. Craig Barnes

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We sometimes talk about the salvation of Jesus as if it were an improvement of our lives. But Jesus isn't interested in adding value to the life you've got. No, he's dying to give you a whole new life.

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I grew up in a wing of the church that stressed the telling of testimonies. A testimony is a description of someone's life before and after meeting Jesus. Even as a child, it didn't take me long to figure out the basic pattern behind these stories. First, the person describes how bad he or she was. (Even if you weren't, you had it make it sound like you were.) Second, comes the part about encountering the forgiving grace of God. Third, the person talks about how much better life is now. There are some minor variations on this, but a good testimony usually follows that outline. A bad person meets Jesus and becomes a good person.

In today's text we receive Paul's testimony, which is substantively different. Paul begins by describing how good he was before he knew Jesus. He had a good pedigree: a circumcised member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews. He had a good resume as a Pharisee, good ambition as one who was zealous, and even good spirituality. "As to righteousness under the law, blameless." Again, all of that was before he got to the second part of the testimony. There he describes the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus as Lord. Paul said everything good is rubbish by comparison. Then, third, he says as a result of meeting Jesus he is, not a better form of himself, but a new self. So whereas our typical testimony is about a bad person meeting Jesus to become a good person, Paul's testimony is about meeting Jesus to become like him, "like him in death, if somehow I may obtain the resurrection from the dead."

The difference here is extremely important. Paul doesn't think Jesus gave him a second chance to get his life together. This is often the way we talk about Jesus, as if the cross and resurrection were nothing more than an opportunity to atone for our own sins by living a better life. So much of our religion is distorted into a message, of "He cleaned the slate on the cross and gave you a fresh start. Now get it right this time." But that is not what Paul is telling us. Paul tells us that it doesn't matter how good you are, you're never going to be good enough. That's what he was trying to do before he met Jesus. It doesn't matter how much you achieve, you'll never achieve enough. And it doesn't matter how hard you work, you'll never work hard enough. What matters is knowing Christ Jesus, in his death and in his resurrection.

When Paul talks about knowing Christ Jesus, he is not telling us to know about Christ, which isn't difficult. He is telling us that it is possible to know him in relationship. The thing that is of surpassing worth in his life is not theological knowledge about God. Paul had that before he hit the Damascus road. No, the thing that makes everything else seem like rubbish is that he now knows God, relationally, in Jesus Christ.

For the purpose of illustration, let's say that one day, Pastor Lynne Faris ascends out of our sight and is gone. That's huge to the people who saw it all happen. When they talk about it to their friends, some have their doubts that this ever occurred. But to those who saw Lynne ascend, well, they know what they saw. Others believe the story and want to hear more. So the eyewitnesses to her life and ascension become important people to a whole new movement. They tell everyone about how Lynne was born, what she did and taught, and all about her love for God. As these eyewitnesses get older, they start to write down their reports so generations of people can read about her. In time, larger groups develop all over the world as people come together to study the written reports on Lynne's life and maybe have a little fellowship. As the centuries pass, they build buildings, get tax exempt status, and start to publish other books like, *The Lynne I Never Knew*, or *What's So Amazing About Lynne*. They send people to school for three years to be ordained to talk about her. These would be the experts on Lynne Faris. (I guess we would call them Farisees.) But even after all that, could any of those experts say they knew Lynne? No. Only those who had a relationship with her could say that.

The thing that is of surpassing worth is not becoming an expert on God, but knowing him. When it comes to the call of God in our lives, that call is not primarily to do things for God, nor is it primarily to know things about God. At the heart of God's call in your life is to know him relationally in Christ Jesus.

Well, how do we find this relationship removed so far from the days when Jesus walked on our earth? Do we have to have Paul's blinding vision of the risen Christ on the road to Damascus? No, although that may happen to some. According to Paul, what is most important in knowing Christ is that we are "found in him." And that is the ministry of the Holy Spirit in your life - to draw you into the Risen Christ so that you are now found to be living in him. "Sharing with Christ in his sufferings," as Paul says, "that we may somehow obtain the resurrection from the dead." So when we talk about a relationship with Jesus Christ, we are not talking about calling Jesus our best friend. We are talking about calling Jesus our life. His story of the cross and resurrection has now become our story.

Every time we come to this table and partake of Christ's broken body and outpoured blood, we encounter the call again to know the sufferings of Christ. You cannot know Christ without knowing about the cross because that is where he will lead us. On World Communion Sunday, today we remember that for some followers of Jesus going to the cross is a literal daily reality as they are persecuted for their faith. They are crystal clear about what it means to know Christ in his sufferings. But for all of us, going to the cross is an experience in dying to our dreams and hopes, sacrificing the life we had planned on living. Some will have to die to their dreams at work. Others to their dreams for their children or their marriages. Others to their dreams about health and the future. These weren't bad dreams, and the problem with them isn't that you need better dreams. The problem is that they were your dreams. And now you need to sacrifice them in order to know the dreams of Christ.

This call to sacrifice and suffering has become strange to our ears today. But it was not always so. It used to be that we were accustomed to hearing our leaders call for this sacrifice from us. In his first speech as the British Prime Minister in 1940, Winston Churchill tried to prepare the nation for a long battle against Nazi aggression. He said, "I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears, and sweat. We have before us an ordeal of the most grievous kind. . . But I take up my task in buoyancy and hope. I feel sure that our cause will not be suffered to fail among men." And the nation followed him into a sacrifice of blood, toil, tears, and sweat. Today, by contrast, we expect our leaders to tell us that they will make us prosperous. We expect prosperity without sacrifice. But at this table of the Lord, we remember that there is no salvation apart from sacrifice.

Just to be clear, though, Jesus isn't calling us to work hard with toil and sweat to get what we want. The cross is not a role model for us. The cross is the place where we give up struggling for our own lives in order to find the new life that he gives us. If you were dying to be a success in your dreams in business, politics, or relationships, here are you called to go ahead and die to those to dreams, because they are killing you anyway. Die to them in order to know the dreams of the risen Christ.

The only reason Jesus called you to follow him to his cross was so he could lead you to his resurrection. I am frequently dismayed to discover people who know all about following Jesus to the cross, but who have no personal knowledge of what it means to live a risen life. They are downcast and despairing, moody and somber. They are without passion, joy, or pizzazz. And when I speak with them about their countenance, they tell me about their burdens as if they were a cross to bear. They are stuck somewhere between Good Friday and Easter.

But Paul, who was in prison staring at his death, was still so clear about the reasons for joy. He reminds us that we preach Jesus Christ, crucified and risen from the dead! Paul would never allow us to grow comfortable with our hurt or the sad wounded inner child or our brokenness. He would tell us that it is all a misguided effort at making life comfortable in a tomb. Jesus isn't there! He left the tomb a long time ago. And he left the door open on his way out. Once Jesus has left the tomb, it is dangerous to your soul to insist on staying in it.

At this table, we are not communing with a dead hero. Our communion is with the risen Savior who is not done saving your life or the lives of those who are in anguish in this world. To commune with him is to sacrifice anything that prevents us from participating in his joyful work in the world. If it isn't joyful, it isn't the work of the risen Christ.

So maybe the greatest sacrifice that is asked of you today is to leave your life in the tomb. Leave the tomb! It may appear comfortable, but a tomb is still a place of death. There is no salvation in there. Salvation is in a new life that knows the Savior's dreams of bringing this world home to God.

Oh God, on this side of Easter forgive us for the sin of not being fully alive. Amen.