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An Apostle's Supreme Ambition

by T. Austin-Sparks

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"That I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, becoming conformed unto His death" (Philippians 3:10).

There are few words in his writings which reveal how committed to the Lord Jesus this man was. The whole context is one consummate outpouring of his heart to the One whom he said had "apprehended" him, and he focuses all in a brief half sentence: "That I may know him."

The impressive thing about this expressed ambition is the time at which it is made. Here is a man who has had a revelation and knowledge of Jesus Christ greater than any other man up to that time. That knowledge commenced whence as he said, "it pleased God to reveal his Son in me". That beginning devastated him, and sent him into the desert to try to grasp its implications. Later he had been "caught up into the third heaven and shown *unspeakable* things, which (he said) were not lawful to be uttered". Between, and around those two experiences, there is evidence of an ever growing knowledge of Christ. Here, after all that, near the end of his life, he is crying passionately: "That I may know him."

The very least that we can say about this is that the Christ in view was a very great Christ indeed, who outstrips the greatest capacity and comprehension of man. This stands in such tremendous contrast to the limited Christ of our recognition and apprehension! How very much more there is in Christ than we have ever seen! But we must break down our verse. It is divided by its main words, and can be stated in its four phrases.

(1) The all-governing passion: "That I may know him."

(2) The effectual power: "The power of his resurrection."

(3) The essential basis: "The fellowship of his sufferings."

(4) The progressive principle: "Conformed to his death."

1. The All-Governing Passion

"That I may know him."

Here a little study in words is both helpful and necessary. In the original language of the New Testament there are two words for 'knowing' or 'knowledge' or 'to know'. They run in numerous occasions and connections right through the New Testament.

One of these words has the meaning of knowledge by information; being told, reading, by report. It is more the knowledge which comes by observation, study, searching, or talk. It is rather knowledge about things, persons, etc. The other word carries the meaning of personal experience, intimate acquaintance; and *inward* knowledge. Sometimes there is a prefix which gives the meaning of "full knowledge" (*epi*). The second of these words and meanings is that which Paul is using and employing here: 'That I may have or gain more of the knowledge of Him which is personal experience by personal acquaintance, by living, firsthand relationship with Him.'

This removes everything from the realm of mere theory, the intellect, and being told. It is the result and effect of an act of the Holy Spirit within. That is why Paul links with this knowledge "the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings". It is powerful knowledge, born of deep experience. And this is the only *true* knowledge of Christ! It is planted or wrought deep in the inner life.

2. The Effectual Power

"The power of his resurrection."

While there *is* a future aspect of the whole statement, that is, the consummation in glory, we *must* understand that in each of these phrases Paul is thinking of this life. Even in the next verse, where he speaks of *attaining* to the "outresurrection from among the dead", he is thinking primarily of present spiritual and moral out-raising. He had known something of this power already. His conversion was such. Again and again, in what he called "deaths oft" he had known it. Perhaps greatest of all were his experiences in Asia and Lystra (II Corinthians 1:9; Acts 14:19-20).

Resurrection power and life *are* the knowledge of Christ. This is how we know Him, and this is available for every believer. It is for endurance, for overcoming, for fulfilment of ministry, for maintaining the Lord's testimony in the world; for every need which demands it in relation to the interests and glory of Christ. It puts life on a supernatural basis. It is the power of *His* resurrection, the greatest miracle in history.

3. The Essential Basis

"The fellowship of his sufferings."

In this connection there are some things that we must at once set aside. There were sufferings of Christ which we do *not* share, and are not called upon to share, although sometimes there seems to be a very fine and thin line between them.

We do not share the atoning sufferings of Christ. There is a whole realm of suffering which was His alone. The work of man's redemption was His alone, *for* us. When He who was without sin was made sin for us He was alone, even God-forsaken in that eternal moment. Upon that fact the whole truth of His unique Person hangs, and the whole system of *perfect* sacrifice rests; the *spotless* Lamb.

But when all that is accepted and established, there *are* sufferings of Christ in which we have fellowship with Him. We also, *for His sake*, may be despised and rejected of men. We can be discredited, ostracised, persecuted, mocked, tortured, and even "killed", both in an act and "all the day long". Paul speaks of a residue of Christ's sufferings which he was helping to fill up for "His body's sake which is the church". This is another, and different, area and system of suffering. Paul looked upon this as an honour and something in which to rejoice, because it was for the One whom he so deeply loved. But he also saw that this suffering *with* and *for* Christ provided the basis for knowing Christ and the power of His resurrection. This Apostle would agree that only those who know *this* fellowship truly know the Lord. We know that! It is perfectly evident that real usefulness in a spiritual way comes out of the winepress, and "they that have suffered most have most to give". There is nothing artificial about the fruit of Christ.

4. The Progressive Principle

"Becoming conformed unto his death."

It is important in understanding the Apostle to realise that he was not thinking of conformity to Christ's death as the end of all else. His real meaning was that he should increase in the knowledge of Christ, know the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings by becoming conformed to His death. His death - Christ's - was behind, something at the beginning, and the spiritual history of the believer is a working *back* to what that death meant. It meant the end of the "old man", crucifixion to the world mind and will; the closing of the door to a whole system which was not Christ-centered and Christ-governed.

All this had been stated and presented in Paul's earlier letters; but it was a meaning which had to be progressively made real and true in spiritual experience. The meaning of Christ's death - Paul taught - was to be the inner history of the believer, and this would work out - progressively - in the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings. So that, *by* being conformed to His death, he would come to the fuller knowledge of Him and of that Divine power. It is ever so.

The all-governing passion opens the way for the effectual, and effectuating power, by the essential basis, through the progressive principle of conformity to His death.