

The Surpassing Worth of Knowing Christ Jesus

Philippians 3:1-11

Key Verse: 3:8 “Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ.”

Can you believe it is the last day of the year? It feels like just yesterday we were starting 2023, and now here we are, on the brink of a new year. As we look back on the past year, I want to ask you a few questions. What were your hopes and dreams for 2023? What did you gain, and what did you lose along the way? The Pew Research Center asked, “What Makes Life Meaningful?” to nearly 19,000 adults across 17 advanced economies. Guess what? The number one answer was family at 38%. Second place went to occupation and career at 25%, and third place went to material well-being at 19%, followed by community and health in fourth and fifth place.¹ People think that if they have loving families, stable jobs, financial security, good health, and so on, their lives will be meaningful. What about you? Some of us got married and started a happy family; some of us welcomed an adorable baby into their home; some of us got promoted at work and got a raise; some of us worked out and got in better shape; some of us earned a bachelor’s or doctorate degree and have a promising future. Congratulations to everyone who gained what they wanted! On the other hand, some of us have lost loved ones. Some of us have been laid off from their jobs and are struggling financially. Some have fallen ill and lost their health. May God comfort them! All of us have gains and losses this year. But there is something very important that we have overlooked here. Indeed, what makes our lives meaningful and happy is not the things mentioned above. The word of God teaches us that knowing Christ Jesus is the surpassing worth that makes our lives meaningful and happy. Through today’s message, I want to share with you why knowing Jesus is the surpassing worth and how we can gain Christ. May the Holy Spirit illuminate our hearts with the light of wisdom during the message.

To understand today’s passage, we need to understand the context of the church in Philippi when the Apostle Paul wrote this letter. Verse 2 says, “Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh.” Paul repeats the word “look out for” three times, giving them a strong warning. This is because the situation they were in was very dangerous. In those days, calling someone a dog was a very gross insult. Most of us love dogs. My wife says that our dog Mario is a blessing from God. But the dogs that the Apostle Paul was referring to were not these pets, but dirty and ferocious wild dogs. The Jews despised the

¹ <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2021/11/18/what-makes-life-meaningful-views-from-17-advanced-economies/>

Gentiles by calling them dogs. ‘Evildoers’ referred to those who intentionally led God’s people down the path of destruction. ‘Mutilators’ referred to those who practiced mere physical circumcision without knowing the true meaning of circumcision.

So, who were the ‘dogs,’ ‘evildoers,’ and ‘those who mutilate the flesh’ that Paul was referring to? Many scholars agree that they were Jewish legalists. They were self-righteous by trying to keep the law, boasting in themselves, and trusting in the flesh. They condemned those who lived by faith. They taught that one must keep the traditional Jewish laws, especially circumcision, to be saved. This was contrary to the gospel truth that Christ has fulfilled all the demands of the law, and salvation is through faith in Jesus alone. In response, Paul points out that the circumcision they practiced was merely a bodily injury that had nothing to do with salvation and was meaningless. And he teaches the true circumcision is not found in trusting in the flesh but worshiping God by his Spirit and boasting in Christ Jesus (3).

The Apostle Paul uses his own example to show how foolish it is to put confidence in the flesh. Paul himself had more reason for confidence in the flesh. He was circumcised on the eighth day, observing the Mosaic law (Lev 12:3), while those who converted to Judaism were circumcised after reaching the age of majority. Paul was of the people of Israel, God’s chosen people who received God’s promise; of the tribe of Benjamin, who, along with the tribe of Judah, defended the kingdom of David. He was a Hebrew of Hebrews who got an orthodox Hebrew education at the feet of Gamaliel, who was the greatest scholar of his day (Ac 22:3). He was a Pharisee born into a family of Pharisees who had memorized the Five Books of Moses from an early age and meticulously observed their traditions. He was so zealous for God that he wholeheartedly persecuted the church and was blameless in his observance of the law. He was a successful, respectful, and exemplary Jewish legalist.

Some of us have many reasons to put confidence in the flesh, like Paul. Some have earned difficult Ph.D. degrees and become professors; some have completed rigorous medical school and become competent doctors; some have graduated with high GPAs from excellent schools like Northwestern University; some have overcome numerous challenges and difficulties to succeed in business; some have been promoted in good companies and have stable jobs. There are also those who have traveled the UBF orthodox path. This is purely my personal opinion, but I think those who met Jesus in UBF as a college student and were trained as disciples of Jesus and shepherds of sheep during their college years, and then went out as missionaries at a young age, are those who have traveled the UBF orthodox path. There are many of them, especially in Chicago UBF. Doing 12 teams of 1:1 Bible study every week, raising many disciples, and becoming leaders in Chicago UBF are also things we are very proud of. We don’t say it out loud, but secretly, we have a sense of pride and bragging rights about what we’ve achieved. Sometimes, we judge and look down on those who have not achieved similar things.

But for Paul, who was relying on the law and trusting in the flesh, a great shift in values occurred: “But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord” (7-8a). All the things he had once counted as gain, he counted as loss. Those who have studied accounting know that a balance sheet has assets and liabilities. The things that used to be listed as ASSET/GAIN—a privileged birth, a good education, a zeal for the law—have now been moved to LIABILITY/LOSS. What used to be an asset has become a liability because of a great change in Paul’s view of them. In English, the verb “counted” is in the past tense, but in the original language Greek, the verb is in the present perfect tense, “I have counted.” It means that Paul decided to count whatever gain he had as a loss. In verse 8, “count” is a present tense that indicates continuous actions in Greek, which means that he is still counting everything as a loss in the present.

How did this great shift in perception or value come about for Paul? Paul makes it clear saying, “for the sake of Christ” (7), “because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord” (8). When the Apostle Paul encountered Jesus personally, his entire worldview was transformed. On the road to Damascus, where he wanted to bring all the Christians bound to Jerusalem, Jesus intervened directly in his life. Suddenly, a powerful light from heaven shone around him and he fell to the ground. Then he heard the voice of Jesus from heaven: “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” Paul trembled with fear and asked, “Who are you, Lord?” Jesus responded: “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.” Afterward, Paul was blinded and did not eat or drink for three days. A disciple named Ananias came to him at Jesus’ command and prayed for him; then Paul’s eyes were opened, and he was filled with the Holy Spirit. This opening of Paul’s spiritual eyes completely changed the way he saw the world, his values, and his way of life. He went deeper and deeper into the world of Jesus and found that in Jesus are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Col 2:3). Through Jesus, he discovered God the Creator, the source of this world. In Jesus, he found the answers to the fundamental questions of his life: how this world and himself came to be, how we humans should live, and how we can be happy, and so on. In Jesus, he discovered God’s holiness, eternity, omnipresence, omnipotence, love, compassion, patience, justice, and others. Consequently, the Apostle Paul accepted and confessed that knowing Christ Jesus is the surpassing worth that nothing else in this world can compare.

What do you think about Jesus? Is Jesus the most valuable to you? Is the knowledge of Jesus the surpassing worth to you, such that you count whatever gain you have as loss for the sake of Christ? We have often heard that Jesus is most valuable, but for some of us, these words do not penetrate our hearts but only go through our heads. We may know that knowing Jesus is surpassing worth, but we are not convinced enough to count all that we have been pursuing and achieving as a loss. Why? Because we have not yet met Jesus in a deeply personal way, and we have not yet fully tasted the joy of experiencing the deep world of Jesus. But when we experience the risen Jesus personally like the Apostle Paul, our values will change, our eyes will

be opened to the spiritual world, and we will earnestly desire to gain all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge hidden in Jesus.

The Apostle Paul, who realized the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus, for Christ's sake, suffered the loss of all things and counted them as rubbish. Rubbish, in other words, excrement or poop, is something worthless we want to get rid of quickly because it is messy. Who doesn't want to flush the toilet quickly after defecating? Paul suffered the loss of all things, but he boldly counted them as rubbish and threw them all away. Why did he do that?

First, it was to gain Christ. Paul suffered the loss of all things to gain Christ. Couldn't he gain Christ without losing other things? How great would it be if we could keep money, honor, status, recognition, privileges, etc., and still gain Christ? How great would it be if we could gain Christ and, through Christ, gain those things as well? Many Christians desire to achieve the American dream with the power of Christ. It's so attractive that some pastors teach and even encourage them to achieve the American dream through Jesus. But it's not biblical. It's not the gospel Jesus taught us. Jesus said to a rich young man who wanted to inherit eternal life: "Go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me" (Mk 10:21). The discipleship that Jesus taught us is the radical abandonment of all that we have, denying ourselves and taking up our cross daily. This is not to say that all Christians should live in poverty; Jesus is the one who provides for all our needs. He also gave us the promise: "But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you" (Mt 6:33). But if we don't abandon all that we have first, there will be no room for Christ to enter us. The reason we give up everything is not to be a loser in this world but to gain Christ, who is most valuable in the world. When we gain Christ, we gain all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge that are hidden in him so that we can have all the things we need to live for his glory in this world as a bonus.

Second, it was to know Christ through the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings. We want to have the power to overcome any difficulties and hardships. We want the power of God revealed through us when we share the gospel. We want to be clothed with the power of Christ's resurrection. But we are hesitant to participate in his sufferings. We hesitate to participate in the poor evangelist's life that Jesus lived, the life he devoted without rest to healing the possessed and the sick, the lonely life of being rejected by people and betrayed even by his own disciples, the painful life of being scourged, mocked, crucified, and bleeding to death on Golgotha. We want to have joy without pain and glory without cross. But without participation in Christ's sufferings, we cannot experience the power of the resurrection. The Apostle Paul longed to become like Jesus in his death and, by any means possible, attain the resurrection from the dead. He wanted to know the sufferings of Christ and the power of his resurrection experientially, not theoretically. The Greek word γινώσκω /ginōskō/ means to know experientially, not just to have knowledge, like an intimate fellowship between a husband and a

wife. The Apostle Paul had an earnest desire to know Jesus experientially through personal and intimate fellowship with him. What a beautiful thing it is to have such a holy desire! We can have intimate fellowship with Jesus in the Holy Spirit through prayer. We can get to know Jesus by meditating on God's Word, accepting it wholeheartedly, and obeying it. We can get to know Jesus personally through our obedience and repentance to Him, and our love and service to our neighbors. Our lives will be meaningful and joyful as we sacrifice and dedicate ourselves to spreading the gospel and getting to know Christ, who is the surpassing worth. Do you want to live this beautiful life of knowing Christ Jesus experientially?

I dreamed of a successful life with power, honor, and money by passing the bar exam and becoming a judge or lawyer. When I entered law school at Korea University, I was full of expectations that my dreams would be realized soon. But I was suffering from the meaninglessness of life. In my first year of university, I joined a UBF Summer Bible conference where the Holy Spirit worked powerfully on me. I repented of my sins of pride, lust, hypocrisy, and others before Jesus, who suffered and died on the cross for my sins. Jesus forgave me, and my spiritual eyes were open; my values and the purpose and direction of my life were completely changed. I suffered the loss of my human dreams and counted them as rubbish. I wanted to know my Lord Jesus more and more. I could enjoy deep fellowship with Jesus through morning prayer and daily bread. One day, after writing a reflection on John 3:16, I was so moved that I cried out, "For God so loved the world."

In 1996, I went to Venezuela as a missionary. I suffered from being despised, briefly imprisoned, learning Spanish, failing in business for seven years, living together with Bible students, and so on. But I learned the humble shepherd life of Jesus. Also, I could experience the grace and power of Jesus, as many disciples were raised in Venezuela UBF and my business became successful. When I bought a five-story house and became self-sufficient in ministry and business, I was kidnapped. In a critical situation where I would be killed at any time, I prayed with repentance of my sins, asking God to save me. I experienced peace, compassion, and grace from Jesus. I was released in two and a half hours and realized it was time to transfer the church's leadership to Venezuelan local leaders. In 2013, I handed over leadership and business to others, and my family moved to Los Angeles. The seven years in Los Angeles, studying theology and serving a house church ministry, were a meaningful time of fellowship with Jesus in the wilderness. In 2020, during the pandemic, my wife and I were blessed to join the Chicago UBF. For the last three years and four months, I experienced the sufferings and power of the resurrection of Jesus. Sometimes, I felt exhausted, and one day, I had to go to the ER. But I could experience Jesus working among us when our Chicago coworkers worked together diligently for campus evangelism and discipleship. Furthermore, I could experience the glory of Christ, coworking with P. Ron Ward for the world mission and ISBC 2023.

My wife and I now have a new calling from God to serve the New York UBF ministry. Please pray for us so that we can know Jesus experientially through the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings. Please pray for us to serve God's mission by discerning the Spirit's leading and following it communally and individually. We are deeply grateful to our beloved Chicago coworkers for loving and serving my family. May we all get to know Jesus deeply through his sufferings and resurrection, counting all other things as rubbish, in order that we may gain Christ, who is the surpassing worth of all.