

The Power of His Resurrection

“I want to know Christ – yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.” Philippians 3:10-11

In his letter to the church at Philippi, the apostle Paul offers a striking comparison between confidence in religion and confidence in Christ. Before Saul met the risen Lord Jesus, his quest for resurrection power was radically different from his experience of resurrection power as a follower of the crucified and risen Messiah. Paul’s understanding of the resurrection underwent a radical transformation from racial and ethnic privilege to personal sacrifice. He moved from meritorious pride to mercy-driven passion, from fighting zealously for righteousness to receiving the free gift of Christ’s righteousness.

Paul went from persecuting Christ’s followers to being persecuted as one of Christ’s most passionate and public followers. Instead of striving to make Israel great again, he became Christ’s apostle to the Gentiles. He exchanged “Joshua’s conquest strategy” for Jesus’s Great Commission strategy. The turning point from Saul to Paul began on the road to Damascus. Luke records the story: “As Saul neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?’ ‘Who are you, Lord?’ Saul asked. ‘I am Jesus, who you are persecuting,’ he replied” (Acts 9:3-6).

Twenty-four years after his conversion Paul was tried for treason and blasphemy before the Sanhedrin. It was his last trip to Jerusalem. Paul declared, *“My brothers, I am a Pharisee, descended from Pharisees. I stand on trial because of the hope of the resurrection of the dead.”* Paul’s use of the present tense, “I am a Pharisee,” is striking. It’s almost as if Paul was saying, “Once a Pharisee, always a Pharisee.” The Pharisees believed in resurrection power, the power to raise the righteous dead on the great day of the Lord (Daniel 12:1-2; Isaiah 26:19; Job 19:25-27; Psalm 73:23-26; Isaiah 25:8). The resurrection signaled the fulfillment of God’s purposes and promises for Israel, when the covenant people of God would be fully restored. Then, they would experience God’s shalom, temple worship would be restored, and Rome would be overthrown. There would be a holistic renewal of Israel’s national life, and Israel would lead the nations to true worship of the one true God. This was Martha’s understanding of the power of the resurrection when she said to Jesus at the tomb of her brother Lazarus, “I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.” Jesus’s response to Martha shifted the meaning away from ethnic Israel to himself decisively. Jesus embodied in himself the fulfillment of all of God’s promises to his covenant people Israel when he said, “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die” (John 11:24-26).

The Pharisees’ meritorious self-righteousness and their political strategy were all wrong. Paul shared their belief in the hope of Israel, but sadly they did not realize that *their* crucified and risen Messiah, the Lord Jesus, fully embodied the hope of Israel. Luke reports, “When he said

this, a dispute broke out between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. The Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, and there are neither angels nor spirits, but the Pharisees believe all these things” (Acts 23:6-8). Paul split his Jewish opponents into two camps, the Pharisees who believed in the resurrection and the Sadducees who denied the resurrection. Saul’s pre-conversion pharisaical understanding of the resurrection involved religious zeal and coercive power. Practicing the resurrection meant forming Israel “into a people of faithful Torah observance uncompromised by the cultural influence of paganism.”¹

Saul of Tarsus was a trained Jewish theologian long before he met the risen Jesus on the Damascus road. He grew up in a devout Jewish family and was immersed in Temple religion and Torah faithfulness. From a young age he was dedicated to the Law of God with the heroic zeal of Phinehas (Numbers 25:1; Psalm 106:30-31). The fact that he was taught by Gamaliel, one of the leading rabbis of his day, indicates that he showed promise and passion as a defender of the ancestral tradition and a devoted leader for Israel’s future. But none of that seemed to matter after the blinding light of the risen Lord Jesus. Paul received the gift of the Spirit of Christ and he was commissioned to proclaim the gospel to the Gentiles. Luke says that Paul “immediately” began to proclaim Jesus “in the synagogues, saying, ‘He is the Son of God’” (Acts 9:20).

Religious Confidence

If anyone could boast in his religious confidence it was Paul. His credentials were impressive . His pedigree, privilege, and passion were above reproach. “In every way he considered himself to be a model Jew, quite satisfied with himself until he met the living Christ.”² Paul laid it all out: “If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: 1) circumcised the eighth day (a true Jew by birth with parents who meticulously followed the law); 2) of the people of Israel (possesses all the rights and privileges of God’s chosen people, the divine theocracy); 3) of the tribe of Benjamin (from this tribe came Israel’s first king and the temple was within their territorial borders); 4) a Hebrew of Hebrews (born of Hebrew parents and raised to speak the Hebrew language); 5) in regard the law, a Pharisee (a son of a Pharisee, the strictest Jewish sect, educated in Jewish law by a Hebrew teacher); 6) as for zeal, persecuting the church (out of zeal for God and for the sake of the covenant community he persecuted the church); 7) as for righteousness based on the law, faultless (like the rich young ruler he kept all the external laws from his youth). Paul was confident in his birth, his family, his race, his nationality, his education, his acts of righteousness, his earnestness, and his achievements. He had a lot to be proud of and he believed in the power of the resurrection – Israel First.

Paul’s story exemplifies a radical change from religious confidence to confidence in Christ. This transformation did not happen overnight. In his letter to the Galatians Paul sketches his early years as a Christian. We don’t know exactly when Saul changed his name to Paul. Luke traces the name change to Paul’s missionary work on Cyprus. At the outset of Paul’s life in Christ there was a three year period in which Paul called Damascus home (33 to 36). During that time Saul went to Arabia, a vast region that extended from the Nabataean kingdom east of Damascus all the

¹ Gombis, Power in Weakness, 17.

² Hawthorne, Philippians, 135.

way south to Mount Sinai in the Sinai peninsula. N. T. Wright suggests that Saul retraced the steps of the prophet Elijah to Mt Horeb/ Mt Sinai in order to confirm God's will and the unfolding promises of God.³

After returning to Damascus, Luke reports that "Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ" (Acts 9:22). Eventually, Saul's bold proclamation aroused his enemies and they plotted to kill him. He escaped over a wall in a basket and fled to Jerusalem. He met the apostles at Barnabas' invitation and continued "preaching boldly in the name of the Lord" (Acts 9:28), until once again his life was threatened and he was forced to escape.

Luke reports that believers "brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus" (Acts 9:30). Paul spent the next ten years, roughly 36-46, in his hometown, presumably working in the family business making tents, awnings, and other leather works. We may forget that Paul "spent most of his waking hours with his sleeves rolled up, doing hard physical work in a hot climate, and that perhaps two-thirds of the conversations he had with people about Jesus and the gospel were conducted not in a place of worship or study, not even in a private home, but in a small, cramped workshop."⁴ The religious zealot who was eager to make every minute count, striving to make Israel great again met the crucified and risen Messiah and spent the next decade working in shop making leather goods.

For roughly thirteen years Paul flew under the radar. He was "still unknown in person to the churches of Judah," but everyone knew that the person who used to persecute Christians was now "preaching the faith he once tried to destroy" (Gal 1:22-23). For Paul, this meant that his commitment to the gospel was not the product of human origin and teaching. He owned his faith personally, not because of any person or group of people, but because he received it from Jesus Christ.

Paul's three year studies in Damascus, his evangelistic pilgrimage to Arabia, his intense time in Jerusalem, and his decade of hard labor in Tarsus all contributed to his spiritual formation. When Paul experienced "a thorn in the flesh," which he called "a messenger of Satan," sent to torment him, he affirmed his discovery of Christ's power and utter weakness. The Lord told him, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." This led Paul to a unique life-strategy: "Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor 12:7-10). Paul's apostleship is unique, but his example is compelling. In the providence of God, everything came together before and after his Damascus road experience to wipe out his religious confidence and in its place instill confidence in Christ.

Christian Confidence

³ N. T. Wright, Paul, 65.

⁴ N. T. Wright, Paul, 69.

Paul's witness to the church in Philippi describes a radical transvaluation of values from self confidence to Christian confidence, from pharisaical resurrection power to the power of the risen Lord Jesus.⁵ "But whatever were gains to me (family pedigree, tribal identity, racial pride, ethnic privilege, covenant-connections, spiritual zeal, obedience to the law, and personal discipline) I now consider loss (a singular loss – one big loss!) for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things" (Phil 3:7-8).

For Paul it was not a matter of going from a list of good things to a list of better things. It was a matter of writing everything off as a loss. All his previous benefits, all his privileged credentials, were now deemed worthless, not for the *sake* of Christ, but because of the *fact* of Christ.⁶ He wasn't doing Christ a favor by revolutionizing his values; he was doing himself a favor. This is not to say that birth, family, heritage, and wealth, are all bad and need to be jettisoned, but it does cause us think of the rich, young, ruler (Luke 18:18). Whatever stands in the way of knowing Christ should be abandoned. "Paul did not lament this loss. For him it was welcomed relief."⁷

Competing Resurrection Strategies

On January 6th the Capital was attacked by a mob of religious and political zealots who sought to disrupt the Congressional authorization of the 2020 election. Among the capital attackers were well-meaning, zealous Christians who believed God called them to act on their faith. I have struggled to understand their religious zeal. They held Bibles, carried crosses, displayed John 3:16 and "Jesus saves" signs. They waved "Jesus 2020" flags. Some participants were from the "Jericho March" and blew shofars - Jewish ritual horns - described in the Bible when the Israelites marched around Jericho. And all of these Christian symbols were juxtaposed with symbols of white nationalism, Confederate flags, Nazis symbols, and even a "Camp Auschwitz" hoodie. Their self-righteous zeal to make America-First reminds me of Saul's zeal to restore Israel's glory and fight for the Law of God. The Christians involved in the assault on the capital also took pride in their religious heritage, their zeal for righteousness, their racial pedigree, and their just cause. Like Saul, they believed it was their duty to fight for God's cause. They saw themselves operating out of a deep sense of nationalistic patriotism. They shared Saul's theocratic and nationalistic aspirations. Saul fought for Israel and they fought for America.

When Saul was trying to imprison Christians in Damascus he was laboring under the mistaken notion that God was calling him to act like Joshua entering the promised land. He believed he was compelled by God to engage in political violence for the sake of Israel-First. He needed to fight for the Torah and everything God's law stood for. But when he met the risen Lord Jesus on the Damascus road everything he changed. Instead of the Joshua strategy, he was called to the Great Commission strategy. God was not calling Paul to take back the promised land or to make

⁵ Gerald Hawthorne, World Biblical Commentary: Philippians, vol.43 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1983), 130. Hawthorne writes: "Nowhere else in his letters does Paul make so clear, and with such feeling, how vitally important the person of Christ is to him, and how tremendous was the impact of the resurrected Christ upon his life and outlook as he does here in these verses."

⁶ Hawthorne, Philippians, 136.

⁷ Hawthorne, Philippians, 139

Israel great again. Instead, Paul sought to know Christ in the power of the resurrection and in the fellowship of his sufferings.

This radical transformation meant giving up coercive power, social status, self-promotion, nationalistic fervor, image management, and personal honor. Paul chose instead a cruciform life, partnering with Jesus in his suffering, renouncing his selfish desires, and sharing with all people the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Recently, I listened to a preeminent Old Testament professor lament America's disheartening moral demise. He chronicled the ways America has descended into moral chaos and secularism. He lamented America's repudiation of the Ten Commandments. His description of the demise of Christendom and the secularization of culture contributed his fear and concern over the future of America. Then a few days later, I listened to one of America's most famous mega-church pastors who gave an upbeat speech entitled "The Church Is The Single Greatest Force For Good In The World." The pastor promoted a triumphant church as the biggest, greatest, and most loving, global organization in the world. The biblical scholar's sober lament was pessimistic. The pastor's inspiring speech was optimistic. Yet both messages shared a similar premise. They suggested that our experience of Christian confidence and our understanding of the power of the gospel is related to the church's impact and influence in the world. In order for Christians to feel good about the future, the world needs to look and act more Christian. Fear incites and zeal inspires religious zeal to "take back America" and reclaim the nation for Christ.

I question whether the apostles would resonate with either the lament or the triumph of Christendom. We have no hint in the New Testament that Christians should expect world-changing cultural impact. America today is like first-century Rome and the followers of Jesus Christ need to embrace their "chosen exile" status. They are strangers in their home culture, missionaries in a familiar but foreign land. Now is not the time for Christians to bemoan the loss of religious clout and resent the power and influence of our secular age. The god of American civil religion is dead and the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is the only God who lives. There is no generic deity around which we can gather as a nation and pay our respects, but eventually every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Believers are no longer defined primarily by their ethnicity and nationality, but by the rule and reign of Christ. They are citizens of the Kingdom of heaven both now and for eternity. Their identity in Christ inevitably leads to a clash with both religious and secular cultures. These "chosen outsiders" and "resident aliens" form a noncompetitive holy community. They have not been called of God to flee the world or fight the world. They have not been called to withdraw into their own tight-knit cloistered culture. They are not narrow-minded, opinionated, and fighting mad. They do not impress the world as hostile and rigid and angry. Their form of offense, the offense of the cross, is the most winsome and attractive "offensiveness" that human culture has ever known. They understand in themselves their own sinfulness and the fallen human condition. But by God's grace they have experienced the power of God's sacrificial love and the responsibility of the ministry of reconciliation.

Paul's encounter with the risen Lord changed the way he did ministry. Instead of a pharisaical Joshua strategy, Paul lived out sacrificially Jesus's Great Commission strategy. As he explained to the church at Corinth, "When I came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God's power" (1 Cor 2:1-5).

We all need to move from religious confidence to Christ-centered confidence and heed the apostle's practical advice: "For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ" (2 Cor 10:3-5).

When Paul said, "I want to know Christ, in the power of his resurrection and in partnership in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, *and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead,*" he was not doubting "the realness of the resurrection to come," nor was he doubting "the trustworthiness of God," nor was he doubting the way in which he will attain the resurrection, nor is he doubting himself. It was Paul's way of expressing humility – "a humility that recognizes that salvation is the gift of God from start to finish."⁸ He rejected any hint of merit and confidence in himself. He refused to presume on the mercy of God. Instead of an Israel-First resurrection power, the apostle chose the power of Jesus's resurrection and the fellowship of his suffering.

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⁸ Hawthorne, Philippians, 146.