

Coram Deo
Soli Scriptura, Soli Deo Gloria, Soli Deo Gracia
Sermon preached at
Stouffville United Church on
the Rev. Capt. Dr. John S. Niles MSM CD

“The Mathematics of Heaven”

February 19, 2023

Philippians 3:1-10

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YG-nDZMH1H4>

When our youngest daughter was in grade six, we went to a parent teacher interview. Tabitha had been having trouble with math we were told. The teacher said, “I asked her if she could get help from her parents? To which, Tabitha said, “My parents. don’t do math. They won’t be of any help.” She was right

Galileo (1564-1642) said. “Mathematics is the language in which God has written the universe.” If that’s the case, I’m a slow learner.

We all have the tendency to define our worth in terms of our own efforts or achievements. If we passed or failed, and yet, one of the chief stealers of joy is the expectations we place on ourselves or are placed on us by others with regards to achievement and validation. And when we don’t receive it, or worse if it is given to someone we deem less worthy, we feel betrayed or devalued.

Paul was challenging this view of worth and value within the community of faith coming from actions or achievements. *“⁴ though I myself have reasons for such confidence If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: ⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.”*

It sounds like arrogance, until he calls all of that a bunch of trash, refuse, garbage, rubbish. The mathematics of pass or fail, success or failure have nothing to do with the mathematics of heaven.

I

And Paul uses it to help us find joy right where we are when he gives us this **strategy**. **(3:7-9)** *“But whatever was to my gain I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more I consider everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord”*

The party aboard ship was in full swing. Speeches were being made by the captain, the crew, and all the guests were really enjoying the week-long voyage. Sitting at the head table was a seventy-year-old man who was kind of embarrassed but was doing his best to accept the praise being poured on him.

Earlier that morning a young woman had somehow fallen overboard, and within seconds this elderly gentleman was in the cold, dark waters at her side. The woman was rescued and the elderly man became an instant hero. When the time finally came for the brave passenger to speak, the stateroom fell into a hush as he rose from his chair. He went to the microphone and, in what was probably the shortest “hero’s” speech ever offered, he spoke these stirring words: “I

just want to know one thing,” he said, “WHO PUSHED ME?”

Praise and approval are fleeting. One minute you are in; the next moment you are out. Just look at social media and how it plays havoc with people’s self-worth if they don’t get enough “likes” on their Instagram, Facebook or TikTok – they get depressed even suicidal if it’s been found.

People are willing to do anything just so they get that approval unless something happens to cause them to reassess what is truly important.

St Paul had all the outward appearances of success within his community and yet, when it came right down to it; once he accepted Christ and came to understand his value didn’t come from those things, he realized they may have been something to boast about at some point, but really they were just rubbish. They were rubbish in comparison to what is truly important.

You see the strategy is simple. Keep what truly is important – important!

II

Finding lasting joy right where you are won’t be found in stuff, or achievements present approval or past success. All those things may be nice at the time. But when that time passes, so do they. Paul reveals his strategy to remember what is truly important the mathematics of heaven which points to **significance (3:10)** *“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, and so attain the resurrection of the dead.”*

In 1947, a professor at the University of Chicago was scheduled to teach an advanced seminar in astrophysics. At the time he was living in Wisconsin, doing research. He planned to commute twice a week for the class, even though it would be held during the harsh winter months. Registration for the seminar, however, fell far below expectations. Only two students signed up for the class. People expected the professor to cancel, lest he waste his time. But for the sake of two students, he taught the class, commuting 100 miles’ round trip through back country roads in the dead of winter. His students did their homework. Ten years later, in 1957, they both won the Nobel prize for physics. So did the professor in 1983.

God doesn’t need large numbers only a committed few who have counted the cost and who understand the significance.

“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 attain the resurrection of the dead.”

How can you believe in God in the face of the suffering in this world? I remember at the last church I served before joining the military someone said something similar to me after Sean’s Cancer had returned for the third time since his birth at 3 years old.

They were wishing to cause an angry response from me, they said, “How can you believe in a God that brought Sean to you only for him to die?” Knowing, what they wanted, I first had a flash of anger, and then paused and responded instead, “I could never believe in a God who brought Sean into our lives only for him to die. I believe in a God, who brought Sean into our lives so that he would never die alone.”

As the argument goes, “How can you believe in God in the face of the suffering in this world? Either there is no God, or God indifferent to it – which means we should ignore him, or God is evil for allowing such things as suffering and death to happen and should be rejected and has much to answer for.

This argument is always thrown out by the atheists and the antagonists. However, I don’t

accept the premise. As the atheists comes from a point of view that this is the only world there is. That there is no eternal life or paradise and so find everything that may involve suffering a waste. While we as believers know that this is not all there is; and so, find meaning, purpose and the fact that there is much we are to learn in all of it before our death and resurrection. And this is of significance.

Let me give you an example. When parents decide to have a child, and the women is pregnant with twins. The pregnancy is uncomfortable, and the birth is tremendously painful, for the mother and the children which are to be born. In the womb, the twin's world is perfect, loved, warm, protected and fed. And then the birth is chaotic, painful and frightening. Though there is medication that can be used to modify that experience and make it easier in some ways.

The atheist twin has the view of the womb as the only world, would state if there are parents that the parents must be indifferent to have the pain the children will go through in this chaotic, painful awful birth experience. Or, that there is no other world but the womb. And if the parents are willing to cause pain to have the child enter this world or have to experience it while in the womb they must be evil.

And yet, we know because we are in this world, that there is much we want the child to experience and learn in this one. And yes, there will be pain, and suffering, and yes we will be able to alleviate some of it. And there will be love before the end.

And yet the atheist would say, not for everyone – true, but as believers, we know this truth. That “the eternal God is our refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms...” Deuteronomy 33:27.

A while ago, a couple announced the birth of their son by sending cards on which were printed an excerpt from George MacDonald's “Where Did You come From, Baby Dear?”

Where did you come from, baby dear?
Out of the Everywhere into the here.
Where did you get your eyes so blue?
Out of the sky as I came through

As believers, we know that if there is no Everywhere, there is no Here. No galaxies, no gaiety. No milky way, no path forward. To make us, God had to put sun in the sky, and the rain on the wind. In “The Valley of Wild Thyme,” Sidney Lysaght has a child ask his mother what it takes to make a rose. Her answer is that a rose, is not possible without the moon and the stars, and the world's eternal wars:

It takes the might of Heaven and hell,
And the everlasting love as well, little child.

I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and share in the fellowship of his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so attain the resurrection of the dead.

III

The mathematics of heaven. Finding lasting joy right where you are won't be found in stuff, or achievements So Paul reveals his strategy, which points its significance and involves

solidarity (3:10) *“Sharing in the Fellowship of his suffering”*

Mark twain said, Joy shared is joy multiplied, but sorrow shared is sorrow halved. Which may have been inspired by Cicero’s saying “Friendship improves happiness and abates misery, by the doubling of our joy and the dividing of our grief.”

A guy was walking across a bridge one day, and saw a man standing on the edge, about to jump off. Immediately he ran over and said, "Stop! Don't do it!" "Why shouldn't I?" he said. "Well, there's so much to live for!" "Like what?" "Well, are you religious or atheist?" "Religious." "Me too! Are you Christian or Jewish?" "Christian." "Me too! Are you Catholic or Protestant?" "Protestant." "Me too! Are you Episcopalian or Baptist?" "Baptist." "Wow! Me too! Are you Original Baptist Church of God, or are you Reformed Baptist Church of God?" "Reformed Baptist Church of God." "Me too! Are you Reformed Baptist Church of God, reformation of 1879, or Reformed Baptist Church of God, reformation of 1915?" "Reformed Baptist Church of God, reformation of 1915!" To which I said, "Die, heretic scum!" and pushed him off.

Mother Teresa once said of a wretched person who was mean and unhappy and unkind. “He is a disciple of Jesus in rather distressing disguise.”

Well, so are we all

It was Blaise Pascal who said, “Man -humanity – is great in their misery.” That helps us interpret life and helps us interpret ourselves. “humanity is great in our misery” Sometimes greatness is disguised. But we miss the greatness when we focus only on the misery.

So Paul says, I want to know Christ and sharing in the fellowship of his suffering When we focus on the fellowship instead of the suffering, we discover that solidarity that doubles our joy and divides our grief.

Perhaps that is why Reinhold Niebuhr said, “Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore, we must be saved by hope. Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore, we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore, we must be saved by love. No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as it is from our standpoint. Therefore, we must be saved by the final form of love which is forgiveness.”

You think about that. Amen