

1-1-1997

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Recommended Citation

Selby, Gary (1997) "When Nothing Else Matters," *Leaven*: Vol. 5: Iss. 4, Article 8.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol5/iss4/8>

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When Nothing Else Matters

Gary Selby

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. Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 3:10–14)

Twelve years ago, when my son Joel was just ten months old, he came down with what we thought was an ear infection. We gave him the usual dosages of Tylenol, but after a couple of hours the fever would return. So I took him to the doctor so that she could give us a prescription and we could get on with our lives.

The doctor checked the usual things—his eyes, ears, throat, and temperature. She squeezed, poked, and felt around. And although she didn't say a word, I quickly sensed that she was concerned. I could see it written all over her face. Whatever was wrong with Joel, it wasn't just an ear infection.

Finally, the doctor came back to where I was sitting and handed Joel to me. I held him in my arms as I heard these words: "We are afraid," she began, "that it might be meningitis. We need to go over to the hospital immedi-

ately and perform a spinal tap in order to check for the presence of white blood cells in his spinal fluid. I want you to follow me to the hospital. I know a back way that will get us there more quickly." With that, we rushed out to our cars, sped to the hospital, parked, and hurried into the emergency room. There I handed Joel off to her and watched as she carried him back into a room where I could not follow.

I hurried to a phone booth and called my wife, Tammy (she had been sick herself the night before), and explained what was happening as best I could. Then I drove over to our house and picked her up, and we returned to the hospital together just about the time the doctors were completing the test. The diagnosis was positive; they had already hooked Joel to an intravenous solution and begun flooding his body with antibiotics to fight the disease.

We came to the emergency room just as they were wheeling him out. There was our baby lying on a gurney flat on his back, his arms and legs spread out, lifeless, his body hooked up to what seemed like a bunch of tubes. It was the most frightening moment I have ever experienced in my life—watching my son lying there, not knowing if he would live or die.

But I'll tell you something else. As I look back on that experience, I realize that it was also a moment of clarity for me. A defining moment. A moment of perspective. And in that moment of clarity, it's amazing what didn't

matter. So many things that, just twenty-four hours earlier, had been so important to me no longer mattered at all.

It didn't matter that I had weeds in my lawn! At that point in my life, weeds in my lawn were a great concern for me. I was obsessed with achieving a weed-free lawn! But when my son was lying in the hospital, the weeds in my lawn didn't matter. It also didn't matter that I was struggling to pay my bills, or that I needed to paint my house, or that I was in school trying to finish a degree. None of that mattered. My concern for my career no longer seemed important, nor did my yearning for everyone at church to love me and approve of me and think I was wonderful, nor my concern at being stuck off in Maryland where no one in the Churches of Christ would ever notice me.

Have you ever had one of those defining moments? One of those moments of clarity? They often come to us in times of crisis or tragedy. You see them in intensive care waiting rooms and funeral homes. They come to us when we hear the words, "I'm afraid it's terminal."

For the apostle Paul, who wrote these words to the Philippian believers, that defining moment had come some thirty years earlier on the Damascus road when he met the Lord Jesus. Paul had been on his way to the city to wreak havoc on the church, just as he had done in Jerusalem. But on the way, he saw a bright light that blinded him. Yet, blinded, he saw! In that moment and in the days that followed, Paul realized that nothing else mattered. In that moment, no longer important were all of the things that had mattered to him—his pedigree, his education, his standing as a Pharisee, his own self-righteousness. None of those things mattered anymore.

But there's more! It wasn't merely that Paul saw the futility of those things. Paul saw something more. He saw the one thing that *did* matter—what he calls "knowing Christ." Knowing the joy of Christ. Delighting in God. Of course, Paul realized that all those other things were not solid and could not fulfill him. But much more, Paul found the one thing that could fulfill him, the one thing that could sustain a life—the *joy of Christ*. When Paul found that, he discovered what God wants for us.

Ultimately, it comes down to this: God wants us to enjoy him! God's purpose is for us to delight in him. When God made Adam and Eve, God put them in the Garden of Delight (that's what "Eden" means); it was the place of

joy and pleasure, because God was there. David discovered God's purpose as well, and we see that reflected in many of the Psalms:

You have filled my heart with greater joy than when their grain and new wine abound. (Ps 4:7)

I will be glad and rejoice in you; I will sing praise to your name, O Most High! (Ps 9:2)

You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand. (Ps 16:11)

That's what Jesus emphasized when he talked about the kingdom of heaven in terms of a banquet and a wedding feast.

We were made to know the joy of God! Our task as human beings is not to give up the pursuit of joy and happiness. Our task is to seek our joy in God, to seek our happiness in Christ. Indeed, the essence of faith is trusting that we find our ultimate delight in God alone. Our challenge as people of faith is to pursue joy in Christ with a passion, to live in the spirit that Flannery O'Connor captured when she wrote, "Picture me with my ground teeth stalking joy!"¹

And you know, an amazing thing happens: When we enjoy God, we praise God! For we can only genuinely praise what we enjoy. Indeed, as C. S. Lewis said, the act of praising is what actually completes the enjoyment.² In other words, we haven't completely enjoyed something until we've praised it. When we learn to enjoy God, to delight in God, we will praise God. Something else happens, too. We sacrifice for what we enjoy! We've got a guy back at my church who suffered a severe back injury some fifteen years ago. He's had multiple surgeries and lives with chronic back pain. And he does the strangest thing. He gets up early in the morning, sacrificing his sleep. He pays money, sacrificing his hard-earned cash. And he lugs a bag of sticks around and endures the pain of trying to hit little white balls with those sticks. He makes these sacrifices all in order to play golf. Crazy, isn't it? But Ron loves golf. It's a source of delight to him. And we sacrifice for whatever we enjoy!

Think about Christian character—the pursuit of righteousness. Even character development isn't an end in itself. At its heart, it has to do with becoming the kind of people who are able to experience the delight of God, the pleasure of God's presence, in ever increasing measure.

We pursue holiness because, as the writer of Hebrews put it, without holiness, no one will see God (Heb 12:14). And oh, what a tragedy it would be to miss out on seeing the one from whose hand all good gifts come!

This joy is what Paul experienced. When he uses the phrase “the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ,” this is what he’s talking about. Paul was one of those rare people who truly experienced what Jesus talked about in the parables of the pearl of great price and the treasure hidden in the field. A man searched and searched for that one priceless jewel, and when he found it, he was so overjoyed that he went and sold everything he had to buy that pearl. Another man apparently stumbled across a treasure hidden in a field and, in his joy, went and sold all that he had in order to buy the field and get his hands on the treasure. That’s what Paul experienced. He found the one thing that really mattered, and it was wonderful beyond imagining. So he can say in Philippians 3:4–11, “I had it all—everything that a young Jewish man could possibly want. But when I found Christ, everything else was loss. In fact, knowing Christ is so great that in comparison, all else is rubbish.”

Then, in verse 12, Paul says this: “*Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect.*” He says, “I’ve glimpsed it and it is wonderful, but I don’t have it yet.” “*But I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it*” (3:12–13). Here’s what I think he’s saying: “I haven’t had the feast yet. I’ve just tasted the appetizer. I’ve only glimpsed what Christ has in store for me. But having tasted the appetizer, what kind of feast must await me?”

In anticipation of that ultimate joy, he says, “*One thing I do—forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus*” (3:13–14). “*Forgetting what is behind.*” What is he forgetting? It could be any one of a number of things—his past, his sins, his successes. But I wonder if it isn’t all those things that he “gave up” (3:4–7)—all those things that once mattered so much to him (his pedigree, his education, his standing as a Pharisee, his own self-righteousness).

When I look at all the things that Paul gave up and I think about what corresponds to them in my own life, it scares me! Education, awards, notoriety, a successful ca-

reer, security. And I’ve always imagined Paul describing those things with a kind of nostalgia, a wistful longing. I’ve always pictured Paul giving them up with pain and sadness, because that’s the way I would feel about it! But I think Paul would say, “No way! They are nothing. I’ve forgotten those things. In comparison with what I have already glimpsed, and with what awaits me, they are nothing. Sacrifice? What sacrifice? Man, I’m living!”

Paul found the one thing that really mattered, and it was wonderful beyond imagining.

“*Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead . . .*” And in my mind I see a slow-motion shot of an Olympic runner, her body leaning forward, her hand outstretched, a look of utter determination on her face. “*Straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus*” (3:14). Do you see what Paul is saying? “I’ve found what really matters. I’ve glimpsed what it means to know Christ. And it is so great, so fulfilling, so exciting, that in comparison, nothing else matters. I’ve given up everything for this one purpose. And all that counts in my life is straining ahead for this one prize!”

Having said this about himself, Paul then invites us to share the same passion. “*All of us who are mature [who have grown wise, who understand what really matters] should take such a view of things*” (3:15). “*Join with others in following my example, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you*” (3:17). We sometimes fight about pattern theology. Well, this is pattern theology—right here in black and white. And what is the pattern we are to follow? The passionate pursuit of the joy of Christ!

Paul goes on to tell us why this is so important:

For as I have often told you before and now say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things. (3:18-19)

Paul does not say this with disdain or bitterness. He's not gloating. He says this with tears trickling down his face, because when he looks at those who are in sin, this is what he sees: they have settled for something far less than what they could have had. That's the tragedy of sin. Their god is their stomach. Their destiny is destruction. You see, sin is never just a matter of stepping over the line or breaking a rule. To live in sin is to settle for something far less than what we could have had. It is to accept a cheap imitation when we could have had the real thing. It is to exchange the glory of God for an image of the creature (Rom 1:23). C. S. Lewis put it this way:

If there lurks in most modern minds the notion that to desire our own good and earnestly to hope for the enjoyment of it is a bad thing, I submit that this notion has crept in from Kant and the Stoics and is no part of the Christian faith. Indeed, if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are halfhearted creatures, fooling around with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.³

Of those who are enemies of the cross, Paul says with tears streaming down his face that they have settled for something that was only a counterfeit of what they could have had.

In contrast, he joyfully reminds us of that for which we hope:

But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body. (3:20-21)

C. S. Lewis captures that vision of our redemption in his book *Miracles*:

These small and perishable bodies we now have were given to us as ponies are given to schoolboys.

We must learn to manage: not that we may some day be free of horses altogether but that some day we may ride bare-back, confident and rejoicing, those greater mounts, those winged, shining and world-shaking horses which perhaps even now expect us with impatience, pawing and snorting in the King's stables. Not that the gallop would be of any value unless it were a gallop with the King; but how else—since He has retained His own charger—should we accompany Him?⁴

That is what we have glimpsed. That is what we hope for.

And for me, at least, that changes everything. For most of my life, I've operated under the illusion that if I worked hard enough, I would get *there* (wherever there is!). I would arrive. I would know peace and contentment. I would know that I was doing what I was here to do.

For me, that destination has taken a number of different forms. Sometimes it has been a matter of acquiring certain things—a house, a car, a certain article of clothing; at times, even a certain tool. (I'm embarrassed to admit it, but there have been times when I really believed that when I had that new power saw or router from Sears in my hands, then I would be *there*!) But of course, the feeling never lasted. The elusive goal of fulfillment was always pushed a little farther out ahead of me. At other times, the destination has taken the form of a goal. When I had accomplished a certain goal, when I had reached a certain milestone in my life, then I would be *there*. When I got my driver's license, I once thought, I'd be *there*. When I graduated from high school. When I finished college. When I got married. When I had children. When I completed graduate school. When I paid off a credit card. (Honestly, there have been times when I have lived as if the purpose for my life was to pay off a credit card!) Many of us, when we're early in careers, see ourselves as "paying our dues." We fully expect that there will come a point when we will be *there*—in a groove, sure of what we're doing, with everything secure and under control. Others of us say, "As soon as the kids are out of diapers, *then* life will begin." Or when they get out of elementary school. Or when they leave home. We come to the end of a career and say, "As soon as I retire . . ." Well, I'm pushing 40. I know that's older than some and not as old as many. But for me, *there* still hasn't become *here*. I have yet to achieve that one goal, that one accomplishment, that would allow me to say, "Yes! I've arrived."

But mostly, I've lived under the illusion that my purpose in life is to find the perfect situation. I've assumed that there was one set of circumstances out there for which I was preparing. When I found it, I would be *there*. For me, it's been a certain kind of ministry or teaching position. For you, maybe it's been something different. But all of my life, I've felt as though I've been preparing for this one, perfect situation. All of my academic training and ministry experiences were preparing me for something out there. I even had God in on it. I believed that God was preparing me for this one set of circumstances. And I believed that when I had finally gone through enough preparation and had had all the right experiences and had found that one, perfect situation, I would be *there*. But it was always out ahead of me. I could never seem to find it.

And then one day not long ago, while I was out for walk and thinking about my life, the most frightening thought occurred to me. What if *there* never comes? What if I never find it? What if I spend my whole life preparing for some event or situation that never comes? And in my imagination, I could see myself thirty or forty years from now, looking back with a profound sense of sadness and loss, knowing that I never found it. I never managed to get it all worked out.

But as I thought about it, something else hit me. (It was as if someone had turned on the lights!) None of those things are really at the center of my purpose for being here. My purpose lies in a different direction altogether. My purpose has to do with knowing God, experiencing the joy of Christ, learning to enjoy God. My purpose is to become—to grow as a person, to grow in faith and character, to become a person of wholeness, integrity, peace, patience, kindness, and joy. My task is to pursue holiness so that I become the kind of person who is able to experience the delight of the presence of God in an ever expanding measure.

My purpose is to know Christ, to move more and more toward that for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. And when I finally accept that, I realize that

I don't need to find the perfect situation to do what I'm here to do. I can fulfill my purpose wherever I find myself—in whatever situation, however imperfect. I can live with the unfinishedness of my life. I can make peace with the fact that life is messy. I can make peace with the fact that I am not going to accomplish nearly all I set out to or hoped to accomplish. I can be okay with the journey because, as one person put it, "The journey is home."

That, I believe, was what Paul meant when he looked around and said, "I've known all the trappings of the good life—status, education, religious accomplishment. But when I found what really mattered, my real purpose, I saw that those things weren't all that important." That is what enabled him to say, "*One thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus*" (3:13-14).

*And now, may God, from whose hand comes all
good gifts,
and at whose right hand is unimaginable delight,
Give you a glimpse of what you have and what
awaits you.
And may you know the joy of God, both now and
forever. Amen*

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Notes

¹Sally Fitzgerald, ed., *Habit of Being* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1979), 126.

²C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1958), 95–96.

³C. S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory," in *The Weight of Glory and Other Essays* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 1–2.

⁴C. S. Lewis, *Miracles* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), 169.