

Text: Phil. 3:1-10

Title: Becoming like Christ's death

Time: 12/26/2021

Place: NBBC

Introduction: Scripture often refers to the animal kingdom to illustrate certain aspects of the believer's life. For instance, we know this morning, as we gather to worship our Savior, that He is our Shepherd, and we are the flock of God that He has purchased with His own blood. We are the sheep of His pasture.

The new life of a calf emerging from a stall is a touching and beautiful Scriptural illustration of what it means to be born anew in a spiritual springtime of life warmed from winter's cold destruction by the Sun of Righteousness. The prophecy of Malachi promised God's people, "But unto you that fear my name shall the Sun of Righteousness arise with healing in his wings; and ye shall go forth, and grow up as calves of the stall" (Mal. 4:2).

One of my favorite animal metaphors for our Christian experience is the hen with her chicks. We sang a song about this truth this morning – "Under His Wings." On the About page of our church's website in our scrapbook, we have a video of Avocet chicks nestling under their mother's wings to be shielded from the rain. These birds remind us of a precious promise about our Lord's care for our well-being: "He shall cover thee with his feathers, and under His wings shalt thou trust" (Ps. 91:4).

The Book of Philippians is about being like Christ. In chapter 1 Paul instruct the Philippian church about praying like Christ in verses 1-11 and about evangelizing like Christ in verses 12-30. In chapter 2 Paul focuses on serving like

Christ, with Christlike unity in verses 1-11 and in victorious gospel ministry in verses 12-18. In the examples of Timothy and Epaphroditus, we discover Christlike selflessness (2:19-30). And now coming to chapter 3, Paul is going to talk about dying like Christ on the cross (vv. 1-10) and living like Christ coming out of the tomb (vv. 11-21). Dying like Christ died and then living like Christ lived are both important to what it means to truly know Christ experientially and not just academically (v. 10).

So the first ten verses of the chapter, our passage this morning, are about becoming like Christ's death. We have here no use of an animal metaphor for our Christian lives, but I would like to propose one as we think about what it means to know Christ by becoming conformed to or like His death. This idea reminds me of what it means to play possum. The opossum is an animal that has an involuntary mechanism that causes it to faint or play dead when it faces danger. I have read that in this condition, an opossum can be poked, rolled, and even carried off without a stir.

It turns out that some of the details of this unique behavior provide a good illustration of what Paul encourages us to do as believers when he tells us to be like Christ in His death. I would like to propose that imitating this amazing creature in this way is an important part of our knowing our Savior better. According to our passage, becoming like Christ's death means three things.

I. Becoming like Christ's death means losing respect for false teachers and prophets (vv. 1-2).

Illustration: The opossum shows its teeth when it is playing possum. Perhaps it does so to provide a sufficient warning to dangerous predators. It seems to be a way the opossum

can say “Beware!” while it is playing possum. When Paul thought of becoming like the death of Christ, he thought of how he had to die to false teaching with his teeth showing.

Application: The chapter begins with a concluding command – “Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord.” But then the rest of the chapter does not really talk about joy. What is also interesting about this conclusion is that, later in the Epistle, Paul comes back to this concluding theme (4:4, 8). Bible students believe about this that Paul’s original plan was to end his Epistle to the Philippian church here with the truths of chapter 4, but instead he had to shift gears after learning about a very real threat to the church at Philippi that needed to be addressed. He needed to talk to them about dying with Christ with their teeth showing in order to be safe from that threat (cp. Jude 3).

Paul warns against the threat in verse 2. The word *beware* is repeated three times for emphasis. He calls false teachers “dogs, evil workers, and the concision.” The false teachers he refers to here were the Judaizers that had rejected the conclusions of the Jerusalem Council and taught Gentiles everywhere that they needed to be circumcised in order to be truly saved. It was their practice to refer to the uncircumcised as *dogs*. Dogs were typically strays who led very unclean lives in the first century world. They were a Jewish animal metaphor for the religiously unclean.

So Paul turns the tables on these Judaizers. They called uncircumcised Gentile believers dogs, so Paul called them that. His doing so does not mean that we should call the false teachers of our day dogs, but rather that we should have the courage we need to turn the tables on them. They call us *sectarian*. We must show how they have divided and corrupted the true church. They call us *anti-intellectual*. We

must expose the foolishness of their presuppositions. They charge us with being unloving. We must point out their lack of love for the truth and souls.

Paul also says they are *evil workers* and *the concision*. I cannot help but think of pedophilia when I think of evil workers in our day. The label *the concision* is a substitute label for *the circumcision*, which he uses in verse 3. *Circumcision* means *cut around*. The Greek word translated *concision* means *cut into pieces*. Paul forcefully opposed their idea that circumcision had to be added to faith in Christ for salvation. Their teaching was very similar to Roman Catholic teaching today, which says that in addition to faith in Christ, a sinner has to be baptized in order to be regenerated or born again.

To say Paul opposed the false gospels that added other things to the true gospel of grace alone by faith alone in Christ alone is to put it mildly. Paul understood that the battle for souls is a war between the lies of Satan and the truth of the Word of God. He felt deeply the need for militancy when it comes to this war. In any war, safety requires strong militancy. Paul's love for the Lord and his desire for the safety of their gospel ministry made him passionate about the purity of the gospel of saving grace.

This Pauline passion and militancy for the purity of the gospel seem foreign to us today. We would rather commend the Roman Catholic pope for opposing abortion than criticize him for his doctrine of baptismal regeneration. We want to overlook Rome's Mariolatry and believe instead that their religion is merely a different Trinitarian denomination.

The Judaizers Paul opposes in this passage would have been dead set against abortion and for traditional marriage and the other social concerns we find in the Republican

platform. That kind of political cooperation is fine as citizens of our state and nation, but as members of Christ's local church, we must maintain with earnest passion a bold thick line between the true gospel and the false gospels of the broad road that leads to destruction. Becoming like Christ's death means losing respect for false teachers.

In the recent history of the church, no one has done more to erase that Pauline line than did the Evangelist Billy Graham. Dr. Graham's ecumenical evangelism, beginning in our country at the 1957 New York Crusade, joined hands with false teachers to bring the gospel to more people. Doing so caused great division to the body of Christ, from which our churches may never recover.

And perhaps even more profoundly consequential for where the true churches of Christ find themselves today, it was Dr. Graham who legitimized rock-n-roll "Jesus Music" at Explo '72, erasing the bold line between standards of personal holiness and worldly lifestyles. Paul believed that there should be no concord between Christ and Belial (2 Cor. 6:15). That concord was a *raison d'etre* of Explo '72.

In both theology and music, becoming like Christ's death means losing respect for false teachers and prophets.

II. Becoming like Christ's death means losing confidence in the flesh (vv. 3-8).

Illustration: While playing the possum, the opossum secretes a foul-smelling fluid, evidently so that a predator's nose as well as its eyes tell it that the opossum is dead.

Application: In our passage Paul refers to all the accomplishments of life that made him honorable in the world's eyes, all his confidence in the flesh, as something with a

foul smell (v. 8). When the believer conforms to the death of Christ, he considers all that the world has come to respect about him, his confidence in the flesh, mere dung in comparison to knowing Christ.

We have some special Christmas tales that endeavor to teach this truth as well. In "It's A Wonderful Life," George Baily learns that what the world respects is not as valuable as he thought it was. In "A Christmas Carol," Ebenezer Scrooge learns why it is a man is blessed with more than he needs, and that death will soon take from him all that he had accumulated. I am also reminded of Oscar Schindler, who laments at the end of his life that his ring could have saved another Jew from the Holocaust – his car a few more.

The prolific Christian hymnist, Fanny Crosby, was a great example of this. God had taken her eyesight, but she was content to have Jesus. She saw her loss of eyesight as an unusual blessing that enabled her to know her Savior better (Saul went blind too). She wrote a hymn about her contentment called, "Take the World, But Give Me Jesus":

"Take the world, but give me Jesus,
all its joys are but a name;
but His love abides forever,
through eternal years the same.

"Take the world, but give me Jesus,
sweetest comfort of my soul;
with the Savior watching o'er me,
I can sing, though thunders roll.

"Take the world, but give me Jesus;
in his cross my trust shall be
till with clearer, brighter vision

face to face my Lord I see.

“Oh, the height and depth of mercy!
Oh, the length and breadth of love!
Oh, the fullness of redemption,
pledge of endless life above!”

Knowing Christ like that means recognizing how much more valuable our relationship with Him is than the fleshly earthly things we hope to accomplish or accumulate. Jesus had no place to lay His head. He was born in a manger's stall. He died outside the city at Golgotha as a common criminal. But He is the Alpha and the Omega. Glorifying Him is the future. What from this earthly existence are we unwilling to give up, to know Him and to follow Him?

III. Becoming like Christ's death means never losing a vicarious atonement through faith (vv. 9-10).

Illustration: When an opossum plays dead it closes its eyes. It is as though in an act of faith it is willing to no longer watch out for itself and instead to place itself in the care of its Creator for its salvation.

Application: Paul mentions that it takes faith to know Christ through sharing in the suffering of His death (v. 9). The opposite of walking by sight is walking by faith. Our natural tendency is to try to see to it with our own insight that we are good enough to establish a self-righteousness before God's laws. The opposite of that is to share in the death of Christ as God's sacrifice in our place to atone for our sins. This sharing comes by simply believing that Jesus obeyed the law for you, took your sin to the cross, arose again, and now offers you His righteousness instead of the righteousness you have tried to establish on your own.

Faith is something we exercise every day. You got in your car and drove to church this morning believing that when you turned that key the engineers had designed something that would get you from point a to point b. If you traveled over a bridge on your way in, you did so by faith in the engineers who designed and built that bridge and in the inspectors who ensured it was safe for public use. Faith is simply believing someone's credibility based on evidence and then acting on that belief. God is ultimate credibility.

Conclusion: The opossum escapes its predator through playing possum. We escape the destroyer of our souls, our sin, through conformity to the Savior's death. It will mean losing respect for false teachers and prophets; it will mean losing any confidence we might have in our earthly accomplishments and possessions; and it will mean the end of walking by the sight of our own insight into our own self-righteousness. It will mean simply believing the One who never lies, that "whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Rom. 10:13).

"A man came – I think it was actually in Philadelphia – on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, 'Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.' That is the distinction – the sermon, and the 'lightning and the thunder.' To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters."

– David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

Preachers and Preaching