

'We're about ...'

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Date: 22 March 2026

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[0:00] Well, we all have goals in life, don't we? Of various sorts. Some grade 3 kids in the States were asked about what their goals in life were and one of them wrote to succeed in! Herbatology. That's the study of reptiles in a zoo. I had to look it up. And given that he's in grade three and spelled it correctly, I think he might succeed with this one. His next one though was to have a wife and kids and the third one was to breed dragons. I assume it's not the fire-breathing type. But either way, they're very specific goals, aren't they? Unlike the next kid who kept it rather simple. I am seven, I want to be eight. That's nice, I like it. Nice and achievable. Unlike the next one who wrote, I want to get a girlfriend, kiss her and rule the world. American kid. I'm not going to say anything else. The point is we all have goals in life for ourselves and even our loved ones, but what about our church? If someone asked you, what is the goal for your church, what would you say?

What would you want our goals to be that we worked towards? Would it be to be the church with the best coffee ever? Perhaps to give the church of secular coffee a run for their money? As someone who likes coffee, I like that goal. Or would it be to have the best playground for kids in the world, given that this is our playground, we're just looking a bit sad. So maybe that's a good goal to have. Or would it be to be a community where we provide for various needs like financial advice or mental health seminars or grandparenting tips, looking after grandkids or something like that. Or perhaps provide a network where we could have a list of the best hip surgeons. They seem to be popular these days. Or swapping recipes and the like. Now they may all be good goals to have, but as Christians, it's God's goal, which ought to be our goal, right? You see, this mini-series is about being on board.

And before we're on board with church, we need to be on board with God. And so we started last week with the big picture, as I said, and saw that life is about the sun, Jesus. For God has made the sun supreme over this life and over new life, which means he's supreme over all of life. And so I suggested we need to live our life, therefore, like rotating planets that revolve around the sun, where he is our priority, rather than living our lives spinning all these plates as though they are our priorities, as important as they may be. And if this is who life is about, as we come from the bigger picture, just one step down to the church picture, then surely it must also involve the sun too. And it does. For as Paul talks about his ministry, we'll see that his goal is to present everyone mature in Christ. But before we get to his goal, he begins with his suffering. So at point one, verse 24, he says, Now I rejoice in what I am suffering for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking regard to Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, which is the church.

[3:26] Here, Paul rejoices in his suffering. And that's not a normal reaction when we suffer, is it? Oh, I'm sick! Woohoo! So why can he say he rejoices in his suffering? Well, because the end of that first phrase, it is for you, for the church at Colossae. He rejoices because it's for their good.

He says a similar thing in the rest of verse 24, where he says he fills up in his flesh the afflictions of Christ for the sake of the body, which is the church.

He does it for their good. But what does it mean that he fills up in his flesh what is lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions? Well, the word affliction in the original New Testament language can also mean trouble or oppression. In other words, it could refer to persecution. And so to fill up in his flesh, the afflictions of Christ, it means, I think, to endure the persecution that comes because of

Christ. And it's lacking in the sense that there's always more persecution to come, sadly, in some part of the world. I mean, even today, right? The Christians in Nigeria are having an awful time, not to mention many parts of Africa and the Middle East. And Paul himself is in prison as he writes this letter because he's been proclaiming the good news about Jesus. And yet he rejoices in this. Indeed, he's happy to fill up in his body, to take as many hits as possible, like a boxer taking punches, or like those action heroes in the movies taking all these bullets and still keep going, in order that he can keep proclaiming Christ, whether by word or by this written letter, for the good of those he's never met, like the Colossians, like us, who are reading this letter.

And I wonder if we'd be willing to suffer like that, to even rejoice and take whatever hits might come for the sake of Christ and for the good of his church. Though perhaps not as many hits as poor, even proclaiming Christ for the good of the church was his job. Point to verse 25. He says, I have become its servant, that is the servant of the church, by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness. He, God, commissioned him and gave him the job of being the servant of the church to work for their good. How? Well, it says to present the word of God in its fullness. Now, by fullness, he doesn't mean every bit of it. He means the fulfillment of it, which is found in Jesus. You see, until Jesus came, the word of God was just the Old Testament, right? And in many places, it was still a big puzzle. It might be still a big puzzle to us today, actually, but it certainly was back then. It was kind of like these guys, a retired couple in their caravan trying to finish their puzzle, looking for a missing piece. Only in the Old Testament, the missing piece was a big piece. And that big missing piece, of course, is Jesus. And when he came, he completed the picture so that we could see the fullness of God's word. And so that's what Paul is talking about here. His job was to present God's word in its fullness with that final missing piece, Jesus, and all the implications of it, which are fleshed out in the New Testament. In fact, like a missing piece, Paul then goes on to call Jesus, the mystery that has now been made known, verse 26. The mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed, made known to the Lord's people. To them, God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles, the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

[7:37] Our first reading from Isaiah spoke of the servant of the Lord, who would be a light to the Gentiles, who are non-Jews, most of us, in whom the nations would find hope. And at the time, it was a mystery who this servant would be. But now the mystery has been disclosed, made known. It's Jesus, the one who gives us the hope of glory. Here's where we see how Paul's suffering was for the good of the church, because the message about Jesus is what gives us this certain hope of glory. And the good news that he died to pay for our sins, so that whoever believes he might be forgiven and given a place in his family now, and he rose from the dead, so that we can be certain he will raise us from the dead on the last day, to enjoy life eternal in glory. Glory is life with God, as perfect people in a perfect world to come, where nothing goes wrong. Have you ever noticed in life, whenever you try and do something, it's never smooth? There's always some sort of hiccup, you know, you go to this place and no, no, you can't go there, you've got to go here first, or you ring up and get put on hold for who knows how long. Can you imagine life always going right? It will be glorious.

And this hope is not wishful thinking, like I hope my team wins the premiership. This is a certain hope. The point is, this is Paul's job to proclaim the full picture of God's word that pointed to Jesus, who gives us this certain hope of glory. And that's for our good, isn't it? I mean, enjoying glory in heaven and then the new creation is good for us, especially compared to the alternative, which is suffering agony in hell and missing out on the new creation, isn't it? See, the certain hope of glory is for our meant and eternal good. This is why Paul is happy to suffer for proclaiming the good news of Jesus, not just because it was his job as a servant of the church, but because it was for the good of the church, which brings us to his goal, point three, verse 28.

He is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom so that we may present everyone mature in Christ. To this end, I strenuously contend with all the energy Christ so powerfully works in me. What is the purpose for which Paul proclaims Christ, even suffers for Christ? Verse 28, in the middle, so that, here's his goal, we may present everyone fully mature in

Christ. And notice how many ones mature in Christ? Everyone mature in Christ. In fact, the word everyone is literally repeated three times in this one verse. He is the one, Christ is the one we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom so that we may present everyone mature in Christ. It's all people.

I don't know if you were here for our kickoff Sunday, but on kickoff Sunday, we looked at the great commission that Jesus gave, which is the same really. Jesus said to go and make disciples of all nations, everyone. And that begins, as it does in our passage, by proclaiming Christ. He is the one we proclaim so that people might first become Christians. I mean, you can't grow as mature Christians unless you first become a Christian, right? But as people hear of Jesus and believe in him, they become Christians and receive the hope of glory. But then he continues to proclaim Christ, to grow people as mature Christians in Christ. Now, you might think it's a bit odd that he keeps proclaiming Christ to grow people mature. I mean, haven't we already heard the gospel of Jesus when we first became Christians? So why do we need to keep hearing it? Well, because it's not only the way that God saves us, but also grows us. As I've said before, we never graduate from the gospel into some new teaching or philosophy, as these Colossians were tempted to do. I mean, you just need to look ahead at chapter 2, verse 4 and 5, where they're being tempted to be deceived by false arguments and philosophies. Rather, we're to stick with the gospel. Oh, sure, grow deeper in the truths and implications of the gospel, but never graduate from it. It's a bit like maths, right? You can start with the basics. One plus one equals two. Well done. I think we've got four mathematicians here.

Okay, I'm a bit worried anyway. But once we get the basics, we can then move on to deeper truths, like advanced algebra or calculus or whatever. But it's still maths, isn't it? Or so to the gospel.

[12:48] And we can grow deeper in understanding it and appreciating it, but we're never to graduate from it. For as we hear it again and again, how Jesus died for us, it moves us again and again to keep living for him out of thankfulness. Or as we hear of God's love towards us in Jesus, that his love that gave his one and only son, it moves us and motivates us to love him and our neighbour in response.

Or as we hear of God's forgiveness towards us in Jesus, it convicts us that we ought to forgive others as he's forgiven us. Or as we hear of Christ's resurrection, it moves us to persevere, knowing that on the last day, he will raise us and it will be worth it. And by doing so, God grows us more like Christ, which helps ensure that we will reach our hope of glory. You see, the Christian life is a bit like the trapezoid. Sorry to go back to mathematics here, but you're growing, you're growing, but the moment we stop growing, we then start plateauing. And if we plateau for too long, what happens? We start going down. It's the same with fitness, isn't it? To stay fit, you've got to keep exercising, keep moving. As soon as you stop, you start to plateau. And if you stop too long, then down the other side you go. So to the Christian life. This is why we need to keep hearing the gospel, that God might keep growing us in maturity in Christ. And so keep us and enable us to reach our hope of glory. But the point is, Paul's God-given ministry, his ministry goal, what he was commissioned by God to do, was to present everyone mature in Christ by proclaiming the good news about Christ. And this wasn't just Paul's ministry goal, even back then. And notice in verse 28, how he now uses we. Verse 24, I rejoice. Verse 25, I have become. But now verse 28, we proclaim so that we may present everyone mature in Christ. This is more than just his goal. It was the goal of his fellow servants and co-workers like Epaphras and others mentioned in this letter. Indeed, it was the goal of the churches who supported Paul in this goal. They had to have the same one as him in order to support him.

And what's more, this goal is essentially the same as Jesus' commission that he gave us all. And so God's goal for Paul, for his ministry, is really God's goal for our church ministry.

In fact, Paul's attitudes and principles, his method and goal have become part of God's word to us, what we're reading right now. And so as good as having the best coffee or the coolest playground or the greatest community services may be, God's goal for our church is to present everyone mature in Christ by continuing to proclaim Christ. And this means, perhaps controversially, that we're not going to be a church that meets all your needs or my needs. Yes, we may help in meeting some needs, whether physical or mental, financial or emotional, as part of loving you. After all, growing in maturity means growing in love for one another. But we're not going to be a church that meets all your needs because our focus is meant to be on meeting your spiritual needs.

[16:37] It's about proclaiming Christ that we may present everyone mature in Christ. That's to be our focus. And so this also means every ministry is either to proclaim Christ from the Old Testament and New or support the proclamation of Christ so that together we might seek to present everyone mature in Christ. What does this mean for us as individual members to be on board with this?

Well, that's mostly next week. But for this week, let me show you three important things from Colossians. So firstly, being on board with this goal means that we are all to speak the word of Christ directly to one another.

Paul will say later in Colossians 3, Let the message of Christ dwell richly among you as you teach and warn one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts.

Notice the similarity to 128. Both are about the word of Christ, either being proclaimed or dwelling richly amongst us. Both are about warning and teaching. Both have all wisdom.

And so when it comes to one another inside the church, it's not just the pastors whose job it is like Paul to proclaim Christ. It's one another as well.

[18:05] It's all of us. We're to let the word of Christ dwell or live richly and deeply amongst us so that we can teach and warn one another to keep growing in Christ. But we're to do it wisely.

In Colossians, wisdom has to do with Jesus, of course. And so as we teach and warn one another, we're to do it in a Christ-like or godly way. Both in terms of what we say, that it's consistent with the word of Christ, and how we say it, that it's gracious like Christ.

Appropriate for the context and the relationship we have. I mean, if we're up at Shopping Town and we see someone we vaguely know, a few checkouts over in Coles or Woolies, wherever you shop, and so we shout out to them, hey, we haven't seen you at church for ages!

What's your name again? That's not going to really help them come back and grow, is it? And one way we can all do this is actually by singing.

It says, through psalms, hymns and songs from the Spirit. Now, I've confessed before that I cannot sing. Back when I was a student minister, I was leading a service and we started singing and I was still at the lectern leading and the microphone was still on, so I started singing to the microphone.

[19:26] And I didn't get halfway through the first verse when the senior minister walked across and turned the microphone off. Clearly, I don't have the gift of singing. But I can sing as part of a congregation.

And by singing to God, I at the same time help teach one another the word of Christ to you, to encourage you and help you grow, just as you do to me.

And of course, we can do it in conversation after church or at Bible study or sending messages through the week. I was visiting someone in hospital last Friday and they said how people had been sending them text messages with Bible verses and Bible truths to encourage them, which was a brilliant way of teaching them, wasn't it?

Even if it was just reminding them of what they knew to help them keep growing. The point is that being on board with this goal means playing our part in presenting one another maturing Christ by firstly speaking of Christ directly to one another inside the church.

But second, being on board means praying as well, that people might hear the gospel. And so Paul says a little bit later on in Colossians 4, pray for us too that God may open a door for our message so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ for which I am in change.

[20:48] Pray that I may proclaim it clearly as I should. Here we are all to pray. Pray for God to open doors for those whose job it is to proclaim the gospel.

It's why we pray for our mission partners in our mission spot. And we're to pray that when we are to speak it, like at our Easter services, whether it's us as pastors or our link missionaries, that we proclaim it clearly.

Notice how Paul says at the end of verse 4, clearly as I should. Because it's his job to speak directly like mine is now. But that's a bit different for all of us outside the church.

And so thirdly, we're all to speak the word indirectly to those outside the church. And so the very next verse goes on to say, not three and four, this is now five and six, be wise in the way you act

towards outsiders, non-Christians.

Make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone. Here to be wise is again to be like Christ, but this time it's about how we act towards outsiders.

[22:01] And it involves making the most of every opportunity by doing good or saying something good that might provoke a comment or question. And then verse 6, our conversation is to be gracious and appropriately flavoured so that we can best answer them in a way that points them to Jesus.

Notice how it's a bit more of a roundabout, indirect way. And so I remember going door knocking with this guy called Gary to invite people to an Easter service that we were involved with the mission at, at this church.

And I remember knocking on one door. The guy answered, looked rather tired. And we did our spiel. I said, I'm sorry to interrupt. We're just letting you know that you're warmly invited to an Easter service that church such and such is having down the road, just in case you're interested.

And at that point, the guy said, look, I'm doing shift work and you've just woken me up. No, thanks. I'm not interested. So he went to shut the door. And then Gary put his foot in the door and said, hang on, since we've woken you up already, then why don't you come and talk to us?

Needless to say, that was not acting in wisdom, was it? Nor was it gracious or appropriately flavoured for the situation. On the other hand, another time a lady was trying to change a flat tire in the car park of Spotlight, I think it was.

[23:23] And so this Christian stopped to help her, made the most of an opportunity to do good, right? And while he was changing the tire, he was thinking of the wisest thing, the most gracious and appropriately flavoured thing he might be able to say when she probably would thank him.

And she did. She said, thank you, that's so kind of you. And so the Christian tried to answer graciously and appropriately for the context by saying, you're welcome. God has been even kinder in giving Jesus for me, so it's the least I could do for you.

Admittedly, that was not what she was expecting. And so she stood there kind of speechless. And so wisdom also said that this Christian, rather than staying and making the situation more awkward, just smiled and left and prayed that God might just use that in her journey towards Christ.

But this is how we're to act wisely towards outsiders, taking opportunities to do good or say something good or encouraging that we might provoke some sort of reaction and then graciously and appropriately answer their comments or questions, pointing them to Jesus.

But the big point is God's goal is to be our goal, to present everyone we possibly can mature in Christ by continuing to proclaim Christ. Then if we're on board with this, then it means not expecting our church to meet all our needs.

[24:44] It means making sure our ministries are proclaiming Christ or supporting the proclamation of Christ, whether that's even doing the grounds of the church to make it inviting so people can come and hear the word of Christ.

Or the flowers. Someone commented this morning, they love the flowers every week. But it also means as members playing our part and presenting people mature by firstly speaking the word of Christ directly to one another inside.

Secondly, praying God would open doors for the gospel. And thirdly, by speaking indirectly to those outside. This is how we help others receive the hope of glory and help each other grow and reach our hope of glory, which is of eternal importance, isn't it?

It's so important that Paul struggles in agony to reach it. Let me come back to our last verse. Verse 29, he says, To this end, for that goal of presenting everyone mature in Christ, I strenuously contend with all the energy Christ so powerfully works in me.

The word for strenuously is literally agonizingly. Paul goes through agony to achieve this goal. Anyone heard of the Barclay Marathons?

[26:02] Apparently, it's the toughest race in the world. It's 100 miles or 161 kilometers in Tennessee State Park. But no one really knows how far it really is because there's no proper course.

You just run through the bush up and down mountains trying to find checkpoints. And so it's actually closer to about 200 kilometers, which is like running five marathons back to back.

It's why it's called the Barclay Marathons, plural. And you have only 60 hours to finish it. It took 10 years for anyone to finish.

And in 40 years, only 20 people have ever finished it. In 2017, Gary Robbins collapsed over the finish line at 60 hours and six seconds.

He was disqualified. How harsh is that? They even made a documentary about Barclay. They called the Barclay Marathons the race that eats its young.

[27:04] And so you've got to wonder, why on earth would you ever go through that kind of agony? There's no prize except to say, I did it. But here, the prize is people enjoying glory for eternity.

And Paul thinks that's worth every bit of agony. Do we? We as a church need to be on board with God's plan or goal for us of presenting everyone mature in Christ by continuing to proclaim Christ. Will you be on board with me? Let's pray. We would be. Let's pray. Our gracious Heavenly Father, we do thank you for this reminder today of your goal for our church.

that we might do everything we can, even in due agony, to present everyone mature in Christ by continuing to either support the proclamation or be involved in the proclamation of Christ.

Help us to be on board with this goal, we pray, for Jesus' sake. Amen.