

EXPERIENCING THE GREATEST POWER IN THE UNIVERSE PHILIPPIANS 3:1-11

Today, on this Easter Sunday, I want you to think with me about power. I like the line about power attributed to Edward Bennett Williams, a Washington D.C. trial attorney, insider, and very influential person. When he was dying, someone teased him about all the power and influence he supposedly had wielded in his life. Williams said, "Power? I'm about to meet real power." What is the most powerful force in the universe? It depends, I suppose, on what kind of power you're talking about. If you have a scientific bent, you know that there are four natural forces that exert tremendous power: gravitation, electromagnetism, weak nuclear force and strong nuclear force which is generally conceded to be the most powerful natural force in the universe. Strong nuclear force is what binds protons and neutrons together to form the nucleus of an atom. But power comes in different packages. What about political power? What about military power? Two thousand years ago – when the Christian faith was just getting started - many people might have answered the question of what is the most powerful force in the universe with this answer: the Roman Empire.

May I suggest to you that however you conceive of power or whatever you consider to be the most powerful force in the universe, it is – at best – only the third strongest power in the world. The Bible supports the fact that a spiritual force called sin and evil is the second greatest power in the universe. It has created more chaos, heartache, despair and disaster over more years than any of us can possibly imagine. It has negatively affected and impacted every area of life and living on this planet for thousands of years: individual people, families, nations, governments, the economy, health, and even natural disasters – just to name a few. There is only one kind of power that is greater and stronger than the power of sin and evil. It's what I want you to think with me about today. The greatest power in the universe is the power of the resurrection. When God raised His Son, Jesus, three days after He died on the cross, He revealed and unleashed the greatest power the universe has – and will ever – know.

The Bible puts it like this, "I also pray that you will understand the incredible greatness of God's power for us who believe him. This is the same mighty power that raised Christ from the dead..." (Eph 1:19-20 NLT) But there's another passage I want us to focus in on today. It was written by the Christian leader, Paul, to a group of Christians living in the Greek city of Philippi in the middle of the first century. There's one phrase in that passage I want us to focus on together this Easter Day, but the whole passage provides an important context. It's those last two verses that grab my attention. "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." (Phil 3:10-11 NIV) What is this power associated with the resurrection of Jesus? Power to do what? Here are four answers to that question this Easter Day. First, because of Jesus' resurrection...

I HAVE THE POWER TO KNOW JESUS, BECAUSE HE'S TRULY ALIVE.

My guess is that very few of us here today doubt that Jesus rose from the dead physically and literally. Of course, many people do doubt that such a miracle is possible, but – frankly - most of them find other things to do on Easter morning than attend church. So, I'm not going to review again today all the evidence for the resurrection. All sorts of books have been written about the resurrection of Jesus and they point to one conclusion: the physical, literal resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth is the best explanation of all the evidence available. Furthermore, no one in the first century believed dead people could come back to life physically – not Jews, not Romans, not Greeks, not anyone. When the first Christians said that Jesus had risen from the dead, they knew they were saying something that sounded absolutely absurd and ridiculous to everyone. But those first followers of Jesus realized that their lives and the future of the world had been radically altered forever by the literal, physical resurrection of Jesus. Indeed, the resurrection of Jesus had already set the future in motion.

The power of the resurrection is built upon a literal, physical resurrection of Jesus. If it does nothing else, it makes it possible to know Jesus because He is truly, literally, really alive. Notice how Paul connected those two things: knowing Jesus and the resurrection – “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection...” If the resurrection of Jesus never happened - if it's just a lovely myth or whatever - then it isn't possible to know or have any kind of relationship with Jesus because He's dead. But He's not dead; He's very much alive. As a result of the resurrection, people can actually have a relationship with Jesus. For just a moment, reflect upon and thank God with me for the fantastic miracle that is the literal, physical resurrection of Jesus nearly 2,000 years ago.

Dr. Thomas Miller, a surgeon and researcher, has explored the miracle of Jesus' resurrection from a medical angle. He notes that the body contains maybe 100 trillion cells. Each one of these cells carries out thousands of different chemical reactions. Thus a bodily resurrection would require some phenomenal power to energize life into all these individual cells, but it would have to do so in such a way that nerve cells could resume their unique function, heart cells perform theirs, blood cells and bone cells do theirs, and so on. Consider your heart as just one example. It beats on average 70 times a minute, 4,200 times an hour, 100,800 times a day, and 36,288,000 times a year. And for that to happen, thousands of processes within each cell must act in a coordinated way. This all happens at least every second in such a smooth fashion that we aren't even aware of it. And at the moment we die, all these processes came to a screeching halt. A bodily resurrection implies that thousands of processes in trillions of cells must be restarted with all the unique intricacy and inter-coordination that existed before death. Dr. Miller notes that this would require not just incredible power but also unimaginable knowledge. He points out that even the latest science has not unraveled the complete mystery of each of the cells of our bodies, and how they interact and "talk" with one another. But for the resurrection of Jesus to occur, all of that information had to be known in its completeness and totality, and known some two thousand years ago. Now, secondly, because of the resurrection ...

I HAVE THE POWER TO KNOW JESUS PERSONALLY AND INCREASINGLY.

If you're a follower of Jesus today, what is – or should be - the real goal of your life? Someone might say, "It's making sure I go to Heaven when I die." Eternal life with God is indeed a wonderful gift given to every child of God, but that shouldn't be your goal in this life. Someone else might say, "It's to get all my sins forgiven." Jesus provided for that when He died on the cross, but that shouldn't be your goal in this life. Someone else might say, "It's to get better and better morally." The Holy Spirit will help you with that, but that shouldn't be your goal in this life. By telling us his goal in life, Paul reveals what should be the life goal of every follower of Jesus: to know Jesus. He said in the passage we read, "Yes, everything else is worthless when compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have discarded everything else, counting it all as garbage, so that I could gain Christ.... I want to know Christ and experience the mighty power that raised him from the dead." (Phil 3:8,10 NLT)

What does Paul mean by knowing Jesus? Obviously, he already knew a lot about Jesus, but there's a world of difference, isn't there, between knowing about someone and truly knowing someone. There are some strong similarities to a very close, loving marriage. This is knowing Jesus on a personal and expanding level not just knowing some facts about who He is and what He did here on Earth. When you love another person, you discover a place of intimacy and connection. You want to be identified with that person in every way. You even want to share that person's struggles and sufferings to some degree. You share life in every way imaginable. That's possible with Jesus now because of the resurrection. As you read and study the Bible, as you learn how to make prayer a conversation with Jesus throughout the day, as you worship Him on Sundays and throughout the week, as you serve with others who know and love Him, as you point people to Jesus both with your lips and your life, as you even suffer persecution and rejection because of your loyalty to Jesus, as you gradually get more and more committed to the things Jesus cares about, you come to know Jesus. Gradually a wonderful transformation takes place. The more you know Him, the more you become like Him. His power becomes your power. His attitudes become your attitudes. His purpose becomes your purpose. His life becomes your life.

A little boy once fell out of bed and his mother asked him how it had happened. He explained, "I stayed too long where I got in." That can happen to you and me spiritually speaking. In other words, we just refuse to keep growing spiritually. We settle for spiritual stagnation. "Been there, done that." We stay too long where we got in. There's a remedy for spiritual stagnation and spiritual boredom: knowing Jesus. He is the only inexhaustible person in the universe. You can never know everything about Jesus and every new discovery is more delightful than the one before it. All relationships have to start somewhere, but they're expected to go somewhere, too. The greatest thing that had ever happened to Paul was made possible by the resurrection: knowing Jesus personally and increasingly. It changed everything. He explained it this way to another group of Christians, "My old self has been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. So I live in this earthly body by trusting in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." (Gal 2:20 NLT) Thirdly, because of the resurrection ...

I HAVE THE POWER TO LIVE JOYFULLY AND THANKFULLY.

How does the death of Jesus on the cross and His resurrection from the dead on Easter Sunday provide that? Because it changes forever the basis of how and why you and I are accepted by God and how can know Jesus at all. Back in Paul's day and time, some ethnic Jews who had become followers of Jesus wanted to hold onto certain religious practices as necessary for even non-Jewish Christians to practice in order to be right with God. The biggest one was circumcision - an Old Testament religious ritual that signified that you were a part of God's chosen people – the nation of Israel. It revealed a very human – but a very wrong and dangerous - human tendency. We like to think that we can earn or deserve a relationship with God by doing certain things.

If you ask the average person – your neighbor, a friend at school, someone who works in the next office – what he or she believes about having a relationship with God, you get the most interesting answers. “Oh, I was baptized when I was a baby” or “I got baptized at a church camp when I was 12 years old.” So what? Water doesn't create a relationship with God. “Oh, well, my grandfather was a Baptist minister.” So what? Many will say, “Oh, I believe in God. I believe Jesus is God's Son.” So what? So does the Devil. “Well, I am a moral person. I'm honest. I'm kind. I'm a good provider. I take good care of my family. I help others in need.” Good for you. You really think that makes you right with God? “Well, I grew up in church and went to Sunday School every Sunday.” So what? “Oh, I've been a member of Karl Road Baptist Church for fifty years; I give money to the church; I serve in three different ministries.” So what? All of those privileges and achievements are good in and of themselves. But not one of them has the power to make you right with God. None of them automatically mean that you know Jesus personally and increasingly.

Only Jesus can make you acceptable to God. It all goes back to the cross where Jesus paid the full penalty for your sin and mine. In exchange for your sinfulness, Jesus gives you His perfect goodness or rightness with God. We are put into that new relationship of acceptance with God. God considers us right with Him. That kind of goodness can't be achieved or acquired by personal effort. It can only be given. Jesus puts you into a new relationship with God the moment you put your faith in Jesus and what He did for you on the cross. That's what Paul is getting at here when he speaks of “... 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.” (Phil 3:9 NIV)

A number of you in the room are old enough to remember when you didn't pay for gas at the pump. Remember when you had to actually take your wallet out of your pocket, pull out real dollar bills, and go into the gas station and pay for your gas? Of course nobody does that anymore. You just pay at the pump. Actually, some parents have discovered they don't have to go to the gas station at all. They can send one of their teenagers with a debit or credit card to fill the tank. When you do that, in a sense, you transfer your identity to your child. He assumes your identity for that transaction as well as the buying power of that card. The credit is his not because he earned or deserved it. The credit is his because what is yours has been given to him in that moment for that

purpose. In the same way, when you put your trust in Jesus – His death and resurrection on your behalf – He loaned you His identity for all eternity.

What happens if you don't get a grasp of this essential truth? You end up living a pretty joyless and thankless life. You live most of your life riddled with guilt and never have a proper sense of security or assurance in your relationship with God. Thoughts about God cause your spirit to get heavy and burdened. He becomes someone you obey out of a sense of duty rather than someone you obey out of love and gratitude. You put your trust and confidence in your own sincerity, some past conversion experience years ago, how you perform at church, or what seems like a lack of any known sin in your life today. Worship is dull... prayer is a chore... serving is a burden. Worst of all, you miss the joy of living life with Jesus every day!

What happens, though, if you start every day knowing that you're accepted and loved by God fully and nothing can change that? What happens when you realize that God's love will never be withdrawn from you regardless of what you do or do not do? What happens to you when you know you're accepted by God because of what Jesus did for you yesterday not because what you try to do for God today or tomorrow? No guilt. No condemnation. No insecurity. You relax and fully enjoy your relationship with God. You're freed up to grow in His love, grow in your trust of Him and grow in your knowledge of Him. Obeying and serving Him become the natural expression of your heart. You begin to experience a joy unspeakable and full of glory!

If Paul were here today, he might put it like this, "Knowing Jesus as my Lord and Savior has been the greatest thrill of my life. My life has been absolutely revolutionized by Jesus. What absorbs most of my time and energy now is not trying to make myself acceptable to God or trying to measure up to human expectations. My purpose is simply to keep on developing this marvelous, inexhaustible relationship with Jesus. Everything else in comparison is just like so much smelly garbage. I still have hard times, to be sure, but because of the death of Jesus and the power of His resurrection, I'm filled with joy and thankfulness just the same." Finally, because of the resurrection:

I HAVE THE POWER TO LIVE VICTORIOUSLY AND FEARLESSLY

Because of the resurrection of Jesus, everyone here today is no longer at the mercy of the second most powerful force in the universe: sin and evil. It's different for different people. For some, it's pretty out in the open stuff – an addiction of some kind, an uncontrollable temper, a sexual lifestyle that doesn't honor God. For others, it's more hidden stuff – pride, selfishness, gossip, or contempt for poor people. But it's all sin and we would be powerless against it if it weren't for the power of the resurrection. Even a very godly man like Paul struggled with sin. He put it like this, "I want to do what is good, but I don't. I don't want to do what is wrong, but I do it anyway.... I love God's law with all my heart. But there is another power within me that is at war with my mind. This power makes me a slave to the sin that is still within me. Oh, what a miserable person I am! Who will free me from this life that is dominated by sin and death? Thank God!

The answer is in Jesus Christ our Lord.” (Rom 7:19, 23-25 NLT) Because Jesus walked out of that tomb, you don’t have to stay a slave of the ways sin shows up in your life.

Because of the resurrection of Jesus, suffering for Jesus in this life is immensely meaningful. What does that verse say again? “I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death.” (Phil 3:10 NLT) This isn’t the kind of suffering that’s the result of being a dope or doing something wrong. It’s not underserved, random suffering like when a small child gets cancer. Paul’s not saying that he wishes he could pay for other people’s sins like Jesus’ suffering did for us. Paul was in jail when he wrote these words. For what? He was in jail for telling other people about Jesus. The suffering Paul is talking about here is persecution for standing up for Jesus in some way. There are many Christians all over the world even today who are being bitterly persecuted and even killed simply because they’re followers of Jesus. We know very little about that kind of suffering in the United States, but, yes, even in our country, you can suffer for Jesus’ sake. After all, the Bible does say, “Yes, and everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.” (2 Tim 3:12 NLT) If you want to live for Jesus, Satan is going to attack you in some way – your health, your relationships, your finances. If you want to live for Jesus, you might get rejected by members of your family or close friends. They may see you now as some kind of fanatic and decide a relationship with you should end. If you want to live for Jesus, you will spend time, energy, money and prayer trying to point other people to Jesus. It will cost you something. Paul says here that when you suffer for following Jesus, it allows your personal relationship with Jesus to enter a kind of new spiritual dimension. You get to know Him in a way that you could never get to know Him without that suffering. To suffer for Jesus’ sake is a privilege not a penalty.

Because of the resurrection of Jesus, I don’t have to fear death because it’s been defeated. “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.” (Phil 3:10-11 NLT) When Jesus rose from the dead, it made your future resurrection both necessary and inevitable. Today, death is still a powerful enemy, but when God raises your dead body to life again someday in the future, death itself will die. That’s now inevitable because Jesus Himself set the future into motion when He rose from the dead. It’s gonna happen! You just wait and see! Jesus put it like this, “For it is my Father’s will that all who see his Son and believe in him should have eternal life. I will raise them up at the last day.” (John 6:40 NLT)

Several centuries ago, there was a man living in Italy who was an unbeliever and completely against Christianity, but he was a little afraid of it, too. How do I know? Well, this man arranged to have a huge stone slab put over his grave so he would not have to be raised from the dead in case there is a resurrection from the dead. He had messages written all over the slab saying, “I do not want to be raised from the dead. I don’t believe in it.” Evidently, when he was buried, an acorn must have fallen into the grave itself by accident. How do I know that? Well, because a hundred years later a tall, towering oak tree has grown up right through the grave itself and split that slab. If an acorn, which has just the power of biological life in it, can split a heavy, solid stone

slab, what can the acorn of God's resurrection power do in a person's life? The minute you decide to receive Jesus as Savior and Lord, the power of the resurrection itself comes into your life. Now you have the power to know Jesus, to know Jesus personally and increasingly, and to live every day joyfully, thankfully, fearlessly and victoriously. Think of the things you see as immovable, heavy slabs of stone in your life today — shame, bitterness, insecurity, fear, doubt. Those things can be split and rolled off of your life. The more you know the risen Jesus, the more you grow into the power of the resurrection. It's available to you — the greatest power in the universe - the power of the resurrection - the same power that raised Jesus from the dead.