

UPWARD CALL

SERIES: TENACIOUS TOGETHER



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Philippians 3:7-16
Seventh Message
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Philippians 3:7-16

We all know that life has its challenges. Helpfully, the apostle Paul acknowledges those challenges and compares life to running a race. Even more helpfully, he tells us how to run the race. More helpfully still, he tells us what prize awaits us at the end. If we keep the prize in view, we'll be inspired to run the race.

Beginning in verse 7, Paul writes one sentence that summarizes verses 7 through 11. Then in verse 8, he begins a sentence that continues through verse 11. The sentence climaxes twice in knowing Christ. In these few verses, the person of Christ is mentioned, either by name or pronoun, no less than thirteen times. The passage is about Christ. It tells us that knowing Christ is paramount.

Philippians 3:7-11:

But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. 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 9 and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— 10 that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, 11 that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Paul patterns verses 7 through 11 after his Christ poem in Philippians 2:6-11, even using several identical or nearly identical words. Paul is showing that he did not consider his Jewish heritage as something to be exploited, just as Christ did not consider the advantage of being equal with God as something to be exploited. Christ's life defined what it means to be equal with God. Paul's life defines what it means to be one of God's people. Paul patterns his life after Christ, making the same journey that he made, and he expects it to end

the same way—with a resurrection. The message for the Philippians, many of whom were Roman citizens, would be that they should not consider their citizenship something to be exploited. The message for us is that we must be willing to surrender any advantages we have if they compete with allegiance to Christ.

Gains and losses

Paul uses the marketplace terms of “gain” and “loss” in verse 7 to compare his former values to his current values. He formerly valued his Jewish heritage and achievements, which from his perspective marked him out as a “righteous” man, or a member of God's covenant people (verses 1 through 6).

At some point, Paul decided that what he thought was profitable was better understood as loss. This decision was “for the sake of Christ.” He must be talking about a decision after his encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-9). He then understood that his Jewish heritage and achievements neither qualified him for covenant membership nor marked him out as a member. Something about Christ caused him to reconsider his outlook to the extent that what he formerly deemed profitable was deemed expendable. One might say that Paul “lost it” on the road to Damascus! He was traveling to Damascus to persecute followers of Jesus. His encounter with Christ changed the course of his life. From that point on, he traveled on a different road.

Your first encounter with Christ may not be as dramatic as Paul's, but after you meet Jesus, you will realize that your values will have to change. Whatever our culture puts forth as its identity markers will have to be re-evaluated in light of Christ. To follow Jesus, you'll have to set out on a different road—one that leads up a mountain.

Surpassing worth of knowing Christ

In verse 8, Paul both further explains what he means in verse 7 and shifts from the past to the present. The present tense implies ongoing consideration. In the present, he counts “everything as loss.” For Paul, this

“considering” is something he repeatedly does. The “loss” in view in verse 7 primarily concerned his Jewish heritage and achievements. Now he considers those advantages and every other potential advantage to be a loss.

Again, such consideration is literally “for the sake of” Christ. What is it about Christ that causes this radical shift in values for Paul and continues to govern his choices? He says it is the “surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.” It’s not that nothing else holds any value; the value of knowing Christ is simply greater—so much greater that Paul can chalk up everything that would compete with “knowing Christ” as something that can be released.

What does it mean to know Christ?

The word “know” was often used in the Hebrew Scriptures in connection with the Israelites’ relationship with the Lord (Exodus 10:2). In his covenant relationship with Israel, the Lord wanted the Israelites to know him. Part of his intention in making a new covenant was to open things up so that more people could know him (Jeremiah 31:4).

The word “know” is used of sexual relations in both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament (Genesis 4:1, Matthew 1:25). Both testaments compare the Lord’s covenant relationship with his people to marriage (Hosea 1-3, Ephesians 5:25-27, Revelation 19:7-8). God is romancing us. The closest human parallel is the physical, emotional, and spiritual intimacy experienced in sexual intercourse between a husband and a wife, but even that pales in comparison to the surpassing worth of knowing Christ.

Here Paul calls Christ “my Lord” for the only time in his writings. Elsewhere, when using a personal possessive pronoun, he calls Christ “our Lord.” For Paul, an intimate personal relationship with Christ is in view here.

For the sake of Christ, particularly knowing Christ, Paul not only considers everything to be loss, he actually has lost all things. He has either acted on his “considering” by abandoning advantages or has had those advantages stripped from him because of his allegiance to Christ.

Moreover, he considers any such advantages as “rubbish”—a vulgar term that could mean either excrement or garbage—so that he may gain Christ. What he formerly considered or would otherwise consider

“gain” he now considers loss and even rubbish so that he may “gain” intimacy with Christ. Does that mean that Paul is looking forward to gaining Christ in the future? In a sense, yes. Verse 7 makes clear that he has already gained Christ, that he already knows him personally and intimately, but as the passage unfolds, there is clearly more to gain, particularly and finally at “the resurrection from the dead.”

Count everything loss

Paul here pursues that which benefits him. If he suffers loss, it’s only that he might gain something. Let us be clear and unapologetic that as followers of Jesus Christ, we are pursuing that which benefits us. We want to gain something. That which benefits us—that which we gain—is intimacy with our Lord. We are going to hear the passionate cries emanating from our hearts and interpret them as Jesus calling to us from that place. And we will meet with him there—in the center of our hearts, in the Holy of Holies where Jesus dwells. When we see the love on his face—the absolutely pure and holy love—we will know in our hearts that we were made for this meeting. The top of the mountain, then, ends up being the center of your heart. That’s where the cloud of God’s glory is resting. That’s where Christ dwells. That’s where he’s waiting.

Think of how you feel when you’re having a heart-to-heart conversation with someone you’re close to when you can’t wait to hear what she says, and you can’t wait to share your thoughts when the connections inspire memories, hope, and laughter. When the conversation is over, you feel as if something has been released. That’s what Christ wants with us, and that’s what we want with Christ.

We will consider everything else loss and, yes, even garbage in comparison to knowing Christ. Nothing satisfies the heart like intimacy with Christ. For I am convinced that neither money nor possessions nor marriage nor sex nor health nor success nor recognition nor affirmation nor anything else one might consider valuable can be compared to the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.

Are you convinced of this? If you are, then according to Paul, you must go on counting everything else that would compete for Christ’s place in your heart as loss and even garbage. Like Paul, you must add it up in your mind. Consider the gains and losses. What is of true and lasting worth, and what is not? What is worth the most?

Traveling light

You may have to give up some of what you value. Or it may be stripped from you. Either way, if in the loss you see the opportunity to gain intimacy with Christ, you win. Wouldn't it be nice to know that whenever you lose something, you're actually gaining something and that what you're gaining is of surpassing value? Wouldn't it be nice to look at the loss of every so-called "advantage" as an opportunity to draw closer to Christ?

Mary of Bethany possessed a pint of expensive perfume, but she thought nothing of pouring it on Jesus' feet as an expression of her love for him (John 12:2-3). She not only released a valuable possession, but she also did so eagerly, in order to embrace something much more valuable, the love of Christ, and express her love in return. So it goes with those of us who meet up with the love of Jesus. Possessions that were formerly highly valued slip easily through our fingers so that we might possess something more valuable.

Like Paul, we must give up seeking our identity in cultural heritage and achievement.

Righteousness for the sake of knowing Christ

Verses 9 and 10 offer a further explanation of what it means to gain Christ. To gain Christ means to be found in Christ—that is, to have a righteousness from God through faith in Christ—for the sake of knowing Christ. The one who finds Paul is God. God is looking for us. When he finds Paul, both now and in the future, he finds him in Christ. He finds that Paul is united with Christ, part of the messianic family. Paul, therefore, has a "righteousness." This is a different place than the one in which he was formerly found.

"Righteousness" concerns status. Here it does not mean "goodness," either innate or imputed; it means covenant membership. In this sense, when one is "righteous," one belongs to God. Paul says he does not have a righteousness "of my own that comes from the law," the kind of righteousness he supposed that he formerly possessed. That would be covenant membership based on Jewish heritage and expressed in Jewish observances and achievements. He considers that kind of covenant membership as "loss."

The covenant membership he now possesses does not come from the law (Jewish heritage) but through faith in Christ. When one has faith in Christ, one believes that

Jesus is Lord. Instead of possessing righteousness of his own (his own race), Paul, in view of such faith, possesses "the righteousness from God." God bestows upon the person with faith in Christ the gift of righteousness or covenant membership.

Righteousness, however, is not the goal of Paul's life. Neither is it the goal of this sentence. Paul wants the righteousness of God *so that* he may know Christ. For Paul, covenant membership is not an end; it is a means to an end. The end is "to know" Christ.

Paul builds to two crescendos in verses 8 through 10 to explain the reason for his "gain" and "loss" mentality. The first is in verse 8, where everything is counted loss for the sake of knowing Christ. The second is in verse 10, where righteousness is desired for the sake of knowing Christ. The goal of the passage and the goal of Paul's life is to know Christ.

It's important that we understand the "righteousness from God." First, we must realize that this righteousness is the status of covenant membership conferred upon the people of God. Second, we must disabuse ourselves of the notion that it has anything to do with heritage and achievements. Third, we must realize that such status is conferred on the basis of faith in Christ. Fourth, we must realize that the righteousness from God is not an end, but a means to an end. Our goal is not to "get" righteousness or even to be righteous, however we might define those terms. Our goal, having been found by God in Christ, is to use the righteousness we already have as a platform to know Christ

We already possess the righteousness we need. The goal is intimacy with Christ. The great privilege in being one of God's righteous ones is that we get to know Christ. Enjoy the privilege.

Paul has ideas about how one might go about pursuing intimacy with Christ.

Resurrection and sufferings

For Paul, knowing Christ means knowing "the power of his resurrection" and sharing "his sufferings." Suffering and resurrection were the dominant themes of the life of Jesus. If you want to know someone, you want to know the story of that person's life. If we asked for the story of Christ's life, we'd hear about his sufferings and his resurrection. At the first level, then, knowing the power of Christ's resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings means connecting with the story of Christ at

a deep level. Paul not only wants to know about these things, he wants to experience them. He wants not only to know about the story of Christ; he wants to live the story of Christ.

Christ came to live the life marked out for humanity by God. In his story, we hear echoes of the stories of Moses, Abraham, David, and others. Mostly we hear echoes from the stories of Adam, the first human, and Israel, the human community. Christ fulfills the Adamic and Israelite call and invites us to make his story our story and thus to know him.

What does it mean to experience the power of Christ's resurrection? It means to experience the risen Lord Jesus through his Holy Spirit, who empowers us by enlightening us, motivating us, leading us, and enabling us. In many ways, the process of experiencing Christ's resurrection means being empowered to experience the sufferings of Christ. This may be why Paul lists knowing the power of Christ's resurrection before knowing the fellowship of his sufferings, even though Christ's sufferings preceded his resurrection. Knowing the power of his resurrection enables us to share his sufferings. Paul may also reverse the order because experiencing the power of Christ's resurrection seems infinitely more desirable than experiencing his sufferings. The order sets us up for the surprise: that Paul desires to experience the sufferings of Christ, and that we should desire to do the same.

What does it mean to experience the sufferings of Christ? Christ loved the world so much that he suffered for it. The sufferings of the world *are* the sufferings of Christ. The risen Lord Jesus, just after meeting Paul on the road to Damascus, spoke to Ananias regarding Paul: "For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name" (Acts 9:16). Earlier in this letter, Paul told the Philippians, "For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake" (Philippians 1:29). As Paul obeyed Jesus in bringing the Gospel to the world, he suffered for the name of Christ (2 Corinthians 11:21-29).

Like Christ, Paul loved the world so much that he suffered for it. To experience the sufferings of Christ is to love Christ and, therefore, the people in the world so much that we suffer for them. It is to share and bear the pain of others, seeking to introduce them by word, deed, and prayer to the love of Christ.

If you want to know someone, you'll want to know what that person cares about most. In the case of Jesus, he cares most about a world full of people in pain. When

he saw suffering, he was "deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled," and he wept (John 11:33-35). Because he cared for the world, he was "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief" (Isaiah 53:3). If we want to know Jesus, we must connect with the sorrow and suffering of the world and resolve to bring the love of Christ to it. He gives us his Holy Spirit to help us do so. This is how we experience the sufferings of Jesus. This is also how we know him at the deepest level. Knowing Christ is of such value that the suffering that brings us closer to him is not only to be tolerated but also *desired*.

Experiencing the power and suffering of Christ is how Paul becomes like Christ in Christ's death. In obedience to the Father and out of love for the world, Christ suffered and died for the world. Being conformed to his death, then, means to suffer for others out of love for them and in obedience to the Father. Our lives then are shaped by Christ's life. We are thus become like him in his death. In becoming like him in his death, we know him.

Know the story, live the story

Learn the story of Christ. In learning the story, connect with Christ. But don't stop there. Don't just know the story. Live the story! Enter the world, seeking to share the love of Christ. You'll find that to do so you'll need the Holy Spirit, who is with you to reveal Christ to you and the world. He will motivate you and empower you and open closed doors. As you move from your little world into God's big world, you'll find that, as the Spirit works in you, your love for people will grow; you'll find that you care more than you thought you cared. You'll come in contact with suffering, and you'll shy away from it less and enter it more.

You'll find your heart breaking for a broken world. When your heart breaks for those in pain, and you feel almost as if you are suffering or even wish you could suffer in their place, you are very close to the heart of Christ. You are like him in his death. And you are knowing him like you never have before. In living the story, you have the opportunity to know—really know—Christ. As Jean Valjean sings in the musical *Les Misérables*, "To love another person is to see the face of God."¹

Is this serving Christ or knowing Christ? It's both. We tend to separate "doing" and "being," but Christ can be known in both the being and the doing. In fact, intimacy with Christ is incomplete if either contemplation or action is jettisoned. Contemplation and action are mutually reinforcing; each motivates the other. Thinking

about Christ causes us to take action. Taking action causes us to think about Christ. The contemplative life and the active life join forces in knowing Christ. I tend to be a more contemplative person—more of a thinker than a doer. We all have our God-given proclivities. My relationship with Christ deepened when I started “doing.”

Look for Christ everywhere, in your “being” and in your “doing.” Find him in the Scriptures. Find him in your prayers. Find him in your passions. Find him in your dreams. Find him in your fears. Find him when feelings of melancholy overtake your heart. Find him when a memory produces a wistful sigh. Find him in your deep desires for sexual intimacy. Find him on the mountains and in the valleys, in the rivers and in the deserts. Find him in the crash of a wave and in the cry of an eagle. Find him in the stunning colors and subtle hues of a sunrise or a sunset. Find him in the way droplets of dew capture the sunlight. Find him at the first instant you notice a change in seasons. Find him in Michelangelo and find him in Frank Lloyd Wright. Find him in Fyodor Dostoyevsky and Emily Dickinson and John Grisham. Find him in Mozart, and find him in U2. Find him in *Casablanca* and find him in *The Matrix*. Find him in the intricacy of a computer chip and the vastness of the Golden Gate Bridge. Find him in the smile of a child and the tears of an orphan. Find him in the glow of a bride and the despair of the homeless. Find him in the joy of a grandfather and the sadness of a widow. Find him in the living, and find him in the dying. Find him with your eyes, your ears, your nose, your hands, and your imagination. Let what you take in stir your heart and carry you to Christ.

How do you know Christ? Anyway you can! Find him here. Find him now.

The resurrection of the dead

Knowing Christ in the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his suffering conforms Paul to the death of Christ and enables him to “by any means possible attain the resurrection of the dead.” Paul writes later, in Philippians 3:21, that in the resurrection, Christ will “transform our lowly bodies to be like his glorious body.” God will vindicate followers of Jesus as his covenant people by raising them from the dead.

Paul doesn’t doubt whether he will be there on that day (although he may be entertaining the thought that Christ may return before his death, in which case he would be transformed but not resurrected). Paul’s wording conveys humility in the face of the power of

God—an acknowledged inability to understand how anyone could be raised from the dead.

For Paul, what’s so great about being resurrected from the dead? He writes in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 that we will “always be with the Lord.” Being resurrected from the dead means first and foremost that we will know Christ fully and forever, just as we have been known by him (1 Corinthians 13:12).

It’s not an easy way to live. In verses 12-16, Paul gives us a vision to help us.

Pressing on toward the goal

Philippians 3:12-16:

Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. 13 Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, 14 I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. 15 Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. 16 Only let us hold true to what we have attained.

Paul here may be speaking against pagan religions that offer perfection now without suffering. Also, there was some confusion in the early church concerning the presence of the kingdom of God. The fact that it had been inaugurated but not consummated took some explaining. Some people confused inauguration with consummation. Paul realizes that his story in verses 4 through 11 could be open to misinterpretation. So he says he has not “obtained this,” which he further qualifies as being “perfect.” He has not arrived at the final goal of knowing Christ fully, which will be realized when he is resurrected from the dead.

Instead of being satisfied with his current relationship with Christ, Paul says, “I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.” The word translated “press on,” used here as part of a race analogy, can also be translated “pursue” or “persecute.” In fact, Paul said earlier in Philippians 3 that he was at one time a “persecutor” of the church. While Paul was pursuing followers of Jesus, Jesus was pursuing him. When Jesus made Paul his own, he said, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” (Acts 9:4). Now that Christ Jesus has made him his own, Paul is pursuing something different.

For what has Christ made Paul his own? For the “prize” Paul talks about in verse 14, which is full knowledge of Christ, which he will not attain until the resurrection. Christ has taken hold of Paul so that Paul might one day fully know Christ. Christ has placed in Paul’s heart partial knowledge and the hope of full knowledge. In this way, he pulls Paul along. Paul responds by pressing on.

In light of this, Paul says in verse 13 that there is one thing he doesn’t do and one thing he does do. He doesn’t consider himself as having taken hold of full knowledge of Christ. He does forget what is behind and strains forward to what is ahead.

Paul, both by heritage and achievement, was an elite Jew (verses 4 through 6). Before meeting Christ, he literally considered these “things” valuable (verse 7). Now Paul wants to literally forget these “things” (verse 13). Earlier, they gave him a sense of identity. He can remember such achievements with some feelings of pride. In another sense, now that he has come to Christ, he can remember such achievements with guilt, especially since persecution of the church was one of his “achievements” (verse 6). Perhaps at different times, his past achievements may attract him because of pride or burden him because of guilt. Either way, whether they are attractive or burdensome, Paul forgets them. Instead, he applies his mental energies to “straining forward” to what is ahead—full apprehension of Christ. In the race, he doesn’t look back, only forward.

In verse 14, Paul explains what motivates him in this race, once again using the verb translated “press on.” In the games, the “goal” was the marker at the finish line. The prize, a palm branch, was given by the president of the games, who summoned the victor at the conclusion of the race. The prize for Paul is literally the “heavenward calling of God in Christ Jesus.” After his death, Paul expects to be summoned by God himself, as revealed in Christ Jesus. There may be some other equivalent to the palm branch, something like hearing God say, “Well done, good and faithful servant” (Matthew 25:23), but Paul doesn’t elaborate. For him, the prize is simply being in the presence of Christ.

The soul’s paradox of love

This passage tells us that we haven’t arrived. Yet sometimes we think and act as if we’ve come to a spiritual living room where we can kick back and relax. We’ve settled into a couch from which our spiritual lives can almost be run automatically. We program our spiritual lives like we program our devices—and with just about

as much passion. We push a few buttons to keep things going, but that’s about it. If we’ve settled into such a mode, we’ve deadened our appetite for Christ.

A mark of someone who is a follower of Jesus is that he or she is *not* satisfied. Having tasted of Christ, he wants more of Christ. And he will not rest until he rests in the eternal presence of Christ. He will not stop running until he wins the prize. A.W. Tozer says, “To have found God and still to pursue Him is the soul’s paradox of love, scorned indeed by the too-easily-satisfied religionist, but justified in happy experience by the children of the burning heart.”²

But if one day we will know Christ fully, why do we need to pursue him now? If such a question is seriously entertained, one might have cause to question whether he knows Christ in the first place. If we take it easy now, what does that say about our desire for Christ? Perhaps that we don’t desire Christ at all. The evidence that you have Christ is that you want more of him. If you don’t want more of him, the time has come for you to meet with God and talk this over with him.

Christ takes hold of us that we might pursue him. On the one hand, we can expect to always sense a sort of holy dissatisfaction with life that causes us to want something more. On the other hand, Christ has seized our hearts that we might seek that “something more” in him. In some sense, do you feel dissatisfied? Does it feel as if something has seized your heart and won’t let you go? Christ Jesus is calling you to run for the prize of knowing him fully and eternally.

If you feel impeded in the race of knowing Christ, something from your past may be slowing you down. Past achievements may cause you to reside in the glory days of yore instead of pressing on to the glory days of Christ. You may long for a past where the lines were easier to draw, and indulgence was easier to justify. Or the failures or sins of the past may haunt you. Dwelling in the past can make you smug because of achievements; wistful because of predictability, innocence and indulgence; or hopeless because of failure and guilt. In these ways, the past can hold us back.

The past should be remembered, but not in these ways. We visit the past to allow God to heal us and to remember the great things he has done for us so that we might live in the present and press on toward the future. The trophies will rust. Predictability, innocence, and indulgence are illusory companions. Past failures, if reversed, would bring you only fleeting glory, and the sins of the past have been washed away by the blood of

Christ. Let go of the past, and get back in the race. “Don’t look back,” said Satchel Paige, the old baseball pitcher. “Something might be gaining on you.”

We must turn from the past and lean into the future, for that’s where Christ waits, at the end of the race. That’s when he will call us heavenward, and that’s when we will rise to meet him, and that’s when the King will rise to give us the prize of himself. Even now, we can hear the call in our hearts and picture the scene with our imaginations. Such a call and such a picture pull us ceaselessly forward.

What ‘mature’ people do

The word translated “mature” in verse 15 is the adjective that stems from the verb translated “am perfect” in verse 12. Paul has just said that he has not been made perfect, or mature. Yet now he says what all of those who are perfect, or mature, should do. He must be using irony. No one is perfected in this life, although the pagan influences and confusion regarding the inauguration and consummation of the kingdom of God may lead the Philippians to think they’ve been perfected—that in some sense they have arrived. The view that such “perfect” or “mature” people should take is the one Paul has just been advocating: pressing on toward full knowledge of Christ. Paul is saying, “Well if you’ve arrived, the view you should take is that you haven’t arrived.” One is in some sense “mature” when she recognizes that she’s not fully mature and therefore presses on toward full maturity, which is full knowledge of Christ.

Paul allows that the Philippians may have a different view of life than the one he’s been depicting in Philippians 3. In fact, he must be instructing them because different views were pervasive. He has told them the truth, in general terms, but he trusts God to give them the specific understanding they need.

However, Paul says there is something for which they don’t need to wait on God: “what we have attained.” Precisely what Paul means by this phrase is difficult to determine. Perhaps what has been attained is revelation from God, as articulated in Philippians 3, that both Paul and the Philippians have apprehended. If this is the case, Paul is telling the Philippians to live based on the understanding God has given them of the truths revealed in Paul’s narrative.

Adventure in faith

If we think we’ve arrived at a comfortable spiritual destination, here’s what we need to do: leave. That’s what

“mature” people do. They’re not satisfied. They press on. They want more of Christ. If we think we’ve arrived, it probably means that we’ve got just enough of Jesus to satisfy some spiritual “responsibility” but not so much of him that he threatens the way we live.

Paul, through the narrative of his own life, instructs us but allows that it is God who gives understanding. He says to Timothy, “Think over what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything” (2 Timothy 2:7). All the biblical writers instruct us, of course. Some of the instruction confuses us, and we wonder how it applies to our lives. We must apply our minds when we read and study and listen to the Word. No matter how much we learn, we will never learn as much as we’d like to learn. We want to learn more. So we press on. As we press on, God gives us insight when we need it, but we don’t receive it all at once. God reveals it to us bits and pieces. He gives us what we need when we need it.

Many of us think that there is some crucial key to life we’re not grasping. We think this because we’re dissatisfied. Of course, we’re supposed to be dissatisfied so that we might press on to know Christ more fully. Nevertheless, we think there must be some magic key out there somewhere that opens the door to satisfaction. Others seem to be satisfied, so the key must be out there. Maybe there isn’t one big key. Maybe there are a whole bunch of little keys that God places in our paths that allow us to open the series of doors we confront in life. God shows us a key, we open a door, and we continue on our journey, moving closer to Christ. Then he shows us another key, and so on.

Seen from this point of view, life is an adventure to be enjoyed instead of a puzzle to be solved. Once you’ve seen God show you a few of these keys, you pick up on this approach to life. A closed door becomes not so much reason for despair but reason for waiting expectantly on the Lord. If you don’t understand something, wait on God. If you need to know it, he’ll reveal it to you at the right time.

The keys that God has given us add up to “what we’ve attained.” We must “live up to,” or live on the basis of, this insight. This collection of keys represents the history of God’s faithfulness and helps us to develop an outlook that sees life as an adventure in faith.

The fragrance of desire

This is our holy privilege and duty: to pursue intimacy with Christ with all that is within us. If a collection of us

made knowing Christ our highest ambition, I shudder to think what it would mean for the advance of the Gospel. When Mary poured the perfume on the feet of Jesus, the house was filled with its fragrance. May we let go of whatever it is we need to let go of, and may the fragrance of our desire for Christ fill the world.

Endnotes

¹ Lyrics by Herbert Kretzmer, *Les Miserables* (Cameron Mackintosh Overseas Limited, 2005).

² A.W. Tozer, *The Best of A.W. Tozer* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House Co., 1978) 15-16.