

Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Intimacy with Christ

Code: A183

Intimacy with Christ

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The apostle Paul perfectly expresses the most earnest desire of every true follower of Christ: "That I may know him" (Phil. 3:10).

"Knowing Christ," in the Pauline sense is not the sort of mystical relationship many people imagine. Paul wasn't longing for some secret knowledge of Christ beyond what is revealed in Scripture. He wasn't asking that private messages from Christ be whispered into his ear.

In fact, the knowledge of Christ Paul sought was anything but mystical. What he longed to know was the power of Christ's resurrection, the fellowship of His sufferings, and conformity to His death.

We err greatly if we think of intimacy with Christ as some lofty level of mysterious, feelings-based communion with the Divine--as if it involved some knowledge of God that goes beyond what Scripture has revealed. That idea is the very heart of the gnostic heresy. It has nothing in common with true Christianity.

Just what do we mean, then, when we speak of intimacy with Christ? How can we pursue knowing Christ the way Paul had in mind in Philippians 3:10? Scripture suggests at least five aspects of true intimacy with Christ:

The Intimacy of Faith

Notice what prompts Paul's comment about knowing Christ in Philippians 3:10. He had already spent several verses describing his life before Christ (4-6). He cited all the spiritual advantages he enjoyed as a Pharisaic Jew. But then he declared that he had discarded all those spiritual advantages for Christ's sake: "What things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ. Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ" (vv. 7-8).

As a Pharisee, Paul had sought to earn God's favor by legal obedience. But he came to realize that the law sets a standard he could never meet. And so he scrapped all his own works of righteousness as if they were filthy rags (cf. Isa. 64:6). This does not mean that he ceased doing good works, of course, but that he gave up trusting in those works for his salvation. Instead, he put *all* his faith in Christ--and was clothed in Christ's perfect righteousness instead of his own imperfect works.

This is the doctrine known as justification by faith. Scripture teaches that our sins were imputed to Christ, and He paid the full penalty for them in His death. Now Christ's own righteousness is imputed to us, and we receive the full merit of it. Without this reality we could enjoy no relationship whatsoever with a holy God.

Moreover, justification by faith--because it means we are clothed in Christ's own righteousness--establishes the most intimate imaginable relationship between the believer and his Lord. It is an inviolable spiritual union. That's why Paul often described believers as those who are "in Christ."

In other words, all true intimacy with Christ has its basis in faith. In fact, no relationship with Him whatsoever is possible apart from faith (Heb. 1:1). As the apostle Peter points out, we love Him by faith, even though we have not seen Him (1 Pet. 1:8).

The Intimacy of True Worship

In Hosea 6:6 the Lord says, "I delight in loyalty rather than sacrifice, and in the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings."

That verse means we should not imagine that worship consists of rote acts of religious ritual--like sacrifices, burnt offerings, and other ceremonies. Instead, we need to realize that real worship is grounded in the true knowledge of God.

If we want God to delight in our worship, we must think rightly about Him. The very essence of idolatry consists in wrong thoughts about God. And conversely, true knowledge of God means knowing Him as He is revealed in Scripture.

To put it another way, sound doctrine, not liturgy and ritual, is the litmus test of whether our worship is acceptable.

Right thinking about God is therefore essential to true intimacy with Him. Anyone who would know Him intimately must know what He has revealed about Himself. And again, this does not mean we should seek some *mystical* knowledge about God. All we can know with any certainty about God is what is revealed in Scripture. Those who would know the true God in the true way must therefore seek to be thoroughly familiar with His Word.

The Intimacy of Prayer

Jesus himself taught us to seek intimacy with God through private prayer. Prayer is where the worshiper pours out his heart to God. And Jesus Himself stressed the importance of *private* prayer: "when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret" (Matt. 6:6).

He was confronting the practice of the Pharisees, who loved to pray publicly, for show. Jesus was not teaching that prayers should never be offered publicly, for there are obviously times when Scripture calls us to corporate prayer.

But the true Christian seeking intimacy with God will pray most often, and most fervently, in private. The true audience of all our prayers is God Himself. And if we understood what an incomprehensible privilege it is to be invited to come boldly before His throne of grace, we would surely spend more time there, pouring out our most intimate thoughts, fears, desires, and expressions of love to Him.

The Intimacy of Obedience

Jesus said to the disciples, "Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you" (Jn. 15:14). Thus Christ Himself made obedience to Him an absolute requirement for true spiritual intimacy.

Let no one claim intimacy with Christ whose life is marked by disobedience rather than submission to Him. Those who refuse to obey Christ as Lord cannot claim to know Him as a friend. Scripture plainly declares that He is Lord of all (Acts 10:36), and He is therefore entitled to demand our allegiance to His Lordship.

As a matter of fact, those who withhold that allegiance are His enemies, not His intimates (cf. Jas. 4:4). That's why true intimacy with Him is utterly impossible without unconditional surrender to His divine authority.

Again, this takes the matter of intimacy with Christ out of the realm of the mystical and defines it in terms that are intensely practical.

The Intimacy of Suffering

Returning to Philippians 3:10, we note once again what kind of intimacy with Christ Paul was seeking: "That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death."

Of course, we easily understand why Paul wanted a share in the power of Christ's resurrection. But why did the apostle desire to know the fellowship of Christ's *sufferings* and be conformed to His *death* ?

We can be certain that Paul had no perverse love of pain and suffering. Elsewhere he testified how he repeatedly besought the Lord to deliver him from a "messenger of Satan" that was like a thorn under his skin (2 Cor. 12:7).

In the midst of that experience Paul discovered that God's grace is sufficient to see us through all our sufferings. Moreover, God's strength is made perfect in our weakness (v. 9).

God gives a special measure of grace to those whom He calls to endure suffering. In a familiar passage in the Beatitudes, Jesus said this about suffering:

Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you (Matt. 5:10-12).

There is a special blessedness known only to those who suffer for Christ's sake. Those who would desire true intimacy with Him must be willing to endure what He endured.

Add all those things together to get the full picture: True intimacy with Christ involves suffering, obedience, much prayer, a good knowledge of God's Word, and a life of faith.

Notice that those are not advanced skills for second-level Christians. They are the most elementary issues of the Christian life. That underscores the truth that intimacy with Christ is not some sort of mystical secret. It is the whole point of our life in Christ. Indeed, it is the chief end for which we were created: to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.

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