

More Precious than Life
 WE PREACH CHRIST CRUCIFIED
 Philippians 3:7-11

David R. Clark

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⁷ *But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ.* ⁸ *What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, 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 is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.* ¹⁰ *I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.*

Dear brothers and sisters of the cross,

Jesus' cross—more important than his life

If you are an Arizona football fan, you heard that Kurt Warner has retired from football. That gave everyone who is a football fan a chance to look back on his career. What do you think were his glory days? Was it winning two MVP's? Was it taking two perennial losers to the Superbowl? Was it passing for the top three yardage amounts in Superbowl history? There are so many!

Unfortunately, for many people, especially Arizona fans, the most vivid memory may be Kurt throwing an interception at the one yard line that was run all the way back for a touchdown. No one would consider that a highlight – unless you root for the Pittsburgh Steelers.

What do you suppose were the glory days of Jesus' ministry? Was it preaching to packed houses? Feeding 5,000 families with five barley loaves and two small fish? Was it raising Lazarus from the dead?

Would you include any of the following: His betrayal by a disciple he had chosen? His bloody sweat and wrestling in prayer at the Garden of Gethsemane? His repeated admonition that his drowsy disciples watch and pray? Could these be counted among Jesus' moments of glory? They certainly don't seem very glorious, do they? Though all of Jesus' acts brought his Father glory, Jesus' suffering for our eternal debt of sin is the crowning glory.

Because of his great love for you, Jesus treasured your life more than his own. When suffering and the cross came his way, Jesus embraced it and, in so doing, embraced you!

Jesus' cross—more precious than St. Paul's life

This thought and the faith that accepts it does not come easily to people because it is so opposite to everything we think by nature. We see that in St. Paul.

Saul, as he was called then, was breathing out murderous threats against what he considered the Jesus cult. You can bet he would have been crying, "Crucify him!" at the cross of our Savior, had he been there. Since he could not get his hands on our risen and ascended Savior, he did the next best thing: he arrested and put to death men, women, and children who were followers of Jesus.

Like many people today, Saul trusted in himself. For whatever good he did, God would surely deliver him from hell and give him safe passage to heaven. But then Jesus changed his life.

As he was breathing out murderous threats against Jesus' followers, Saul was struck down on the road to Damascus. There a kind of death took place. In the words "**I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting**" (Ac 9:5), Jesus put to death Saul's notion that he was doing God any favors. God considered Saul's shining virtues to be the most loathsome vices and the very reason he should burn in hell. The only hope of forgiveness was to trust in the Jesus he had, up to now, persecuted. How pitiful it must have been for the confident, self-willed Saul to march toward Damascus only to be struck blind for three days and led by the hand, like a helpless child, into the city of Damascus. There Saul's sight was restored by God through a member of Christ's church—Ananias. A death and

resurrection took place in Saul. He died to his old way of thinking and found peace in God's gift of Jesus, his Savior.

What a difference that made in Paul's life! Years later, after he has sat at Jesus' feet, and suffered for carrying Christ's cross clearly and confidently in his life, the Spirit led him to write:

“But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.”

History tells us that Saul, whom we know later as St. Paul was executed in a Roman prison. Jesus' cross was more precious than life.

Jesus' cross—more precious than our lives

We probably didn't see a light shining as Saul did. The only light we probably saw on the day of our conversion, was from the church windows and the sanctuary fixtures. All we may have heard was the voice of the pastor as he poured a handful of water on our heads “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

But a death—a drowning—took place there, the drowning of that inborn Pharisee who, up until that moment, was the center of our universe and our meager hope of salvation. At the same time, there was a resurrection to faith in Jesus of Nazareth. One moment we were blind. The next moment the church came and, through the power of Christ's glorious passion, made the scales fall from our eyes. For **“we were therefore buried with [Christ] through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead . . . we too may live a new life”** (Ro 6:4).

Since entered life through the cross, death is not strange to us. We have learned to die every day . . . and many times each day . . . to self, to all the unholy allies of the flesh in this world and beyond when we repent of our sins and turn to Jesus' cross for forgiveness and for the power to live for God. Each day we say with the apostle, **“Whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things.”**

Since we have become accustomed to Jesus' cross it has become more precious to us than life! Certainly we can point to the moment of our confirmation when we promised to give up all – even our very lives – rather than deny Jesus cross and his word.

There are so many ways that this can happen, so many ways by which we may be called to count Christ's cross as more precious than our own lives. For St. Paul who wrote this letter to the Philippians, it was his two-year house arrest in Rome, while he awaited trial before Caesar.

Paul saw his house arrest as the pulpit that God, in his infinite wisdom and love, chose for him, the way that he would show how precious the cross of Christ was to him. It might be difficult for us to understand how this powerful missionary of the Lord could possibly do so behind the four walls of his prison with no one but guards and a few selected friends with whom he could speak. Yet God chose this as the way he could most effectively preach the gospel. Paul knew that: **“I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.”**

You and I will be called on to do the same. We also are called on to hide our life in Christ's. Very often the most effective pulpit is not chosen by our own will or wisdom but by the will and wisdom of God. It is where we are standing now. It may be a pulpit of pain or health, gainful employment or no employment at all. We may be wrenched by struggles within or struggles with those who do not understand us. They may rage against our Savior. We may be in the prime of life or on the verge of death. No matter. Our life is hidden with God in Christ. And as that happens we preach Christ crucified, a message more important than life itself. Amen.