

What is *your* goal? Perhaps to get through school, to get a promotion, to *not* lose your job, to survive to retirement ... or even just to get through the day, perhaps to get through the next five minutes ... to have children, to get the children raised ... What is *your* goal?

Did you hear what the Apostle Paul's goal is? "*to know Christ*" – which is a whole lot more in the Bible than merely knowing *about* Christ. It's like how you feel when you fall in love or when you are so enthralled with a particular teacher that you take every class s/he offers, as John Piper writes on his [desiringgod.org](http://desiringgod.org) website – Paul is driven by an inner compulsion to fully "*know*" Christ. Can you say with Paul, "*I want to know the power of Christ's resurrection!*"

I have perhaps told you the story already of the pastor from my days as a youth whose wife was called in to be with him when a laser procedure nicked his artery and doctors knew they could do nothing and he would die in a matter of minutes. Knowing he was dying, my former pastor turned to his wife and said, "*Now I get to see what this great adventure is all about.*" The Apostle Paul writes, "*I want to know the power of Christ's resurrection!*" I want to know what it is like to be lifted up out of death by the Life-giving power of the Almighty God! And Paul knows that this means first sharing in the fellowship of the sufferings of Jesus and becoming like Jesus in death. I want to be like Jesus! That is what Paul is saying. It is the only way to "*attain to the resurrection from the dead.*"

We have this notion that life beyond death is automatic. That isn't the biblical understanding. Life after death is God's astounding, resurrecting gift – to those who have become like Jesus in suffering and death.

This week I have had to think about that fellowship of Jesus' suffering in a new way. A young couple whom I have known for most of the lives sent email. He grew up in the congregation I served in Virginia for 16 years and is now a lawyer in Baltimore; he has been active in denominational work that I helped nominate him for. She is the daughter of friends from seminary days, vibrant, hard-working front office staff for the Baltimore Orioles. I helped officiate at their wedding less than a year ago. And now comes the prayer request as specialists determine what chemotherapy and

radiation treatments are need to overcome tumors in her lung. Totally out of the blue. Scary, scary stuff! I sent them my prayer: *"May the Spirit of the Lord hover over you, just as in the Beginning the Spirit of God hovered over the chaos and void and called forth order and life (Genesis 1) – may the hands of Jesus command the winds and raging waters to keep your boat afloat (Luke 8), hands that now bear the imprint of how he suffers with you in your turmoil and anguish. ... Shalom! God's Peace bring to you the fullness of Life!"*

Paul knew what it means to become like Jesus, to share in his sufferings. Perhaps you do, too. On a lighter side, I read this week that Abraham Lincoln was awakened in the middle of the night by a bureaucrat who informed the President that one of his appointees to a high government post had died hours before. *"Can I take his place?"* the bureaucrat blurted out. Lincoln replied, *"If it's all right with the undertaker, it's all right with me."* (Homiletics journal) It is quite out of the ordinary for the Apostle Paul to want to experience the suffering of Jesus.

What is *your* goal? Paul's goal was to know Jesus, fully and completely, even in the midst of suffering and through death. *"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. ... 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."*

Today we are meeting together in a congregational planning session to discern goals for our life together as a church, goals that will require us to *"press on"* to take hold of what Jesus Christ is calling us to become, goals that will require that we forget what is behind and strain toward what is ahead, with a deep yearning desire to fully *"know"* what it is like to be alive in the Lord, as we work with each other through our uncertainties and struggles to reach the end goal of Life with God.

There will be temptations to settle for less. Paul writes about that, too. When bodily, earthly appetites take over and control us, our stomachs can become our god. And it isn't just the appetite of hunger for food that pulls us from living the way the Lord wants us to live. Other appetites distract us tremendously: *Greed* for all the marvelous earthly gadgets that the neighbors have. *Pride* that makes us push others down, as if that should raise us up. *Lust* that lures our minds into desires that sidetrack us from the good and right relationships the Lord created us to pursue,

fantasies that waste so much precious time and energy. All of these load us down with guilt and shame. The devil must dance with glee to see us struggling, feeling badly about ourselves, because these appetites derail our best intentions and keep us from giving heart and soul and mind and strength to the work of the Lord. And in the end, such voracious appetites for food, for stuff, for prestige, for selfish sexual expression – all have the destiny of destruction. Paul writes, *“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.”*

We are not to settle for such temporary, transitory goals in life. We are not to settle for less than the glory and joy of being partners in God’s work of redeeming life, of raising one another up out of the mire and muck into joy and hope and courageous efforts to overcome evil with good! Is that *your* goal in life?

*“Our citizenship is in heaven,”* Paul declares. Our goal is to live with the Lord Jesus in the Kingdom of heaven – a realm of *“life with God”* that begins here and now when we let the Spirit of the Lord dwell with us, transform us, and empower us, so that we are made ready for to be launched into dimensions of Life that are out of this world! The Lord has the power *“to bring everything under his control.”* That is Paul’s faith. And that is our faith, as we set forth to discern the goals that will be the next steps in our life together as followers of Jesus.

What is *your* goal? In what ways might you aim to *“know Christ”* and become more like Jesus? A first step is to open up the struggles of your life to the Lord. He knows all about them anyway; nothing is hidden from his sight. Talk to him about the struggles; talk to him about your yearnings; talk to him about your deep desire to have your life count for good in God’s sight. And trust in the resurrecting power of God! Most any successful person can tell you that you will learn more from your failures than from your successes, if you are willing to learn from them. The failures teach us to ask, what is the purpose for which I was created? What is all of this all about? And that’s when the Lord can work with you in new ways, showing you what you are meant to be.

It isn’t really in our power to get our act straightened out by ourselves, after all, you know. We are called to *“press on toward the goal,”* yes; but it is only the Lord who can do the marvelously awesome miracle of turning our lives inside out, getting us

back on the right track, filling us with dreams and spiritual strength to work at far more than we are worthy of doing. It is the Lord who calls us into being, raising us up to soar like eagles! And who really knows what all God will do, if we are fully open to allow his Spirit to work in us and through us?

*"Attempt something so great for God that it is doomed to failure unless God be in it."* That's the challenge issued by Randy Pope, Pastor of one of *"Ten of Today's Most Innovative Churches,"* according to a book by Elmer Towns [quote from Elmer Towns, *An Inside Look at Ten of Today's Most Innovative Churches* (Ventura, Calif.: Regal Books, 1991), 91.] When the Lord opens the way, leave the past behind, press on toward the goal of life with God that is truly Life in all its fullness!

Some of you know how I sign off at the end of many of my email messages. I often use the word *"Shalom!"* which means that I wish for you the fullness of Life and goodness: *"Shalom! - God's Peace bless you with the Fullness of Life!"*

That is what the Apostle Paul wants to experience. That is what Paul invites you and me to learn. *"Join with others in following my example,"* he writes, *"and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you."* You are not in this alone. We join together in following Jesus. We encourage each other. We become partners in seeking to discover the fullness of Life.

One final story – perhaps you've heard it before. Some years ago at the Seattle Special Olympics, nine contestants, all physically or mentally disabled, assembled at the starting line for the 100-yard dash. At the gun they all started out, not exactly in a dash, but with a relish to run the race to the finish and win. All, that is, except one boy who stumbled on the asphalt, tumbled over a couple of times and began to cry. The other eight heard the boy cry. They slowed down and paused. Then they all turned around and went back. Every one of them. One girl with Down's syndrome bent down and kissed him and said, *"This will make it better."* Then all nine linked arms and walked together to the finish line. Everyone in the stadium stood, and the cheering went on for ten minutes. People who were there are still telling the story. Why?

Because deep down we all know this one thing: What matters most in this life is more than winning for yourself. What truly matters in this life is helping others win, even if it means slowing yourself down and changing your course.

And so today we will help each other press on toward the goal. We will help each other learn to know Jesus more and more fully, to discover what goals are appropriate next steps for us to become more fully *“a family of Christians committed to following Jesus,”* as our statement of purpose says. What long-term and what short-term goals will help us to be *“partners in Biblical teaching, in compassionate service, in peace witness, and in joyful fellowship”* ... as we, like the Apostle Paul, aim more than anything else to *“know”* Jesus and to experience the power by which God can raise this Creation out of suffering and struggle to enter into the grace and peace of Life with God? We are called to discern and reach those goals together! May the Lord transform this lowly body of Christ so that we become like his glorious body in heaven. Amen.

Hymn 427 *You Shall Go Out with Joy*