

Philippians 3:7-11 Christ crucified is more precious than life.
Lenten Evening Worship 3 March 3, 2010

Dear Friends, in Christ,

The words “glory days” usually refer to a memory precious to people of a time when life seemed better. A child of 12 doing homework may think back to glory days of kindergarten. A couple at 75 may long for the days when they were just married at 25. Near the end of His life, what did Jesus think of as “glory days?” He could have longed for His quiet childhood compared to His hectic adult life. He may have envisioned the early days of ministry where crowds in the 1,000’s followed Him wherever He went or how at His word, demons fled from Him. However, none of these “glory days” lasted. The crowds deserted Him. The devil stepped up his attack against Jesus all the way to Calvary. As the world viewed it, Jesus’ “glory days” seemed a thing of the past. Yet God’s Word tells us the truth so that we can say:

Christ crucified is more precious than life.

This should be the firm belief of every Christian. The Apostle Paul considered Christ crucified as more precious than his life. But, he didn’t always think that way. He wrote about what he had considered glory days as an unbelieving Jew, “*circumcised on the eighth day..., of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless.*” (Philippians 3:4-6) Like many people today, Paul thought that he could save himself. He gloried in the accomplishments of his legalistic past, and he thought that his righteousness by the law was good enough for God.

But, Jesus confronted Paul on the way to Damascus, saying “*I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.*” (Acts 9:5) He showed Paul that his notion righteousness was leading him away from God. Once converted, the things that had been precious to Saul the Pharisee became useless to Paul the sinner who was saved by grace. In fact, Paul knew that his self-virtues were most loathsome to God and were the very reason he should have been condemned to suffer in hell.

The only hope of forgiveness was for Paul to trust in Jesus. How pitiful it must have been for Paul to be struck blind and led by the hand into the city of Damascus. There, Paul’s sight was restored by the power of Jesus’ name. In a sense, Paul died to his old way of thinking and received new life in Christ. Paul wrote, “*Whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ 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 and is by faith.*” (v.7-9)

Once Paul became a true child of God through faith in Christ, he was convinced that he should speak the Gospel to others even if it brought him harm. He later wrote about his life as missionary for Christ, “*I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen and ... from Gentiles; in danger in the city and in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers.*” (2 Corinthians 11:23-26) And Paul had inner turmoil about the welfare of the Christian converts. Finally, history tells us that St. Paul willingly gave up His life by execution in a Roman prison. Christ crucified was more precious to him not only in life but especially in death. Jesus’ words remain true, “*Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it.*” (Matthew 16:25)

So, Christ crucified should be more precious to us than life. At the time we were baptized we were given forgiveness of sins and a new life in Christ. At the same time a drowning took place of our sinful nature that opposed Christ's righteousness to save us. Paul wrote, "*We were therefore buried with [Christ] through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead . . . we too may live a new life.*" (Romans 6:4)

Since we entered real life through baptism, we have learned to die to self and to sinful temptations. We don't put our trust in anything we do, only in Christ. We repent of our sins and turn to Christ crucified for forgiveness and for life. We can say with Paul, "*Whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things.*" (v.7-8) Jesus' death leads us to be willing to give up all, even life on earth, rather than part from Him.

St. Paul was under house arrest in Rome when he wrote this letter to the Philippians. He was awaiting his trial before Caesar. Was it frustrating for him to be confined, since missionary work was what Paul lived for? No! Paul saw his imprisonment as having a share in Christ's suffering. It was not that his suffering saved him. Rather, since Christ alone had fully paid the price to bring him to heaven, the apostle saw his sufferings as a badge of honor for the sake of the gospel. He realized that Jesus had suffered much more for him than he would ever suffer for his faith in Christ. Paul wrote, "*I want to know Christ and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death, and so... to attain to the resurrection from the dead.*" (v.11)

The apostle later wrote to the Philippians, "Rejoice always!" Even though he was in prison, Paul was set free by Christ's sacrifice that he might serve the Lord. Paul saw his house arrest as a pulpit that God had chosen for him. Under the careful watch of a Roman soldier, the apostle spoke the gospel so that many guards and Romans became Christians!

God has directed us where we are in life. Because we can speak about and live by faith in the Gospel of Christ, we should consider our life right now to be part of our "glory days." Life may include pain or good health, gainful employment or none. We may be distressed by struggles within or outside us. We may be in the prime of life or near death. It is no matter. Our life is with God through Christ. His blood sanctifies our lives. His promises keep our attention on "*the power of [Christ's] resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in His sufferings... to attain the resurrection from the dead.*" (v.11)

There is only one reason why we can claim eternal life, because, **second, Jesus' death was as important to Him as His life.** Jesus did not look for glory in His lifetime. He knew that life here would be plagued by the attacks of devil and a hostile world. He sorrowed when He was betrayed by Judas. He felt the pain when His Father denied His prayer to take away the cup of suffering. There was no glory in His bloody sweat while He wrestled in prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. He was disappointed when He found His sleeping disciples, whom He had told to watch and pray. There was no glory in His trial and condemnation by His church or by the injustice that led to His innocent death. Who would count these events as moments of glory?

Yet, since all His suffering was part of the payment for our eternal debt of sin, all is truly His crowning glory. Shortly before Jesus' suffering began He said, "*The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds*" (John 12:23, 24). Jesus' incarnation, His innocent childhood, His perfect ministry, and His voluntary suffering and death showed that His desire for our salvation was stronger than life.

Because of His great love for you, Jesus treasured your life more than His own. Jesus embraced suffering and the cross and, in so doing, He embraced you! This is the message of Lent that gives you the eternal glory which Jesus now has! May the commitment of His life help us to follow Him no matter what the cost until we join Him in the true "glory days" of heaven. Amen.