

Bible Study for Texas for 9_28_82503

October 10, 2003

Posted: 8/22/03

Baptistway Lesson for Sept. 28

Philippians 3:2-14

Keep focused on knowing Christ

By David Morgan

Texas native Lance Armstrong won his fifth straight Tour de France last July. He appeared the morning after his victory at a press conference titled: "Life After Cancer: A Celebration Of Life."

Armstrong is not only the pre-eminent cyclist in the world but also a cancer survivor. Armstrong said at the conference: "It's an honor to win the Tour de France but even more so as a cancer survivor. When I think about a crash on Luz Ardiden or a cyclocross in Gap, and then think back to 1996 and being in a hospital bed in Indianapolis, it's easy to choose." Armstrong has kept cycling in proper perspective.

Paul's word to the Philippians can help us to keep our lives in proper perspective. An appropriate outlook on life includes a lifelong quest to know Christ fully.

Watch out for false teachers

False teachers threatened the Philippians' well-being. The attack came from a faction of Paul's opponents known as Judaizers. This party was comprised of men who believed that Gentile Christians had to submit to and practice certain Jewish rites before they could become Christians. Paul relentlessly battled this heresy, which may have been dividing the Philippian church.

Paul warned the church to resist this group, which he likened to dogs. Now Paul was not thinking of the domesticated dogs many of us have as pets. Dogs in his day were ferocious scavengers. They roamed the streets and were known to viciously attack people. Both Jews and Gentile used this term to express contempt toward the other. Paul used the word as one of rebuke.

He warned the Philippians to stay clear of these teachers. He further referred to them as evil workers. They felt that they were acting in righteous ways, but Paul saw their acts were evil. He urged the Philippians to realize that the Judaizers taught a false circumcision. The word Paul used for circumcision was used in the Old Testament for mutilations and other incisions which were prohibited by the law (Leviticus 21:5; Deuteronomy 14:1). Paul's strong language stressed the severity of the threat.

Boast in Christ Jesus

True circumcision was not a physical act. It was the church's recognition that the body of Christ comprised the new people of God. Paul wrote in Romans that true circumcision was of the heart and not the flesh (Romans 2:25-29). He spoke in similar words to the Corinthians: "Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but what matters is the keeping of the commandments of God" (1 Corinthians 7:19). Paul's word for worship described the worship of God's special people, those who worship him in

Spirit and truth.

Those who are of the true circumcision boast in what Christ is doing and not what they think they are accomplishing. Christ alone was the subject of their praise and adoration. The Christians had no reason to trust in or to brag about anything in their lives was apart from God and outside of what Christ was doing.

The futility of the past

If any person had reason to trust his birthright and past accomplishments to please God, it was Paul. Whatever others might submit as reasons for boasting, Paul could exceed them. He listed those things in his life that some would consider advantages in knowing Christ (verses 5-6).

Paul was circumcised when he was eight days old. His parents followed the law closely in this regard (Genesis 17:12). Abraham circumcised Isaac on the eighth day (Acts 7:8). Jesus and Mary did likewise for Jesus (Luke 1:59). That Paul was circumcised as an infant also proved he was a Jew from birth and not a convert. His parents must have been devout Jews to perform this act so diligently.

Paul's adding he was "of the nation of Israel" further showed that he was not a Jewish proselyte but was a Jew by birth and ancestry. Paul could not only claim a Jewish genealogy, but he could trace it back to the tribe of Benjamin. This small, faithful tribe remained loyal to the Davidic dynasty when the kingdoms divided after the death of Solomon. Israel's first king, Saul's (Paul's Hebrew name) namesake, came from Benjamin.

Paul was a "Hebrew of Hebrews." Many Jews in his day had adopted a cosmopolitan attitude toward the world. They spoke Greek more fluently than their native tongues of Hebrew and Aramaic. But Paul came from Hebrew parents who preserved a Hebrew heritage. Paul was faithful to the

ancient Jewish culture in all ways.

The Pharisees counted Paul among their number. Faithful and strict adherence to the law was one mark of this religious sect. This conservative and influential group of laymen sought to preserve the religious heritage of Judaism.

Paul was more than simply a member of the Pharisees. His leadership was evident when he watched over the cloaks of those who stoned Stephen (Acts 7:58). He demonstrated his enthusiasm when he began to attack Christians. The apostle was traveling to Damascus to pursue and persecute Christians when Christ appeared to him in a blinding light.

Paul declared he was blameless in the law. He scrupulously kept the commandments. No Jew could find any fault in Paul. He stood at the top of his class.

Abandoning all for Christ

Paul had catalogued a rather comprehensive list of qualities that would have given him reason to boast in the flesh. "In the flesh" means apart from God and not necessarily carnal. Paul consciously and willfully rejected at his conversion the previously mentioned list of traits. Paul had considered life without Christ and the benefits of his Jewish heritage. He contrasted those with what Christ offered. He chose Christ and rejected the advantages of his past.

Verse 7 deals with Paul's past conversion ("I have counted"). In verse 8, Paul was describing his current state and attitude ("I count"). Paul's earlier list of advantages focused on religious matters. He now made clear he would count "all things" as loss for the sake of his new relationship with Christ. He would cling to nothing which prevented him from knowing Christ intimately. By referring to Christ as Lord, Paul admitted Christ held

an absolute and ultimate claim on him. Paul had relinquished control of his own life for the sake of serving the Lord Jesus Christ. All those things which Paul had prized earlier in his life he believed now to be rubbish.

To be found in Christ

Paul's aim was to gain Christ, that is to more and more allow the Lord to control him. Paul also wished he would possess more and more of Christ in his life. "To gain" considered Paul's present situation. "To be found" in him looks to the future. Paul wanted Christ to find him a faithful member of the body of Christ when the Lord returned or at the apostle's death. Being found in Christ included a righteousness only God could bring. Paul had rejected all of his heritage and adherence to the law as a means for achieving this right standing before God. He had discovered only God could impart to him a righteous, upright quality of life. Paul appropriated this righteousness through his personal trust in Christ.

To gain Christ and to be found in him would produce an intimate relationship with Christ. Paul wanted to know Christ better. Paul wanted to experience the power of the resurrection in his own life as God further transformed him in mind and spirit. He connected experiencing the power of the resurrection to the fellowship of his sufferings. Paul felt that to experience suffering because he was proclaiming the gospel would deepen his faith. He did not flee from suffering but embraced it as a medium of God's grace.

He believed that as he died more completely to self he would be raised to the life Christ planned for him. Paul anticipated that at life's end he would experience the fullness of being redeemed through Christ's resurrection.

Pressing on toward the goal

Paul figuratively, and perhaps literally, took a breath after plumbing the depths of his desire to experience all Christ had to offer him. He acknowledged that what he had been contemplating would only be fully realized in the future. His conversion on the Damascus road was only the first step on the journey. He remained a pilgrim on earth, seeking the perfection in Christ that could only come when the journey had ended. But he continued to strive for what he still lacked. Christ took control of Paul's life near Damascus. Now Paul prayed he might know Christ and everything this new relationship entailed. Christ had a plan for Paul. Paul sought to know it and accomplish it.

Paul made no pretense in claiming he had attained all Christ had prepared for him. Paul had spent countless hours in prison contemplating what Christ was doing in his life. His statement was not one of false humility. He genuinely knew he had far to travel in his walk with Christ.

Paul was so overcome with emotion he omitted the verb "do" and literally said, "one thing." That "one thing" was to forget the past and reach for the future. Obviously Paul could not erase his memories, but he could live in such a way that he refused to let his past control and determine his tomorrows. He described himself as straining forward toward the future and the prize which Christ held for him.

Paul had renounced his past. He rejoiced in his present circumstances, and he fixed his gaze upon Christ's goal for him. "Goal" translates a word found only here in the New Testament and usually means a mark for shooting at. The prize that awaited him had been determined by Christ.

I've heard it said that who you know is more important than who you are when it comes to getting a job. I have doubted this statement, although it sometimes appears to be based in fact. But when it comes to the Christian walk, who you know is all that counts. Who you are has been replaced by the new creature you are in Christ. Keep focused on Christ. The best way to

live your life is to seek constantly to know Christ more fully and completely.

Questions for discussion

- ◆ Name some false teachings Christians may hear taught in their churches.
- ◆ If we can never achieve perfection, why should we keep trying?

News of religion, faith, missions, Bible study and Christian ministry among Texas Baptist churches, in the BGCT, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) and around the world.