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The Transcendent Value of the Knowledge of Christ

by T. Austin-Sparks

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An extract from "The Excellency of the Knowledge of Christ", Chapter 2.*

"I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord" (Philippians 3:8).

"For to me to live is Christ..." (Philippians 1:21).

"The excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus..." Clearly that means that the knowledge of Christ in the case of the Apostle Paul far transcended all other knowledge. For him it was a knowledge that outstripped in its value all other knowledge which he had had or conceived himself capable of having. He sets the knowledge of Christ Jesus his Lord over against every other thing, and just as the candle light pales when the sun shines, so for him the most powerful light and glory which man is capable of experiencing faded in the presence of Christ Jesus his Lord.

Such words were not just words in the case of Paul. This was not some fine flourish of language. Coming from such a man as he was, they carried tremendous weight, not because of who he was, but because of the life out of which the words sprang.

Really to get something of the power and the strength - the depth, the fulness, the wonder of this phrase, of this language - it is necessary to turn to contemplate this man's life and to see the background of his words. Words are of value in proportion to the reality of a man's history - the history that lies behind his words and relates to his words. We may say things, but those things may

be worthless, because there is nothing behind them in ourselves. Or we may say things, and those things may carry with them tremendous weight of meaning and value because of what lies behind them in the person of the speaker. We must remember, then, that when Paul said these words, he was practically at the end of his earthly course... and that a whole life crammed with spiritual history lay behind every syllable. But what a life! Everything culminated and was gathered up into these final utterances.

Paul's Sufferings

Look at him personally. Here is a man, worn and feeble, upon whom there has broken... and upon whom there has rolled waves - mighty and continuous waves of every kind of suffering that you could think of if you sat down to try to catalogue the sufferings of man: a victim of gross perjury, the prey of many contending enmities; a broken and enfeebled physical frame; in circumstances of deep affliction; vexed with hundreds, possibly thousands, of opponents; having very few real friends now remaining.

He has placed on record some of his experiences of adversity. They run like this: In afflictions, in necessities, in tumults, in labours, in watchings, in fastings; chastened, sorrowful, poor, having nothing; in prisons, in stripes above measure, in deaths often; "five times received I forty stripes save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day have I been in the deep; in journeyings often, in perils of rivers, in perils of robbers, in perils from my countrymen, in perils from the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in labour and travail, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness. Besides those things which are without, there is that which presses upon me daily - anxiety for all the churches" (2 Corinthians 11:24-28).

There are many other touches as to the experiences of this man of God. He lightly refers to them and passes on: "I who am rude of speech" (that is what some had said about him): "I who am despicable in presence" (again, what some had said about him). The yes and the no man - that is, the man who vacillates, who at one time says yes and at another time no. Sending requests to a beloved yokefellow, he says: "Bring the cloak which I left at Troas" ...clearly showing that he was knowing coldness.

If you look among his writings and in his history, you accumulate a tremendous amount that points to his history of suffering, of trial, of adversity. In the end he says: "All they in Asia have turned away from me"; "Only Luke is with me."

Then we see what he had given up for that; see that for which this is the exchange from the human side. He tells us what his natural advantages were - how that he had a reason and occasion to boast more than any other.

Paul's Sacrifices

"If any man thinks to have confidence in the flesh, I yet more (more than any man): circumcised the eighth day (i.e., he was born a Jew; he was not a proselyte), of the stock of Israel (not a graft, but the original stock), of the tribe of Benjamin (After the name of the tribe, the next most distinguished name is that of Saul, the first king, who was of the tribe of Benjamin), a Hebrew of Hebrews: as touching the law, a Pharisee; as touching zeal, persecuting the Church" (Philippians 3:4-6).

All of that represented position, advantage, influence, reputation - something in this world that provides a basis of honour and success, a name and a place among men. He had exchanged that for all this of which we have spoken... and much more.

How does Paul feel about it? See the extremes in this man's life: the extreme, on the one hand, of honour and earthly glory - that in which men pride themselves, that which from this world's standpoint was to his advantage. It went a long way. On the other hand is the opposite extreme. Think of it! A man like that, standing out amongst men in a place of conspicuous honour and privilege and influence, yet beaten with rods, thrashed with a whip, flung into prison, stoned, and all the rest. How does he feel about the exchange? What is his attitude to the whole thing? At the end of a life like that, how does he sum it up?

"Rejoice in the Lord" ...rejoice... rejoice! You say: There is something behind these words! These are no empty words. Put a history, an experience, like that behind an utterance, and the utterance counts for something. It is amazing.

If we stayed long enough to meditate upon it, it is calculated to bring us down to our knees in shame. There is no complaining, no repining here; no saying: "I have given up everything (and it is a big "everything") for Christ, and look what He has brought me to - see what I have got! No! There is not a sound or a sign of complaining about it all.

If he says, "Sorrowing" (and he does), he immediately couples with it: "Yet always rejoicing." If he says, "As having nothing," immediately he says, "Possessing all things." If he says "As poor," he instantly says, "And yet making many rich." His attitude toward the whole thing is not one of complaint, but rather the opposite - glorying, rejoicing, and bidding others rejoice. Alone, forsaken, enemies all around, his lifework being torn to pieces by those enemies, universally suspected, all friends leaving him, alone in prison - rejoicing, glorying, exulting.

The Excellence of Knowing Christ Jesus

This goes a long way beyond us. But what is the explanation? It is the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus. The knowledge of Christ - to know Christ as He may be known; to know Christ as He is open to be known; to know Christ as He desires to make Himself known; that is the explanation... and Paul had come into that in large measure.

He is saying this, in other words: It is possible to know Christ in such a way that, although to begin with you may lose everything in this world that is precious in the eyes of men, you have something infinitely more; and to go on with, it is possible so to know Christ that no matter how many may be the forms of suffering, how deep may be the suffering, how inexplicable may be some experiences, how continuous - right on to the end - the adversity may be, yet that knowledge of Christ is something which keeps you above and well above... so that you are not submerged. Although these mighty seas of sorrow and suffering and adversity may throw their weight against you, they break; they do not break you... they break on you. It is possible to know Christ like that. That is what he is saying, if we understand him aright.

Most of us will have to confess that too often the problem has shaken us; the suffering has brought clouds of questionings and doubts into our hearts; we have not stood up to it like this. But our

object is not just to see Paul doing this thing, neither is it to measure ourselves to a disadvantage at the side of Paul; but it is to see that Paul's Christ is our Christ, and what was possible to Paul is possible to us... that Christ is the same yesterday, and today, and forever; He is a Christ who is knowable in exactly the same way that Paul knew Him.

Christ as the Dynamic of Life

What is the way to this knowledge? On the one hand, there is our side, and I think the answer is: "For me to live is Christ." How will you know Christ in fulness? How will you know Him as He can be known: Only on this basis, that for you to live is Christ. What does that mean?

Paul went into Arabia for three years after he met Christ on the way to Damascus, and during those three years he had ample time in solitude to face the implications of his new relationship. For him it became perfectly clear in the course of three solitary years that it was going to cost him everything. All these issues were faced out then. For him it became simply and ultimately a matter of life and death. It meant this: Everything I have on this earth - in this world - has got to be held for the Lord, for Christ; and if, in the course of my relationship to Him, all or any of these things have got to go, then I settle that now. If it means suffering, persecution, and death itself, I come there now - I accept it all - so that for me to live will not be home, family, friends, reputation, acceptance, influence; but if it means none of these things at all - rather, the loss of all things - then the very motive of my being in this world will be none of these things, but only Christ... Christ, the dynamic of life!

In other words Paul would say: "For me to be on this earth simply means Christ! I will accept with gratitude what He may give! If He gives something or allows me to retain something here, I will be grateful for it; but if all has to go, then it does not make any difference. Christ - and only Christ - is the object, the dynamic, the motive of my being on this earth!"

When we have settled things like that - when it is really brought to that conclusiveness of issue - that for us to live is Christ, then the Lord has a very open way to become everything to us. Is it not true in our case that too often our relationship to the Lord, our Christian life - our being Christians and being brought into difficulty, resulting in suffering has led us to stand still or draw back for a minute and say: "Ah, well, I did not expect that it would mean this! I do not know that I am prepared for that!" Something like that has very often happened with us, has it not? Suffering the loss of all things is easy language, *but* really only a man who has put everything once and for all into the balances can know Christ in fulness - utter fulness - and say: "I suffer the loss of all things for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ!"

It just means this: the utterness of Christ to us requires our utterness for Him. If we are holding anything instead of Christ - apart from Christ, contrary to Christ - we are limiting our own knowledge of Christ.

That is one side - our side: "For me to live is Christ." We have failed - we have broken down in this matter. And yet our hearts are bent and set upon one thing (I trust they are)... that when we have passed this way, which we pass only once, the eternal verdict will be that our having lived was Christ. It is a solemn thing to bring into view: What is going to be the effect of my having passed this way? Unto what have I lived? What will the end of my life represent as the result of my years? What will eternity show - and what will time show - as to the value of my having gone this way?

When we are utterly for the Lord like that, it gives the Lord the opportunity of the other side - the divine side: "The eyes of your understanding being enlightened... to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge... that God may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him."

I am sure that if the human side is right and there is utterness for the Lord... the divine side will be all right. But between the two there comes a test - there comes a point where the whole issue of life is focused upon one full-orbed decision: Am I going to be in this world with any interests of my own whatever, or is it going to be, no matter what it costs and what the way may be, just Christ? That is very often headed up in a practical test - not a mental test - and not whether the Lord asks us to say a thing... but to do it. Everything as to our knowledge of Christ in fulness hangs upon an act - sometimes one act that commits us.

We may recognise the implications: ostracism, persecution, defaming, misrepresentation, suspicion, loss of influence, loss of reputation, loss of place - launched out in a way in which comparatively few will go with us and in which we shall be misunderstood. That may be the way of the challenge of the Lord... and of His highest interests. The question is: Are we going to stand back and say, "No, I cannot go that way"? Or is it going to be: "For me to live is Christ"? If so... and we put that into the required act... we shall know the excellency of Christ and have the most excellent knowledge of Christ - Christ excelling. May it be so with all of us.