

Lesson 1: Introduction to the J-Curve

In our first session on the J-Curve, I'd like to start with a story that begins in a far West region of Nepal, a place called Dhangadhi. Few years ago, I had an opportunity to do a Pastors' training on prayer and one of the people I enjoyed the most was Pastor Alisha. You can see him here in the blue jacket in the middle. He was soft spoken, had a true servant's heart. On the last day in Nepal I finally got to ask him: "Alisha, what's your story?" as we shared breakfast. He said: "Well, I was a farmer all my life and one day a group of missionaries came to our village and showed the Jesus film. They shared the gospel and I became a Christian. Alisha said he was so excited that he shared Christ with everyone and people are coming to faith and so someone eventually said, "Alisha, you should be a pastor." And he said: "So I became one."

And so he would farm his land and he would continue to pastor. The church grew numerically and God miraculously provided property and money to build a church building. In this picture is the building that we actually met in for our training. I said: "Wow Alisha, that sounds amazing!" And so he said: "Yeah, but things were not always easy." And I said: "What do you mean?" And he said: "Well the elders eventually started to grumble and they had a meeting without me and when they came to me and said they don't like my leadership." And on top of that, they said: "We're leaving and we're taking half the assets to the church and at least half the people". Now if that wasn't painful enough, they started a church right down the road from the existing one. From where we're standing, he said, "You could see the new church right down the street."

Now, in a story like this, what does it look like to be successful in ministry? What if you have a genuine call? A few God-given gifts and a willingness to use them? What if you're relatively faithful and yet, everything looks and feels horrible just like this? Can you still be successful? Now if it's according to common sense the answer is no but if it's according to the gospel the answer is a definite yes.

Let's take a more specific look in Philippians 3:7-8, "But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish." Verse 9, "and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death."

Now the focus of Paul in chapter 3 of Philippians is primarily one thing and you see it here in verse 8. He wants to know Jesus. Verse 10, later on, he says, "that I may know Him". The most important thing in Paul's life is to know Jesus and ever since the risen Lord confronted Saul on that dusty Damascus Road, Paul's life ambition is to know Christ more. He just couldn't get enough of Jesus. Now let's look specifically in verse 9 at how Paul knows Jesus. The verse is called the "Chiasm". It's a Hebrew poetic structure that has a symmetry to it. And this particular one happens to kind of go on this order, subject A, subject B, subject C, and then backs out with subject B and subject A. And so, if you look at this in particular. Paul says he's comparing and contrasting subject A, righteousness, and on the one hand you have the righteousness of my own, and on the other hand, you have the

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righteousness upon faith. And more specifically he compares and contrasts a righteousness of my own out of the law. Over here, he has a righteousness upon faith, one that is of God. Now the thing about a chiasm is that the main point is right in the centre. So how do you move from having a self-righteousness to a righteousness from God. You see it right in the centre of the passage. It's through faith in Christ. How does Paul know Jesus? By faith.

When we believe in Jesus, His perfect life, or as the passage says, his righteousness, is credited to our account so that we can be made right with God. How does this transfer happen? Through faith. We are justified by God through faith in Jesus. For many of us, this is good basic gospel, but interestingly enough Paul doesn't end there. He goes on. He wants to expand on what knowing Jesus looks like. And so if we hone in on verse 10, he goes on to say, "that I may know him and the power of his resurrection and may share in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death." This may seem somewhat odd to us. After all, isn't Jesus' suffering already done and so how do we share in them? And why would anyone want to become like him in his death? and what does it mean to share in the power of the resurrection?

Paul says, I know Jesus by faith but goes on to say I also know him by sharing. And so in particular here, the word is fellowship. I share in Jesus' death and resurrection. What exactly does that mean? Do we literally share Christ's physical death and bodily resurrection? Of course not, we can't go back in time and relive his death and resurrection but we can re-enact it. The reenactment of the gospel has a specific shape. At seeJesus, the ministry I serve with, we call this the J-Curve because obviously it is shaped like the letter J. In general, Jesus' life moves down to death and up in resurrection.

Now, this shouldn't come as a surprise to us. After all, remember the shape of Jesus' story described in Philippians 2 and if we trace 2 verses, 7-9, on the J-Curve, we see here that he emptied himself, and move down, as a servant.. become a man... humbled... obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. And therefore, God exalted Him and that every knee should bow and tongue confess that He is Lord. If Jesus' life follows this path, what makes us think that ours would be any different as we know and follow Him? The J-Curve is not just the shape of Jesus' life, but ours as well. And so, the Christian life is not only initiated by the gospel, but it's also reshaped by the gospel.

Again, as we look at Philippians 3:10 traced on the J-Curve, we see that we come to know him as we share his sufferings, we become like him in death... that I may know him and the power of his resurrection. In other words, your life as a follower of Jesus will be full of mini deaths, challenges, suffering, sacrifice, obedience, and real time resurrection. Inner transformation of your heart, amazing change in your life.

Theologian J.I Packer says it this way, "For this is to be the pattern of our whole lives. Through... love and obedience and the tribulations of pain and loss for Jesus' sake, we enter into a thousand little deaths day by day, and through the ministry of the Spirit, we rise out of those little deaths into constantly recurring experiences of risen life with Christ."

And so, with that in mind, let's get back to Alisha. Think about how knowing the power of Christ's resurrection and sharing in the fellowship of the sufferings can be helpful during the church split. At

this moment, you might even want to consider how knowing the J-Curve might be helpful in your current circumstances. For Alisha, the J-Curve locates him, suffering and trials can be disorienting and Alisha knows somehow that he's now in a story and it's not his story, more specifically it's Jesus' story. And it's shaped moving from life to death to resurrection. Knowing this also provides a reason for what he has experienced. And it's because he's sharing in the fellowship of the sufferings of Christ as well of his resurrection.

This not only normalises suffering but also indicates that this is the shape of the normal gospel-centred shaped ministry. It reframes our narrative. It's not necessarily easy for Alisha, in fact the longer that he suffers, the more his ego is going to be stripped. And it's difficult to sit in sadness. And if you're like me, I want the sadness to go away. There are different options for Alisha's heart to travel if he doesn't embrace a fellowship of Christ's sufferings. If we look at this chart here. Here are some of the options. He can grow angry. And if he sits in that anger long enough, it can turn into bitterness. On the other hand, he can withdraw and resign his position as well as his call. He can blame others and keep pointing the fingers. In the quieter moments with other people, gossip about what they did to him. He can be hopeless, and despair, and give up everything. He can fight or in this case, he can receive the suffering as a fellowship with Christ as a J-Curve.

And so, by receiving the J-Curve, it means that you're willing to take the cup as a sovereign and even good gift from the hand of the Father. There are three basic steps in doing this, number one, when you're facing the J-Curve, you need to see it and recognise what it is. That you're in a J-Curve. Number two, we need to learn to receive it. And so, saying, like Jesus, I take this cup is a difficult thing to do. In fact, this is probably one of the key points. It's not just recognising it, but then being able to recognise that this is directly from the hand of a loving Father who's in control of my life. One of the primary feelings when we receive it properly is sadness. Thirdly, eventually, this actually becomes our glory or we make it our boast. This only comes over time as we begin to see what God is doing and as he changes our hearts. And so, that's a brief introduction to the J-Curve. In the next lesson, we will take a closer look at the different ways that death take shape as we follow the path of Christ.