Philippians 3:13

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[0:00] Let's turn again to Philippians chapter 3, the words we find in verse 13. Philippians chapter 3, and verse 13.

! Those words in particular, but one thing I do. I press on towards the goal to win the prize which God has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus.
But one thing I do, I press on towards the goal. In today's world, we hear much about objectives and aims.
We find this in great companies and governments and schools and colleges and many other areas of modern life. It's deemed to be very important to define our objectives and also to ensure outcomes in terms of our own particular policies.
And Paul is operating here within that same framework. He is reminding us of the objectives that dominated his own Christian life.
[1:23] And making very plain to us that his was a very sharply focused life. One thing I do. Now, I think it's very possible that today, as Christians, our lives are often unfocused.

Our lives lack clear objectives. Our lives lack even often any clear assessment procedures. We don't know if the outcomes we proposed have been achieved to any degree.
And I want tonight to examine these words of St. Paul's in their context to try to establish what aims and outcomes we ought, as God's people, to propose to ourselves.
I want to ask, first of all, where it is that we are starting from. Paul has himself a very clear starting point defined for us in verse 12.
A starting point of what I might call spiritual realism. Not, he says in verse 12, that I have already obtained or have already been made perfect.
[2:52] Paul is very clear where he stands at this present moment in his own experience. And he's quite realistic about it.

He has not yet attained that for which God laid hold of him. And he has not yet been perfected. He's not yet been matured.
Now, of course, Paul and all of us who are Christians have already attained and secured a great deal. Because Paul had met with Christ on the Damascus road.
And that had transformed the whole of Paul's experience and of Paul's outlook. And through that, Paul had come to be united to the Lord Jesus.
And he had come to share in the righteousness and in the power of the risen Christ. And he had come to be united to the Lord Jesus.
[4:22] And he had come to be united.

righteous in Christ, and adopted in Christ, and sanctified in Christ. And you have great hopes, and great prospects, and great power, because you are in Christ Jesus.
And I don't want for a moment to encourage you to doubt any of that. And I don't want any depreciation of what we have already attained.
And I know that very often there's been in the church a sinful, depressive, unparalyzing self-deprecation.
And sometimes we have been so overwhelmingly conscious of all our shortcomings and all our faults, and use those to serve as excuses of serving God more effectively and more zealously.
[5:48] And yet, there can also be an indefensible complacency. Because someone could look at Paul and say, oh, he's made it.

And maybe Paul took it out to himself and said, I've made it. I've been converted. I've been forgiven. My whole life has been transformed.

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There's no doubt that sometimes people have come to know the Lord. They've gone through this great gate.
Their feet have been set on the rock. They've been given this great assurance of God's love and God's forgiveness. And then they've said, that's it.
They're saved. And that's their salvation. This point in time, perhaps many years ago, when in some way they came to know the Lord.
[6:50] And yet, St. Paul, who had a conversion more memorable than most, is saying to us, that is only the beginning.

We have not yet reached or attained to that from which God laid hold of us. Our conversion was not an end in itself.
It was a means to an end. It was merely a point on a line. And I want us to understand very clearly that however dramatic that moment was, however clear the divide between our pre-conversion past and our post-conversion present, yet conversion itself does not make us perfect.
It is not an end in itself. It's only a means to an end. And Paul is saying to us, I must press on, because there is still so much imperfection.
And all of us tonight, we're Christians, know how much there remains unmortified in ourselves. How much of the flesh, how much of unchastened human nature there still clings to us.
[8:15] We know those evil desires. We know those evil desires. Those unbelieving thoughts. Those malicious feelings that still inhabit our human psychology, despite the transforming experience of conversion.

We know how much of the flesh, we know how much of the flesh, we know how much remains still unrenewed. We know how limited our own growth has been.
We know how much of the flesh, our knowledge is still so limited. Our faith is still so weak.
Our hope is still so uncertain and so unclear. And our love for the Lord is still so unstable. You know that despite all those years of following the Lord, yet we're often strangers to assurance and to real Christian joy.
And often inexpert in asserting, maintaining, defending our own faith. And inexpert in giving others a reason for the hope that we have.
[9:25] My main purpose is not to tell you how backward you are. But it is important to remind ourselves that whatever our conversion is meant to us, and whatever our early years as disciples have meant to us, still, that's only a beginning.

We have not yet obtained all this that God intended for us. We have not yet become a true. So that's the starting point.
And I invite you for a moment tonight, many of us now on the point of breaking up for the summer, and all of us on the threshold of a great, exciting new phase in the congregation's history, to engage with St. Paul in this realistic assessment of our own selves.
I'm not asking for self-depreciation or self-deprecation. I'm simply saying, let's accept that we're only beginning, that we're so far from being perfect, and let's go on then to propose great new objectives and goals and outcomes to ourselves.
So that's where Paul is starting. I have not yet reached maturity. And so then, what goal does St. Paul propose to himself?
[11:01] Well, the immediate goal, I think, is this going back into the previous context. The immediate goal is that he wants to know Christ.

A way back in verse 10. I want knowledge, he says. And many of you are students, and in your own courses, you have aims, objectives, and well-defined learning outcomes.
And Paul is saying to us, what I want is knowledge. And in some ways, that's what all the philosophies wanted, and all the great faiths of the world wanted.
They were all concerned with knowledge, with gnosis, in some form or other. They wanted to know the mystery of the universe.
They wanted to know the secret of happiness. Some specialized form of knowledge. But Paul was absolutely precise. I want to know Christ, he says.
[12:05] What's the focus of your life? What's your great immediate objective? I want to know Christ.

You couldn't put it in fewer words. You couldn't put it more lucidly or put it more memorably. What outcome do you want?

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As you have your own daily experiences, as you worship with your friends in church, as you read God's word for yourself, as you pray and meditate, as you react to all that life throws at you and all that life demands of you.
What outcome do you want from it all? Paul says, quite simply, I want to know Christ. Paul isn't saying for a moment that nothing else in the world matters.
He is not saying that diligence in our own profession honesty in our own employment, hard work in the prosecution of our own studies, faithfulness in all our friendships, that those are not important.
[13:25] But he's saying the supreme outcome of my life, the goal, the objective to which I am working is to know Christ.

I want to know Christ. I want, through all my exposure to the means of grace and all my experience of Christian fellowship and all my experience under God's providence and all my work a day, professional practice, I want the great outcome of it all to be that I would know Christ.
That is the outcome that Paul is looking to. And if we pause for a moment to unpack it, it means at one level that he wanted to know Christ in a literary and historical sense.
And I do want to plead with you not to minimize the importance of this. I want to know the Jesus of the Gospels.
And I want to know the Gospels and what they say about Jesus. It's a matter, I think, of very great concern that the churches, perhaps particularly the Protestant churches, spend so little of their time in the Gospels.
[14:59] Now, I'm not saying for a single moment that the Old Testament isn't hugely important. I came across a remarkable father under Iona this week.

You know that that community at Iona under St. Columba in their daily worship they went through the Book of Psalms every single week.
They covered the Book of Psalms every single week in the offices at the Abbey at Iona. And yes, I would want to underline and endorse that.
The Book of Psalms, the Old Testament, is hugely important. And of course, the epistles of St. Paul and Peter and James and John and Jude and Hebrews, of course, these two are hugely important.
But you know, the Gospels are the pivot. They're the climax of the Old Testament. They're the fulfillment of the Old Testament. And they're the foundation of all the epistles.
[16:12] And there in the Gospels we meet. What I'm going to call for the moment the enigma of Jesus. This multifaceted, this untamable, this undomesticable, this indefinable, this indescribable Christ.

Those parables, you know, the meaning of which proves so beautifully elusive, you never have the meaning.
Because that meaning is always just beyond your grasp. You have so much of it. Those miracles, those words, this person, personality, this Christ who walks those plains of Galilee and the desert of Judea and the dark third district Jerusalem and Nazareth.
We want to be with him. My own whole cast of mind is Pauline. My cast of mind is the epistle to the Romans with its lunches.
and yet as my life and ministry and all the rest of it comes to its conclusion, one must be enormously conscious, regretfully conscious of this, that it is in those Gospels that we meet, the man in Christ Jesus, this man who is the Son of God incarnate.
[18:00] And in many ways it's far easier to understand the epistle of Paul to the Romans than it is to understand the Gospel of Mark or the Gospel of John.

At least for us Western minds it is. And yet I really want to encourage you to immerse yourselves in those Gospels, to know this great story of virgin birth, of great teaching, the teaching methods of this man Jesus, those great and mighty acts of healing and deliverance, those great parables, of this marvelous, this incomparable story of the Passion, the meaning of all those great crises, of his baptism, his temptation, Transfiguration, Gethsemane, the cross of Calvary, the resurrection.
Be there, you see. This great Protestant haste to get to the doctrines before we have the story. Let's get to know the story in all its depth and all its intricacy and sometimes in all its elusiveness.
Those Gospels are the greatest literature this world has ever seen. Even at an aesthetic level, although these men were not remotely self-conscious artists, yet these Gospels are incomparable and in themselves they are a complete education and a complete culture and we need to live more with this man of Galilee, with his lifestyle, with his priorities, with those things that concerned him

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and those things he didn't care about.
We need to be with him. So yes, I want, he says, to know Christ. I want to know the Christ of the Gospels and I want to know the Gospels of this Christ.
[20:05] But it's more than that, is it not? It's not less, but it is more. And I'm going to put it in terms of the word personal. I want to know Christ personally.

I want to know him as a person. I want to have a personal knowledge of him. And I'm not entirely happy with this word because in some ways it is too cozy.
I'm not wanting to portray Christ as one with whom one could have a cup of coffee and a cozy chat because he is God incarnate.
And yet he is a person and we are persons and we relate to him as person to person. He is the word of God.
He is the original speech and the creator of speech and the creator of mind. And he has made us in his own image and we too have speech and we too have mind.
[21:24] And we can speak to him and through our speaking our minds can meet and we can know him person to person not simply as a historical figure but as a living Christ with whom we have an intensely personal relationship or at least Paul says that's what I want to have I want to know I want to get to know him I want to know fully more fully I want to know perfectly I want to know personally I want to know him better not only I want to know more about him his CV but I want to know him I want to know the person I want to know him better

I want a better growing developing relationship with him that's what I want person to person I want to know when I say that again I'm conscious that this too is elusive!
because he stands to me in such a variety of relationships and never seems quite to keep still so that I know that this is the defining relationship I know him as my God I know him as my Lord I know him as my maker I know him as my teacher I know him as my pastor I know him as my mediator I know him as my brother I know him as my friend I know him as my daily companion I know him as the one I pray to I know him as my master who owns me I know him in all of those relationships because he is all of these to me and if I reverse that it means that
I relate to him as a creature and I relate to him as a slave and I relate to him as a pupil or disciple or student to a teacher and yet I relate to him too as friend to friend as brother to brother I relate to him as the companion to whom I talk instinctively although sometimes only in sighs and in groans and so don't you want to know him better in all of those relationships and Paul goes on to give us detail and in those details that Paul gives us two great things in some ways two quite astonishing things stand out I want to know about him and I want to know him personally and then he says
I want to know his power I want more and more and more experience of his power this astonishing power that raised Jesus from the dead this power that stilled the storm this power that rebuked the wind and the sea I want more and more and more experience of this power he wanted to know us the power of moral and spiritual transformation which would raise and elevate himself to a new level of dominion over sin I want to know that power conquering sin I want to know that power conquering temptation
[25:52] I want to know that power conquering every obstacle that faces me in life I want to know that power enabling me to cope with pain in all its species and in all its degrees I want to know that power enabling me to conquer temptation I want to know that power enabling me to perform every duty to do those things for which I am not by nature equipped for which I'm not talented for which by nature I'm not endowed I want to know to know she will say again in Philippians chapter 4 what it is to be able to do all things in the Christ who strengthens me I want to know this powerful saviour I want this inspirational presence which is beside me

I want to know this indwelling power which is within me this God helps me overleap the wall and I have no idea tonight what wall you're up against maybe some great sheer vertical wall some obstacle that stands in your way some terrible dreadful existential reality that dwarfs you and that fills you with all and I want us then to say at this point Lord I want to know your power because with your power I can be more than conqueror I can be hyper conqueror I can do it I can do it through the
Christ who indwells I want to know this power more and more Paul says I want more experience of this power and I want to know the fellowship of his sufferings I want to share in his sufferings and this in many ways is the most elusive and the most awesome point of all Paul wanted to understand these sufferings it's all brilliantly recorded for us in the great gospel stories and I'm sure that Paul

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pondered that narrative day in day out what a saviour was willing to suffer for him this Lord who went towards pain and death and infinite darkness because he loved this man
Saul of Tarsus and Saul wanted to know Paul wanted to know more and more just how much it did cost and just how far Christ's love had gone you want to know too how much he loved you how much he sacrificed you want to know some of it you want to understand what your Lord and saviour went through he wanted to know the sufferings and he wanted to suffer for him and he congratulates his church at Philippi for the great honour conferred upon them in verse chapter one it had been given to them he says not only to believe in Christ but!
suffer for the sake of his name what an honour that was yes he wants them to know about the sufferings and he he wanted also to suffer for but what he's saying here is more difficult and more elusive he wanted to suffer with them he wanted to share to have the kind of experience of suffering that Christ himself had to experience what Christ experienced and he knew of course that this was only possible to a limited degree surely I do not misrepresent Paul here I want this he said I want the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings I want to experience what he experienced
[30:56] I want to share I want the kind of experience that he had and that means for me at one level that Paul wanted to be perfected the way that Christ was perfected he learned obedience through the things that he suffered and Paul had learned that the only way to reach Christ likeness the only way to learn the real meaning of sonship of obedience of service the only way to learn compassion was through suffering he wanted to be perfected through suffering the way Christ was perfected through suffering!

And he wanted to share if you'll bear with me in the grief of Christ as he beheld the city and wept over it as he grieved over the hardness of human hearts and he wanted in a way to have some share in the hardship that Christ underwent for the good of his church Paul could not take Christ's place as a sacrifice or have any role in that work of sacrifice but he could suffer as a witness and he could travel as a witness he could suffer the hardship of shipwreck and the hardship of flogging and the hardship of imprisonment and the hardship of martyrdom because of his love for the world and his love for the church and in that way and to that extent
Paul was able to share in the sufferings of a savior to have fellowship with Christ to experience in some way what Christ experienced being made perfect through suffering and experiencing Christ's heartache over the state of lost humanity and suffering with Christ hardship in connection with the preaching of the good news and the salvation of the world Paul wanted to know that and he wanted to know it you see because as he suffered and as he wept and as he grieved and as he underwent hardship he understood his lord better I'm sure that the more his wonder grew the more he entered into what Jesus suffered the more astonishing it was that
Christ went through with this some of you may know what it is to walk through relatively easy areas of human suffering and then to reflect in comparison on the sufferings of Jesus and to wonder how Jesus coped and that's part of what Paul means here to know him to go through suffering and in and through that to come to know Christ better that he went through it so this is Paul's great intermediate objective I want to know him he said I want to know about him and I want to know him personally I want to know his power and I want to know something of what he suffered I want to know these things and I move on for a moment to this how is this great objective this goal to be achieved and if
I put that in just one proposition it's this it's achieved by total commitment and dedication and that's what stands out in the whole of this context how much this objective mattered to the apostle and how dedicated it was to ensuring that this objective was actually achieved and that he would come to know Christ and he put it in all those various ways he reminds for example here was somebody was so so sharply focused this one thing I do of course he did much else and yet in some way everything else was tributary everything else was contributory it was all subsumed under the one great objective this one thing this sharply focused person and I'm asking you again how sharply focused are you how many objectives are you pursuing simultaneously how many incompatible objectives are you pursuing simultaneously we have to propose a goal to ourselves there is one race in which we can enroll there is one finishing tip towards which we can strive we cannot choose to run simultaneously in a whole series of different meetings or different races we can't run at one at the same time towards a dozen different finishing tapes this one thing
[37:18] I do this sharply focused man that's what Paul was intensely sharply focused this one thing I do and it goes along with this that he was a man who refused to be distracted forgetting

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those things that are behind he didn't stop to see who was behind him or what was going on behind him or what was going on around him but he just focused on this one thing yes there had been great things in his past of which he might have been proud and there had been dreadful things in his past of which he might have been ashamed but he forgot all that it was what was in front of him that mattered you can look at your past you can deny the sin in it you can be paralyzed by the sin in it or you can resolve to yourself well it's behind me and

I'm going to press on towards the goal I want to know Christ that's what Paul was doing and in that quest Paul is straining he tells us every single muscle straining towards what is ahead I press on you see Linford Christie coming towards the finishing tape that magnificently muscled muscled body those terrifyingly focused eyes every ounce of energy thrown into this trajectory towards the tape straining pressing reaching forward and an epitome the very acme and apex of concentration that's what he was straining towards this to know the
Lord Jesus Christ and it must involve too if I wouldn't develop this it has to involve disengagement I am worried that sometimes in my name or taking my teaching as some kind of excuse and example there are developments which pretend which imagine that without self discipline without self control by worldliness by self indulgence we can somehow conquer this land of ours for Christ it can't be done there must be disengagement there must be great self discipline in the use of
Christian liberty we must lay aside every sin we must lay aside every weight we must lay aside vanity insofar as our human lives will allow us to do so please I do not want a reaction to extremism I do not want a reaction that go to the other extreme I don't want to react to legalism by going to the extreme of license and self indulgence and I would want anybody who claims to be in any way interested by anything I've ever said to look at this passage this man who is so sharply focused who will not be distracted who strains every muscle to disengage from the world in order to attain his own great objective all I said his immediate objective was
I want to know Christ but what was the great and final outcome that this man proposed to himself and I'm just going to mention it very very briefly it is surely this I press on to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus his immediate objective was to know Christ and the final outcome Paul wanted was quite simply I want to be in heaven with Christ or I want to be with Christ in heaven and I want heaven because that's where Christ is I love this man I adore this man I want to know I want in the time I have on earth to be getting to know him better and better more and more fully and then
[42:53] I want as the final outcome I want to be with him forever that's the prize in the short term I want to get known better and in the long term I want to be with him that's the prize the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus now I say to you again we are not going to conquer Scotland by being worldly undisciplined and self indulgent Christians we're going to conquer Scotland by being focused Christians this one thing I want to know Christ and I want beyond knowing him I want to be with him to be with him in heaven eternally and it is out of those objectives and out of that relationship that

Paul's great missionary journeys were born and Paul's great service and Paul's world transforming lifestyle all born out of his great personal objectives I want to know Christ Christ and I want to be with Christ and that kind of man knows that kind of people they turned the world upside down I want to know Christ and I want to be in heaven with Christ forever may God grant it so let us pray we ask oh
Lord that your blessing might rest upon our attempts to wrestle with your word forgive us oh Lord if there is sometimes irreverence in the way we express ourselves and forgive us if sometimes we fall so far short of what your word actually meant that you might find it easy to laugh at us we thank you Lord that you never laugh at us in derision but you may laugh at us as an adoring father and we ask grace based upon that assurance to ask you to help us to achieve those great aims and outcomes proposed to us by your servants in Paul help us Lord to know Christ may may may

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