

The Goal of Life

Philippians 3:10–16 (NIV)

I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, **11** and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead. **12** Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. **13** Brothers and sisters, 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, **14** I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. **15** All of us, then, who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. **16** Only let us live up to what we have already attained.

The Parable – Part 1

Imagine you are the owner of a beautiful 2,000-acre farm which has the richest and most fertile soil in the state. Every acre is arable. Nearly every crop imaginable could be grown on your rich land – corn, soybeans, cotton, potatoes, beans, squash and okra. In the community around your farm, many people are living a meager lifestyle and need what your farm can produce to feed and clothe their families. You realize this farm could easily provide enough to feed your family and livestock, provide enough income for a very healthy living and provide much needed resources for people in the community. It seems the potential of your farm is unlimited.

No doubt John 3:16 may be the most known passage in the NT (for God so loved the world . . .), Yet a significantly important statement is found later in John. Jesus said, “*I have come that my sheep may have life and have life abundantly.*” It is clear that Jesus not only came into this world so that we could live with God after we die but also so that we could enjoy the abundance of life here and now. **It is as though God has placed us in a rich garden that has unlimited potential in enabling us to grow fully into what God wants us to be.**

Abundant life, what is it? It is clearly more than mere biological life of existence – heart beating, breathing in and out and brain waves registering in your skull. **Abundant life has to do with life that is worth living.** It is more than merely being happy some or even most of the time. It is **life that is filled with meaning and purpose.** It is a life that counts and makes a difference. It is a life where we love and are loved. It is a life where we experience joy and peace. Would you want to experience that type of life?

I have the joy of being Charlie’s pastor for the last 5 years of his life. Charlie had a deep love for Jesus Christ and for his church. During his business career, Charlie had dabbled in several different ventures and had enjoyed modest success which afforded his family a comfortable living. Being around Charlie was a pleasure and always uplifting. I could sense his deep faith. He was never preachy or self-righteous but he was always kind and genuine. He was an extremely generous man willing to help his church and those in need. Charlie lived a life filled with meaning and purpose. My sense was he experienced Jesus’ abundant life.

On the canvas of the Bible, there are many wonderful portraits of the abundant life God offers to us. When Jesus visited Nazareth and shared a message in synagogue, he chose to read from Isaiah 61: “*The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, 19 to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor*” (Luke 4:18–19).

One cannot experience abundant life as long as he is in bondage. So Jesus desires to set people free from the things that imprison them and destroy their lives. People among us who have been or are the process of being set free from addictions that were destroying their lives and the lives of those around them. People among us have been oppressed by forces in their past and have been and are being liberated from those forces such as family dysfunction, abuse that left deep wounds and scars and traumas and neglect that wounded the soul. Jesus came to give life back to these persons in abundance.

The life Jesus came to bring is life that reverses negative emotions that drain our souls of vitality. Paul wrote to his protégé, Timothy, that God does not give a spirit of cowardice – that emotion that freezes us and prevents us from acting – but God has given us power, love and a sound mind. In Christ, we are given hope instead of despair. Peace instead of fear. In Christ, our tears are wiped away and given joy to fill our hearts.

Abundant life Jesus offers brings health to our relationships. Christ makes us as a fine leather, which is tough on the exterior to protect what is under it while be soft to the touch. His life enables us to develop an emotional toughness where we are not offended and angered by the slightest misspoken word or seemingly offensive action. We are able to give people the

benefit of the doubt and even when intended, we are given the power of forgiving. Yet we are kind and tender toward the other.

A couple of months ago, Patty and I celebrated our 40th wedding anniversary – 40 years the best years for both of us – 15 for Patty and 25 for me. During those years we have had our share of difficulties, disappointments and challenges. It has not all be easy. I have often been hard-headed and have acted like a jerk. Yet through those years, the presence of Christ in our lives – loving and growing us – has enabled us to make it through and have a deep and meaningful relationship together. We not only love each other after 40 years, we love each other in a deeper way.

God has placed people on a beautiful farm where the potential for the abundance of life exists.

The Parable – part 2.

Let's return to the image with which I began – you are the owner of large, rich farm. Even though, you have full ownership of the farm, you have an enormous need. You lack the equipment and resources to cultivate, plant, tend and harvest any crops. You have no way of securing the money or loans to obtain what you must have to farm the land.

Then one day, the federal government adopts a program that makes available everything you need to farm your land - a huge, 8 tire-GPS guided tractor with attachments to cultivate the soil, plant the seeds and keep it weeded. A huge combine is provided to harvest all that grows. Also made available are all the seeds and fertilizers needed plant the crops. It seems everything that is needed is now provided to maximize your farm's production and to experience its full potential. Wow – what a gracious provision!

Paul had a deep understanding of the wonderful life God had made available for us. Yet he also understood that we, in ourselves lacked the resources to lay hold of that life.

In Ephesians, he wrote that God has *blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing*. He names some of those blessings – God *chose us, adopted us as His daughters and sons, forgave us, gives us an inheritance and has sealed us with the Holy Spirit*. Through God's spiritual blessings, we are given what we need to reach the full potential of the life God intends for life now and life eternal.

The Parable – part 3.

Let's return to the parable. Everything piece of equipment and all the needed resources have been made available to you to farm your land. What more is needed for your farm to reach its potential?

Imagine when everything is delivered, the agent gives you a manual on the tractor and equipment the size of a Bible. He tells you this will instruct you on how to utilize fully all the features of the tractor and equipment. He gives you a schedule of classes at the local community college on sustainable farming and the maintenance of the equipment – when to plant, what to plant, what and how crops should be rotated, how to organically control pests and weeds, when to harvest. He then hands you the keys to the tractor and drives away. You immediately hop in the tractor, crank it and take it for a spin around the north 40.

When you get home, you flip through a few pages in the manual and look at a few pictures. You decide you don't really need this since you have seen other people plow and plant before. As for the classes, you really don't have the time to attend. They will cut into watching the Braves play baseball. So the next day you start plowing. Eventually you get tired and stop. You open a few bags of seed, try to hook up the planter but have all kinds of problems. You think you have it right and you start planting. Seeds spill out and don't release just right. When they sprout you see it is not a great looking field. You think you will do better next year. Eventually

as time passes, you decide it is not worth the effort. Eventually, weeds and shrubs and then trees take over your farm.

While many within the community of faith are experiencing the abundant blessings God has made available and living abundant lives, many others are not. Some have made professions of faith and have not progressed much beyond that point. Some started the journey and were faithful for a while but dropped out or got stuck.

In the past couple of decades, research from both the Pew Research Center and the Barna Group have shown some interesting comparisons of those who identify themselves as Christians versus those who do not. In many areas there is little difference in these groups as a whole – Christians are just as likely to lose their cool, get a divorce, tell a white lie, use profanity or view sexually explicit media. Christians are much less likely to take steps to care for the environment in activities such as recycling. (Some of those studies revealed that the highly engaged believers were different however.)

Lean into the goal.

Let's go back to the parable of the farm. What if you did take the time read the equipment manual and learn how to use all its features? What if you did go the classes? What if you were faithful in applying what you learned in your cultivation and planting practices? What if you continued to do the best farming practices year after year?

Paul understood in his own life how important it was to continue learning and growing in the faith. The words you hear earlier are a powerful testimony to his own commitment and execution to growing in Christ. He wanted to know Jesus fully and his life to be fully impacted by Jesus.

When Paul wrote these words, he was in the last semester of his life. Most likely he was in prison in Rome and he realized he would likely face execution at some point. He had been on the journey with Jesus for many years. He had done more to spread the gospel than any of his contemporaries. He had deep and strong theological mind. (None of us could claim to be near the same place as was he.) Yet he wrote he had not yet reached his goal. He was still "pressing" on to take hold of that for which Christ had taken hold of him. He wanted fully to be what God had created and intended him to be. He was determined keep pressing toward this.

He used a vivid metaphor. He said he kept straining toward the goal or leaning toward the goal. The idea here is of a runner who in nearing the finish line and is leaning in toward the ribbon. He was determined to finish the race and win the prize.

Paul was not content just to have this as his testimony. He urged his readers, particularly those who are mature in the faith, to believe and practice the same.

Our faith is a life long journey and pursuit. The blessings and possibilities all come to us through what Jesus has done. But we must live into those possibilities. Like Paul we can't live on past merits or be held back by painful things of the past. We must press on toward the goal. We must take ownership of our growth in Christ. I can't grow you as a Christian. This church can't grow you. We can provide pathways and resources. You must commit yourself to the journey.

The good news is as we do this, we begin to enjoy the great benefits of God's kingdom. We enjoy the fruits of the farm. We grow into those persons God created us to be.

Will you join me in leaning toward the goal? Will you commit yourself fully to Christ and growing in him? Will you commit to investing yourself into the process of growth?