

# A Committed Loser

Isaiah 43:16-21 | Psalm 126 | Philippians 3.4b-14 | John 12:1-8

## PHILIPPIANS 3.4B-14

<sup>4b</sup> ...even though I, too, have reason for confidence in the flesh. If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: <sup>5</sup> circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; <sup>6</sup> as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. <sup>7</sup> Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. <sup>8</sup> More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ <sup>9</sup> and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. <sup>10</sup> I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, <sup>11</sup> if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. <sup>12</sup> Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. <sup>13</sup> Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, <sup>14</sup> I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

## INTRODUCTION

“Every Olympic event should include one average person competing as a point of reference.” It’s an old joke, but it has some merit. Think about the Winter Olympics that finished in Beijing just over a month ago. ‘Here are the world’s greatest figure skaters from France, and the US, and China, and here are Franz and Maria from Vienna, it’s their third time trying to ice skate. Here is the Canadian national hockey team, playing against the hockey club from St. Andrew’s Preparatory School in Woking.’ I don’t know about you, but I would definitely watch those Olympics. It would certainly help all of us to appreciate the incredible talent and skill and effort it takes to compete at the highest level, to appreciate the pinnacle of human endeavour as the world’s greatest athletes test the limits of what a human being can do.

Paul, in this part of his letter to the Philippian church, is likewise considering the limits of human endeavour—not in sport, but in something far more profound. He’s looking at the idea of salvation itself and asking: can you get there? Can you accomplish it? Like and athlete, can you achieve your way into eternal life? Let’s take a look at how he reasons through this question.

## 1. THE HOPE OF THE RESURRECTION

First, what exactly is the salvation, the prize, that Paul is holding out in front of us? He begins to describe it in the middle of the passage. Look at the end of verse 8:

...in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Phil 3:8-11.

These two parallel sentences are the heart of the argument: “*that I may gain Christ*” in the first sentence, and “*know Christ and the power of his resurrection*” in the second. His goal is to gain Christ, and his goal for them is that they may also gain Christ. And here, gaining Christ means gaining his righteousness.<sup>2</sup> That is, it is not just that Christ takes our sin, but we gain his righteousness. For what purpose? In the following sentence, it is that we know the power of his resurrection. This is a reference to the eternal life that follows salvation—the triumphant resurrection life of Jesus that we may attain. In other words, very simply, we who believe not only have our sin removed by Jesus Christ, we gain the righteousness of Jesus Christ and so gain eternal life in his resurrection.

Notice though, in both sentences, there is a contrast. Gaining Christ’s righteousness means not having a righteousness of my own. And attaining his resurrection means sharing in his suffering. And yet, the goal is so magnificent, so matchless in its value, so extraordinary on the most profound level, that it is worth whatever the cost. And for those of you who believe, who have had the slightest taste of life in Christ Jesus, you know what I mean.

## 2. THE OBSTACLE TO ATTAINING THE RESURRECTION

But it also raises a question. How does one attain the resurrection? How does one gain Christ? If it is such a worthy pursuit, how do we get it? And this brings us to the beginning of the passage. There are false teachers who are attacking the church in Philippi, and they are offering a wrong answer. How does one gain eternal life in the final resurrection? They suggest it comes from confidence in the flesh—through human endeavour. But Paul retorts:

...I, too, have reason for confidence in the flesh. If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.<sup>3</sup>

It’s quite a CV. Paul has some status. He’s basically a gold-medal-winning Olympic athlete of religion. He has some reasons to be confident in his ability to earn the salvation, many more reasons than most people—certainly more than average people like you and me. If anybody was capable of getting there on their own, it was Paul.

I don’t know about you, but I identify with this. I was on a flight once and I heard over the intercom that request that you usually see only on television. ‘Is anyone on board a doctor? We’re having an emergency in the forward cabin and need the assistance of a doctor.’ In my heart, my first inclination was: ‘I’m a doctor. I am. I have a degree. I can save this person’s life. I had that thought for about a second longer than I should have, in the fanciful and self-aggrandizing delusions of my id. Because I remembered: ‘My PhD in New Testament is almost certainly useless in this emergency. Unless someone is dying from not knowing what order the Gospels were written in, it’s unlikely I’ll be much help.’

---

<sup>2</sup> This is a key biblical text in defining a doctrine known as *double imputation*—the imputation of the believer’s sin to Christ (substitutionary atonement) *and* the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to the believer (enabling, though imperfectly, obedience in this life).

<sup>3</sup> Phil 3:4-6.

But it's so easy to think that way. 'Of course, I'm saved. I was born into a Christian family. I was brought up in the right church. I was baptised. I'm living a relatively peaceful and decent life. I volunteer at the Bazaar. I'm such a legitimate Christian, I even tithe... Surely the Lord has a worthy reward in mind for me.' It's so easy to rely on our own flesh, the superiority of our theology, or even the obvious exceptionalism of our traditions. Or, in more recent times, we throw out objective measures altogether and we rely on our own self-understanding. 'The things of the world don't matter, so long as I am happy with myself, as long as I have self-realized in a way that allows me to be fully me, as long as I love myself.' And maybe once in a while, we come to realize that we are mistaken, that we've relied too much on our own understanding, and then we replace it with yet another system of belief, philosophy, or worldview. The cycle continues. And we are both the measure of our own success and the primary obstacle to our happiness.

### 3. THE MEANS OF ATTAINING THE RESURRECTION

And what's Paul's response to that? *Get over yourself.* Listen to how he responds:

Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ...<sup>4</sup>

Did you hear that repetition of the word *loss*? "*Whatever gains... I have come to regard as loss... I regard everything as loss... For his sake, I have suffered the loss of all things.*" It's a shocking idea. Everything is not just neutral, but a loss. It is refuse. Trash. Rubbish. Everything I've accomplished in my own flesh, every advantage I've gained apart from Christ, everything that is not Jesus Christ in me, is garbage. Everything I've been through is irrelevant, and all my possessions are additions to the junkpile. My righteousness, my good deeds, my position in life, are all worthless... compared to the "*surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.*" What a phrase! Loss for the sake of Christ. Loss that I may gain Christ. And why? Because it is of surpassing worth. It doesn't matter how accomplished or successful we are. It doesn't matter one bit. Because on this journey called life with a destination of eternal life, our efforts are not going to get us very far.

But it is not hopeless. We can still gain the hope of resurrection. And that hope is found in Christ Jesus. Only his suffering and death will ever make a difference. Let that sit for a minute. Think about it. Maybe you're somebody who has been relying on yourself, on your own goodness and accomplishments—something especially easy to do in this season where we focus on our own righteous living. Don't let piety become self-righteousness. This is a chance, a reminder for all of us to repent of any self-justification and give ourselves to Christ Jesus. Trust in him alone. And if we do, if we have already repented and believe, then this is a chance to identify all those ways in which we rely on ourselves instead of him. Gain the surpassing worth of knowing him. And remember that everything else is loss. Be a committed loser. Lose that you might gain.

---

<sup>4</sup> Phil 3:7-8.

In the simplest terms, Paul's argument is rather simple, foundational, and essential. If you hope to attain the resurrection, if you hope to gain Christ and enjoy the surpassing worth of knowing him, get out of your own way. Get over yourself. This world will tell you that it is about you. Achieve your dreams. Raise your status. Level up. Lean in. Be you. And maybe then you'll be satisfied. But not Paul. Paul had more reason than most to boast when it comes to being a good person worthy of salvation. But here he reminds us, it doesn't matter. It's rubbish. Consider it all as loss. In Christ alone shall we put our trust.

## CONCLUSION

There is a musician that, in my younger years, I admired very much. His name is Derek Webb. And it has been quite sad to me as, over the last few years, he's rather publicly deconstructed his faith—rightly questioning the self-righteousness that plagues modern religion, yet concluding that his personal enlightenment and the progress of humanity is where the answer lies. He, sadly, forgot his own lyrics. And even though he has forgotten, Webb's words remind us of Paul's answer:

I trust no other source or name,  
nowhere else can I hide.  
This grace gives me fear, and this grace draws me near  
and all that it asks it provides.  
No one is good enough to save himself.  
Awake my soul tonight to boast nothing else.<sup>5</sup>

Or as Paul concluded: "...but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus."<sup>6</sup>  
Amen.

---

<sup>5</sup> Sandra McCracken, "Awake My Soul," from Derek Webb, *She Must and Shall Go Free*, 2003.

<sup>6</sup> Phil 3:13-14.