

Paul's Purpose in Ministry

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[0:00] Well, some grade three classes in the States were talking about goals in life and what they wanted to be when they grew up. And so the kids had to write down on a piece of paper the kind of things they wanted to do in life, their goals.

And one of them wrote on the next slide, to succeed in herbatology. And now that's looking after reptiles in a zoo. I had to look it up. And given they not only knew what herbatology was, but also spelt it correctly, I reckon they'll succeed.

They'll reach their goal. Although having said that, his next goal was breed dragons. So I'm not sure if he's quite got reality checks there.

Another grade three class boy wrote this on the next slide. He wrote, to get a girlfriend, kiss her and then rule the world. Ambitious little boy.

And then more realistically, I like this next one. Next slide. He says, when I grow up, well, I am seven now. I want to be eight. It's a much, much more sensible goal.

[1:10] Of course, these days as adults, we don't normally think in terms of goals, do we? I mean, for many of us, we're just simply trying to survive the week until the weekend or survive the winter until spring.

But even though we may not use the word goals or think much about goals, we still have things we want for ourselves or for our friends, for our children, for our parents and family and so on.

We want our parents, for example, to be healthy. We want our kids or nieces and nephews to get a good education, to reach their potential. We want good things for our friends.

We want a good income for ourselves. And we work hard to achieve those things, these goals that we have without even realising it. And so we do still have goals, even if we don't use the word, and we still work hard to achieve them.

Well, today we come to Paul's purpose or goal in his ministry. And he also, as we'll see, worked hard to achieve it. But first, let me remind you of where we've come from.

[2:15] Last week, we saw a song about Christ's greatness or supremacy. And then in chapter 1, verse 21, if you've got your Bibles there, chapter 1, verse 21, Paul spoke about how God has reconciled people through Christ and his death on the cross.

And that means that all who believe can be confident that we'll stand before God, free from accusation, free to enter heaven. So he says, verse 21, Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behaviour, but now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you wholly in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation, he says.

That's the great news of the gospel that Paul has been proclaiming. The news of Jesus' death on the cross for us, where Jesus took the punishment for our sins so that we who believe can be made holy in God's sight, can be forgiven, counted blameless, even though we are not.

We can be free from accusation. It's because Christ has already paid for our sins in full, then there is nothing left for us to pay. No judgment left for us to face.

We are free from accusation, free to enter heaven if we believe. And so if you are here this morning and you don't yet believe in Jesus, then it's quite clear that you won't be free from accusation, but will have to pay for your own sins.

[3:46] And so please do believe in Jesus. That's what the Colossians have done. They heard this message about Jesus, the gospel, and now Paul writes to encourage them to stick with Jesus and the gospel.

You see verse 23? He says, This is what you have if you continue in your faith, established and firm, and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel.

And then he adds, This is the gospel that you heard, and it has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant. And it's with that last phrase there that Paul now turns to what it looks like for him to be a servant of the gospel.

What it looks like, he gives us a snapshot of his ministry, if you like. His ministry to everyone, which is the rest of chapter one, and then his ministry to the Colossians in particular, which is the first part of chapter two.

And so let's have a look at our passage for today in chapter one. So point one, Paul's ministry for everyone in general. 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 in regard to Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, which is the church.

[5:02] Paul begins by saying that part of his ministry involves rejoicing in suffering. Now that's not a normal reaction when you suffer, is it? To rejoice. We don't normally go around and say, I'm so excited, I've got the flu, and my head's blocked.

It's so exciting. We don't normally do that, do we? So how can Paul rejoice here? Well, because the suffering, he says, is for you. For you, Colossians. That's what it says.

The sufferings have been for their good, in other words. That's why he rejoices. It's brought them good. The thing is, however, he's never met the Colossians. He's never suffered directly for them.

What's more, verse 24 is literally on the next slide. It just literally says, I rejoice in the sufferings for you. And sometimes you can use the word the for my in the original language.

But the point is, I wonder whether Paul has in mind the suffering that we just saw in verse 22. That is, I wonder whether Paul rejoices in the sufferings of Christ, which has reconciled them, which has brought them good, like being free from accusation.

[6:07] Either way, the rest of verse 24 makes it clear that Paul himself also suffers, and he rejoices in that. He suffers for the church in general. He says in the rest of verse 24, I fill up in my flesh, my body, what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, the church.

And now the rest of that verse is tricky. And you can ask me a bit more about it again later. But just briefly, the word for affliction there can also mean persecution.

And so what I think he means here is that he fills up or takes on as much persecution as he can, takes as many hits as he needs to, to keep preaching Christ. He's certainly not saying that Christ's death on the cross is lacking in any way.

No, no, that has reconciled people. His sacrifice on the cross was complete and full, did its work, did its job. Rather, he's saying that he's willing to take on whatever persecution comes from proclaiming Christ.

Why? Well, he says for the sake of the church, for its good, for its growth. I remember being at the beach during the summer holidays with the kids, and our youngest, Megan, wanted to go out into the deep water with the big kids.

[7:17] And so I took her out. But then a set of waves were coming in, and she was in my arms. And rather than letting the wave, you know, crash into her with a mouthful of seawater, you do what every other parent does.

You turn around and you take the hit in your back and hit him across the back. That's kind of what Paul is saying here. He's willing to take the hits of persecution that comes from preaching Christ for the good of the church.

In fact, as he writes this very letter, he is in prison for preaching Christ. And yet he wouldn't have it any other way. He happily accepts persecution, takes the hits that come from preaching Jesus, and even rejoices in his suffering because he knows that God uses that message about Jesus to bear fruit, as we saw in chapter 1, to create Christians and to grow Christians in maturity.

And that's why the preaching of this message about Christ is the main part of his job. Have a look at verse 25. He says, And Paul says that God commissioned him, gave him the job of preaching God's word in all its fullness.

Now, he doesn't mean necessarily every bit of God's word, but rather the fulfillment of God's word. And who is the fulfillment of all God's promises? Well, he hasn't quite got there yet.

[8:46] He said he puts it a different way. He says this preaching the fullness of God's word is the same as making known this mystery, this secret that was once hidden, but now made known or revealed to God's people.

And so what is this mystery or secret that's been revealed? How is God's word fulfilled? Well, now he finally tells us in verse 27. He says, 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.

You see, Christ is the secret, the one whom the Old Testament prophets wondered about, the one who fulfills God's every promise in the Old Testament, in whom every promise is yes.

And he's the one who brings certain hope of glory. And notice Paul says, Christ in you, that his Christ is in us by his spirit, which means that our hope of glory is certain.

For if Christ's spirit is in us, then we have been sealed, secured for glory. Our hope of heaven is definite. Next week, our eldest girl, Katie, is going on camp for four days.

[9:57] I'm not sure whether to rejoice or mourn. I haven't worked it out yet. But do you know what the first thing kids do when they get into their cabins at camp? What's the first thing you think they do?

They bags a bunk, don't they? That's my bed, and they throw their sleeping bag or pillow or whatever it is, and they bags a bed. They put down their bags like a deposit to secure it.

But you see, that's what the spirit of Christ does. He lives in us, not only to help us, but he also bags us for God, if you like. God's spirit is like God bagging us, putting down a deposit to secure us for heaven.

And so it's guaranteed, you see. On the next slide, Paul puts it like that. This in Ephesians, talking about a similar thing. He says, Christ in us by his spirit means our hope of glory is certain.

That's what Paul is saying here. And so Paul's job is to reclaim this Christ who fulfills God's word, the one in whom all God's promises find their yes, the one through whom God gives his spirit such that Christ is in us, always with us now and guaranteeing glory later.

[11:18] Paul's job was to proclaim this Christ. Why? Well, because it's by proclaiming or teaching about this Christ that both saves people and grows people as Christians.

That's his goal. Have a look at verse 28. He says, He, Jesus, is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom. Why? So that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ.

To this end, to this goal, I strenuously contend with all the energy Christ so powerfully works in me. See here, Paul says he proclaims Jesus, teaches people about Jesus, even admonishes people to stick with Jesus.

Admonishes just means to warn, sometimes rebuke, say, you know, you're going the wrong way, come back. Why does he do all that? Well, verse 28, so that he may present everyone maturing Christ.

This is Paul's purpose in ministry. His goal in life, to present people maturing Christ. That is, people who are like Christ. That's what it means to be maturing Christ. To be like him.

[12:27] To think his thoughts after him. To act like him. And Paul works really hard to that goal.

He does everything he can to achieve it. Verse 29 says, to this end, for this goal, I strenuously contend. And the word for contend here can mean struggle, or wrestle, or fight.

In other words, he works so hard, as though he fights to see people saved, and grow into mature Christians. For those of us who have kids, or nieces and nephews, your goal for them, I'm assuming, is that they might grow in maturity, over time.

That's what our job as parents, uncles and aunts and so on is. But it's sometimes really hard work, isn't it? To try and help kids mature, grow up. Sometimes it's a strenuous struggle, to get kids to do the right thing.

But while we, who are parents, might rely on a morning cup of coffee, to help us, or two or three, Paul has something much better. He has God's strength, which works powerfully in him, he says, to move and motivate him, to sustain and strengthen him, as he fights to present everyone mature in Christ.

[13:40] And if this is his goal, for everyone in general, then it is certainly his goal, for the Colossians in particular, which brings us to point two, and we'll move more quickly through this. Have a look at chapter two, verse one, and see if, as I read it, whether you recognize any similar language.

He says, I want you to know how hard I am contending for you, and for those at Laodicea, and for all who have not met me personally.

My goal is that they may be encouraged in heart, and united in love, and that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, and that they may know the mystery of God, namely Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom, wisdom, and knowledge.

And the first bit, at least, sounds familiar, doesn't it? Just as Paul is contending, or fighting for everyone, so he is contending, or fighting for them, even though he's never met them.

And so, how is he doing this? Well, he's certainly praying for them. In chapter one, verse nine and ten, he says, he prays continually for them, that they might be filled with the knowledge of God, that they might live lives worthy of Jesus.

[14:54] In other words, that they might grow as Christians. In fact, the word for content, here in chapter two, is the same word used later on in chapter four, when Epaphras wrestles in prayer, contends in prayer.

And if you've ever had to pray regularly, or even if you've ever tried to pray regularly, you know that it can be a wrestle, can't it? A struggle. It's something you've got to work hard at. Well, so too does Paul.

He works hard at praying for them. So, that's one way he contends for them. Another way he contends for them, or struggles for them, is by proclaiming Christ to them. Writing this letter, for example, even though it means he will stay in prison for doing it.

I mean, that's why Paul is in prison, for preaching Christ. And so, I wonder whether he could, you know, get out if he just gave it all up. Oh, no, I've changed my mind. I was wrong. I'm sorry. You can let me out now.

I've got it all wrong. I'm just going to take it all back. Yet, he doesn't even consider that. He just keeps going full steam ahead, writing letters, spending what little money has on parchments and ink, to keep proclaiming Christ, so that they might grow in maturity.

[16:00] These are the kind of ways that Paul is contending for the Colossians, even though he's never met them. And why does he do that? Well, verse two, his goal is that they may be encouraged in heart, to keep going as Christians, that they might be united in love, that they might have full, complete, and certain knowledge of Christ.

In other words, that they might be mature, that might grow in maturity as Christians. See, just as Paul contended or fought to present everyone maturing Christ, in verse 28 and 29, so also he fights to see these Colossians maturing Christ.

And for the Colossians in particular, it means knowing that Christ is the source of true wisdom, he says. You know, wisdom is different to being clever, right? Wisdom is about living well in the world.

Growing up, my younger brother learned to read before I did, so my parents assumed he was more clever than I. I've never held that against them. I'm completely over it. But I remember when crossing the road one time, his method of crossing the road was to put his head down and run as fast as he could, thinking he could outrun any car that would come.

He may have been cleverer than I was, but he wasn't wiser than I was. The difference, you see. Wisdom is about living well in the world. In our first reading from Proverbs, we heard a call for us to seek wisdom, to understand the fear of the Lord, to get knowledge so that we might live well.

[17:31] And Paul reminds them that actually, all wisdom from God is found in Christ. Verse 3. And why does he remind the Colossians of this? Well, because of verse 4.

He says, I tell you this, so that no one may deceive you by fine sounding arguments. For though I am absent from you in the body, I am present with you in spirit and delight, or literally rejoice, to see how disciplined you are and how firm your faith in Christ is.

You see, as I said over the last couple of weeks, people were coming into the church with fine sounding arguments and saying to the Colossians that, you know, if you really want to live a wise life, if you want to really be a great Christian and mature in Christ, then you actually got to add some other things to Jesus as well.

You got to add things like the worship of angels. You got to have some visions and spiritual experiences, as we'll see next week. People were saying all that sort of thing and it sounded like a good argument, but it was deceptive because in the end, it actually didn't produce results.

And again, we'll see that next week. And so Paul reminds them, you know what? Actually, all wisdom is found in Christ. You don't need this other stuff. He is all you need to live as we were created to live, to live well in God's sight.

[18:51] And so Paul reminds them of this and finishes the section where he started with rejoicing. This time, not rejoicing in suffering, but rejoicing for their faith, which is firm. Of course, their firm faith is not going to stop him from encouraging them to grow in faith, to keep growing in maturity.

That's Paul's purpose. In ministry, both for the church in general and for the Colossians in particular. And so the question for us is, if this is Paul's goal for everyone, actually it's God's word, so if this is God's goal for everyone, then is it our goal too?

I mean, if this is what Paul and God think is the most important goal for us and one another in our lives, if this is what they really want for us when we grow up, not necessarily herpetology, then is it our goal for ourselves and for our friends, for our children, for our family?

I mean, we can have all sorts of goals in life. We can want all sorts of good things for people. I mean, it's a good thing to want your parents to be healthy. It's a good thing for our nieces and nephews and kids to reach their potential, get a good education.

I want my kids to learn a musical instrument. It's a goal for me, which is good for their development and one day, hopefully good for the church, complaining on the front. There are good goals that we can have, but what is the greatest goal that we have?

[20:18] Our greatest goal for ourselves and each other. Is it to pass exams, to get fit, to do well at work, or is it to be mature in Christ? Because that's what God's greatest goal for us is, above all else.

I remember mentioning a couple to you, a couple of months ago, I think it was, and it was a couple that was studying with me at Bible College, and it was in my third year of college, I think it was, and I mentioned to you that they found out they were having a son who had Down syndrome.

And while they rightly grieved over the effects of living in a fallen world, and rejoiced at the thought of heaven where he would have a new body, Down syndrome free, their prayer point that came around, which I didn't tell you about, was not that God would heal him, nor was it that he would reach his potential, nor was it that they might cope, although they're all good things to pray.

Their prayer point when it came around was that, no matter what, this child would grow up to know and love Jesus. That was their greatest goal for their son. Is this our goal for ourselves, for our family, for our friends, for one another here, seated here this morning?

And if it is, how are we to achieve it under God? Well, the same way Paul did. Remember, he prayed for the Colossians. He worked hard at praying, because it is hard work, and he worked hard at proclaiming Christ, and enduring the persecution that came with it.

[21:51] Remember what he did in verse 28, chapter 1, verse 28, he said, he is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ. That's how we help each other grow in Christ, by praying and proclaiming Christ.

Now, we do need to be careful to work out what was particular to Paul, and what is applicable to us. I mean, Paul was commissioned by God for a special job, to proclaim the gospel in a full-time sense, in a way that we are not.

And yet, on the very next page of your Bibles, we're told that we are still to teach Christ to one another, in words that are very similar to verse 28 there. So just turn over one page in your Bible, so chapter 3, verse 16, and see if you can notice the similarities in language there.

Chapter 3, verse 16, he says, let the message of Christ dwell among you richly, as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, through psalms, hymns, and songs of the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts.

Do you notice the similarity in language there? Teaching and admonishing one another. It's not just Paul's job, it's our job to one another. We have the word of Christ dwelling richly amongst us, by singing Christ-centered songs to each other, and so on.

[23:15] But we also to teach one another, even admonish one another, though you have to be careful how we do that. Hence it says, with all wisdom. But notice it's the same language as chapter 1, verse 28.

We may not be poor, but we are still to teach Christ to one another. And I take it to our children and friends and everyone whom we want to see mature in Christ. Because only by teaching the word of Christ that people become mature like Christ.

In fact, I was encouraged recently by a couple who are very flat out in life with young kids, family issues with parents and so on.

And they've been trying to read the Bible to their kids, and their child was really not interested, kind of resisting the whole time. And they're kind of at wit's end, and yet they persevered.

They just switched Bibles, and we're doing this, and kept going. Why do they do that? Because they know God's goal for their son, above all else, is to become mature in Christ.

[24:17] And so they teach him about Christ. For us, when things come up with kids at school, we used to, well, we still talk about what happens with our kids.

You know, they come home and report on the day, and so-and-so did this, and the teacher's so unfair, they did that, and you know, you kind of listen, oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. But sometimes there's real issues that come up, you need to talk with them. And I must confess, we used to, and we've got out of the habit, which is terrible, but we used to kind of say, well, how do we react as that, as Christians?

What do you think God wants us to do? And then pray for the kid who bullied them, with our child. And as I said, we've got out of the habit, which is terrible, but that's another way of teaching kids, so that we might help them to grow up in Christ.

For others, they play songs, which are basically just verses from the Bible, so that the word of Christ dwells richly in their head. And for another person I mentioned a couple of weeks ago, they listen to the Bible in their car.

For others, they push it to make it a Bible study at night, when they're tired. For some people here, they have friendships with one another, where they can hold each other accountable, and lovingly follow them up, if they've missed church or Bible study.

[25:25] It's terrific, because it shows that your goal for each other, and for yourselves, is the same as God's goal, to be mature in Christ. And so you do what you can, to teach one another about Christ, to remind each other, pray for each other.

And so can I encourage you, to not just ask how the weekend was, after church and before church. I mean, do that. It's an important part of sharing life together. But if someone shares something after church, then why not pray for them, there and then.

I know it's a bit unusual, but if we can't pray in church, where can we pray? And if you're chatting with people, then why not talk about, what you're reading in the Bible at home, or ask them to pray, that God would help you, to read the Bible at home.

You know, once or twice a week or something. And I know, look, it's not just against our culture, you don't want to come across as pious, or judgmental, you know, we're worried about that as well. And it is hard work, but be encouraged, even the Apostle Paul found it hard work, strenuously contended, and yet, he relied on God's help to do it.

And so too can we. So here's my challenge for you this week. I'm going to get immensely practical here. Pick a verse from Colossians, and try and remember it, and what it means.

[26:44] I'm going to bring back the old memory verses, to try and let the Word of Christ dwell in us, to grow us. And then come back next week, and during the fellowship break, share it with someone. Now I know immediately what you're thinking, right?

You've suddenly all got something on next Sunday at 10.30. Can't be here. But don't miss church. Instead, realize what God wants for you, and for us.

He wants us to become mature, like Christ. And the way that happens, is by praying for one another, and by speaking and teaching one another, the Word of Christ. As Paul says, in chapter 1, verse 28, he is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully, mature in Christ.

So may we share his goal for us. Let's pray. Our gracious Heavenly Father, we do thank you for the example of Paul in the Bible, which reminds us what your goal, your greatest goal for us is, to be mature Christians, Christians who are like Christ, who think his thoughts, who live his ways.

And Father, we know that the way that happens, is by being taught, and reminded, what Christ is like, from your Word, the Bible. And so Father, we pray, it is hard, it is a struggle, but help us, we pray, by your Spirit, to keep working hard, as Paul did, to teaching one another, and ourselves, that together, we might grow fully mature, in Christ.

[28:19] For we ask it in his name. Amen.