

Why bother with Gospel labour?

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[0 : 0 0] Let's pray. Heavenly Father, I pray that you would indeed make the word of God fully known to us today.

! Help me to be able to unpack this passage in a way that is helpful and edifying for all of us here. That would also bring illumination and clarity so that we might really know what you are looking for.

And what kind of lives you want us to live and what you want us to prioritize. So please be with us by your spirit this morning. We pray all this in the name of Christ. Amen.

What do you look for in a church or a ministry? This year we've seen a slight increase in our average attendance. And I know there are people here who are either looking for a church or have recently decided to settle here.

If that is you, welcome! But what are you looking for in a church? Based on my experience, here are some common criteria. Some people want to know, are they people like me here?

[1 : 1 1] People who are of similar background and stage of life? Others ask, is the music good? Will it help me emotionally connect with God?

Those with families often wonder, is there something for my kids? Will my teenagers even come? Some will email us inquiring, is it near my home?

Is there parking? And perhaps one or two might even want to check out the pastor. Is he tall and handsome? Someone with the experience of a 60-year-old and the energy of a 30-year-old?

And there is a place for such questions. Certainly we here at KEC don't want the musical experience to be the equivalent of torture.

We want our teenagers to feel like there is a safe space for them. Although I'm not sure we can do anything about the pastor. But there is one thing above all we hope you will find here.

[2 : 1 5] We want to be a church that is centered on Christ. We want to be a church that labors for the gospel. Because as our passage will show us today, that really is the most important criteria.

You can have great music, you can have amazing community. But if the gospel is not central to our identity and our ministry, then we are not following in the footsteps of Paul.

But are we sure we want to follow in Paul's footsteps, you might ask? After all, just have a quick scan of the passage before us today. In verse 24, Paul says he is suffering.

Down in verse 29, he talks about the stress and the struggle. Another translation uses the word toil. Or again in 2 verse 1, he says it's hard work.

And if I'm a first century Christian looking for a church, and I decided to look up St. Paul's church on the website, and discovered all those descriptions, I might go, yuck, no thanks.

[3 : 30] Maybe I'll go check out the church down the street instead. The one planted by some newcomers in town who promised me more. More comfortable air con, more mountaintop moments, more spiritual entertainment.

That sounds better. But if I stop and linger on Paul's description of his ministry, just a little longer, I might get a little curious.

You see, if Paul is suffering and stressing for no good reason, I obviously wouldn't find that attractive. But in verse 24, notice now that he says he is suffering for me.

Or a little later in the sentence, he says he is suffering for the sake of Christ's body, the church. So even though he clearly finds what he is doing tiring and draining at times, he thinks his ministry is beneficial for me.

He labors on because he thinks it's totally worth it. So the question is, why? Why does he bother with gospel labor?

[4 : 50] What makes it all worthwhile? Well, that's what today's sermon is going to be about. We're going to see the reason Paul bothers is because he's convinced God has given us one precious treasure, one primary aim, and one power source.

That's why Paul gives his all for the gospel and why we must as well. So let's explore these reasons together, starting with the first one, because God has given us one precious treasure.

One precious treasure. I wonder, did you notice how over and over again Paul keeps using the language of fullness in this passage?

So for example, in verse 24, he talks about filling up something, about becoming full. In verse 25, he talks about presenting the word of God in its fullness.

In verse 27, he talks about the glorious riches of this mystery. So once again, the idea is that of fullness. In verse 28, he talks about being fully mature.

[6 : 05] In chapter 2, verse 2, he talks about the full riches of complete understanding. And actually, it's not just this section of Colossians.

Last week, in chapter 1, verse 19, Paul talks about God being pleased to have all his fullness dwell in Christ. And as Jeremy pointed out last week, he kept using the word, all.

All things were created in him. In him, all things hold together. That also conveys the idea of fullness. So clearly, the fact that such language is all over Colossians is beyond dispute.

The question is why? And the most likely answer was simply because that's what the newcomers in town were promising.

You are not full, they were saying. You are not complete. Join us, then you will have the full knowledge, the full wisdom, the full experience.

[7 : 12] And that sure sounds attractive. But in chapter 2, verse 2 to 3, Paul tells us why he is willing to suffer so much. Notice, end of verse 2, it is so that we will possess complete understanding.

But then the question is, complete understanding of what? Answer, verse 3, that we have all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

We have one precious treasure and his name is Christ. In other words, Paul is saying, contrary to what these guys are promising, we already have all the fullness we need.

It's a bit like this. Some of you will know that I used to study at this place called Oxford University. And here on the screen is one of my absolute favourite buildings, the Radcliffe Camera.

On the screen, please, Nat. Thank you. So that's the Radcliffe Camera and I spent many hours in there.

[8 : 28] And the Radcliffe Camera is part of the Bodleian Library. And the Bodleian Library is what we call a library of legal deposit. That means, by law, every single book ever published in England has at least one copy in there, along with some rare book and manuscript collections.

So, for example, the original manuscript of Frankenstein is in there, as well as the handwritten manuscript of *The Wind in the Willows*. And you can imagine, they have these huge networks of underground tunnels stretching to other parts of Oxford so that there is access to all this storage space for millions and millions of books.

And I always found it amazing that I could just log onto the database system, search for what I wanted, and, assuming that someone hasn't asked for it before me, I could just call it up to be delivered delivered to me.

So whether it is a textbook introducing quantum theory, or just a Tintin comic, it's all there. Although I should say, of course, that you need to have special permission to have access to the rare and valuable manuscripts.

But quite literally, you could just about say all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge of England are contained in this library. Now that is quite a staggering thought.

[9 : 57] But now, look at what Paul says we find in Jesus. Not just some treasures, not even all the treasures of England.

No, all the treasures of the universe are found in him. That is where you look for treasure. Not in a celebrity, book, or it influences YouTube video, but in this person, the Son of God, who came to us in flesh and blood.

You see, do you want to know how to reconcile with God, to please him, or bear fruit for him? Then look to Christ. Or do you want to understand the purpose of life, or how to suffer well, or how to find joy that doesn't fade?

Then look to Christ. That is the kind of wisdom and knowledge he offers. And he doesn't hoard that treasure, but shares it freely with those who come to him.

And Paul doesn't want us to take this treasure for granted. And so in this passage, he makes sure we get it. He slows down and highlights three of its wonderful features.

[11 : 21] So let me just walk you through them, and as we do, let your heart be stirred again by how fully glorious Christ is. First off, Paul tells us that Christ is the full realization of God's plan.

You see, how does the Bible describe the time before Christ arrived on the scene? verse 26 tells us it's like a mystery. But Paul doesn't mean mystery here in the sense that it is a riddle or weird or spooky.

He simply means something that hasn't been revealed yet, like a surprise birthday party you keep hidden from your best friend for now. Or you can think of it like this.

As you might know, just down the road on Jalan Ongdiang Sui is the new uniform complex. I pass by it fairly often. For a while, all I saw was cranes and scaffolding and building materials, and I wondered what they were building.

It was a mystery. But now it is 100% complete. You can see a new multi-story building and auditorium and car park. The building plan has been fully realized what the uniform complex looks like has now been revealed.

[12 : 51] Or here's another way to think about it. My family has just come back from a holiday in Legoland. Months ago, I told my kids that's where they are going and they have been excited ever since, especially when I described some of the rides and the hotel and so on.

But it was still kind of hazy to them. It was still a bit of a mystery to them. What? Legoland would look like exactly until we got there three days ago.

And finally the mystery has been revealed as the holiday plan is executed. Successfully, I must say. That's what Paul is saying about Christ.

He's the moment your best friend walks in and we all say, surprise, happy birthday. holiday. He is the complete uniform building. He is the holiday plan put into action.

He is the mystery now revealed. He has been disclosed to God's people. God has executed his great plan in him to save, to redeem and to renew.

[14 : 00] He has come, he has died, he has risen. And now that he has stepped through the door, we rejoice. We don't think, oh, I wonder if there is a better surprise coming.

No, God's plan is fully realized, all has been revealed, and we simply enjoy what we have received. That is one feature of the treasure we have.

Then second off, Paul tells us that Christ has taken up full residence in us. Did you notice that is how else Paul describes this mystery or this treasure that we have?

Look at verse 27. You have Christ in you. Now, think about what that means.

The Christ we looked at last week, the one who is fully God, the one who is all supreme, the first spawned over all creation.

[15 : 08] That Christ lives in you. So he's not just someone offering advice from afar. He isn't someone who just paid your debt and then left without a word.

He isn't a renter treating you like a short-term spiritual A, B, and B. No. He has taken up full residence in you.

And that is incredible, is it not? That is fullness on a different scale. But that is not all. For if Christ has made his home in us, then we can be sure of glory.

Because his presence is the guarantee of our future. He is, verse 27 again, the hope of glory. So that means even if our present feels messy and uncertain and exhausting, our future is not.

It is secure and joyful and beautiful. Not because we have figured everything out, but because Christ has made his future our future.

[16 : 28] treasure. The one who conquered death now lives in us by his spirit and he will not leave his work unfinished. He will take us home to glory, no matter how inglorious our life turns out.

This is our sure and solid hope. And that is another feature of our treasure, the full residency of Christ. But we are not done.

For third off, Paul tells us Christ is the one who brings us to full maturity. Did you notice that is what happens in verse 28? When we keep drinking in of his goodness and his grace and his wisdom, we mature.

That's the idea. Or perhaps think of it like this. Later on in Colossians 3 verse 11, Paul says that Christians are being renewed in the knowledge, in the image of its creator.

In other words, as we are repeatedly exposed to the gospel, letting it sink deeply into us, we become more and more like Jesus.

[17 : 48] That's what this treasure does for us. because that's maturity in a nutshell. Becoming more like Jesus.

Maturity isn't about how old you are, or how educated you are, or how well-traveled you are. No. Maturity is loving like God loves, caring about truth the way God does, being faithful like he is.

in other words, all that Jesus is. And that kind of maturity is deeply attractive. We might sometimes think of maturity as dull, but ask any teacher in a rowdy classroom, full of children quarreling over petty things, and they will tell you, a mature student is a God sent.

And so as we take all this in, I hope you're persuaded. Christ is the most precious treasure we have.

He is the full realization of God's plan, the one who makes himself fully at home in us, the one who brings us to full maturity, and so no wonder we labor on in gospel ministry, because Christ is worth it.

[19 : 18] But that is not the only reason we press on. There is a second reason we bother with gospel labor, because God has also given us a primary aim.

A primary aim. Paul mentions this in verse 25. He writes, I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness.

In other words, Paul is saying, this treasure isn't just for me to admire. I've been entrusted with it for the sake of others.

I've been given a stewardship for the church. And that makes sense, doesn't it? If this gospel is truly valuable, if it can fill people in ways that nothing else can, then surely we must make it the main thing.

Surely we want to make it fully known. That's exactly what God commissioned Paul to do. To faithfully present this treasure to everyone.

[20 : 32] And in doing so, Paul is more like a waiter than a chef. A chef can experiment with some of his dishes, can't he? Maybe add a bit more salt here, try a different ingredient there.

But the waiter's job is simply to deliver the food as it has been cooked. He takes what the chef prepares and serves it to the people. And that is our primary aim.

We serve the gospel as it is. And why not? It can't be improved. It can't be made even more satisfying.

Because remember, in Christ is found all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. He is the fullness. And how does he do it?

Verse 28 is the key. By proclamation of Christ. He is the one we proclaim.

[21 : 35] Paul declares. Now, that doesn't necessarily mean he gets up and stands behind a pulpit and delivers a monologue for half an hour. Rather, Paul is already proclaiming even as he writes this letter to the Colossians.

Even though in 2 verse 1 we find out that he hasn't actually met a lot of them. Because he is making Christ known to them. And he is applying the gospel in order to impact their lives.

And proclaiming Christ, by the way, doesn't just mean basically saying anything we like and then just throwing in the name of Christ or mentioning a Bible verse once in a while.

Paul helpfully shows what it involves instead. Verse 28 again. There is the admonishing. That means warning people.

That means calling people to turn back from looking for fullness in the wrong places. It's calling people to adjust. Think of a ship.

[22 : 45] If its radar systems are slightly off, such that they are one degree off from where they're supposed to be going, it might be hardly noticeable at first. But if you don't adjust accordingly, you will end up miles off course.

And that's why admonishing is included. It's really about course correction. And more positively, verse 28, it involves teaching.

That's basically building up our understanding of Christ, of who he is, of what he's done, and how that then is to shape our lives. If you have heard me regularly for a while now, it's basically one of the main things I try to do Sunday, after Sunday, including right now.

And I hope you are beginning to see, if you haven't already, that this is why we do what we do here at KEC.

You see, what is Paul telling us here, basically? He's saying that our primary aim is word ministry. Our aim isn't to entertain the masses.

[24 : 03] Our aim isn't even to offer charity services per se. Although we might do that, if we've worked out that there might be one way we obey Jesus.

But our primary aim is to proclaim Christ, teach Christ, and admonish so that we don't leave Christ.

Christ, and the only way to do that is to proclaim the Bible. That's actually my primary job description. It's making the word of God known in all its fullness.

And that's what you need to see every pastor doing. A pastor can be doing many things, but if he's not doing this, he has failed his KPI.

And did you see that in verse 28 that Paul says that all of the word of God is for all the people?

[25 : 03] He says we need to teach everyone and admonish everyone. The NIV hides it a little to smoothen the language, but the word everyone actually appears three times in verse 28.

And so that means word ministry doesn't have to be restricted to the Sunday preaching by the pastor. No, whenever any Christian prayerfully speaks God's word to one another, encouraging, teaching, correcting, and building each other up in Christ, not just in formal settings, but across the rhythms of life together, they are engaging in word ministry.

word ministry can be done in conversations of the church, small groups, hospital visits, text messages, and shared meals.

So for example, if I hear of how someone is praying with a struggling person and pointing them back to Christ's promises, I'm encouraged, because that is word ministry at word.

word ministry is for everyone. And this is what we should aim for.

[26 : 27] Because as we've already seen, verse 28 shows us that this is how people are brought to full maturity. We preach Christ not just to non-Christians so that they might believe, but to Christians too, because that's how we grow.

Paul couldn't be clearer. This is the path to maturity. Yes, we might outgrow our toys when we are no longer toddlers, but we never outgrow Jesus.

There is never a stage in the Christian life where we move past him. We always need the kind of word ministry that keeps putting Christ in front of us because that is how, as chapter 2 verse 2 says, we find relational wholeness and how, as 2 verse 4 shows us, we gain theological stability.

So, if you are checking out a church, what must you look for? You must see if it's exercising a ministry like Paul's.

You see, there are so many potential messages a church could be proclaiming. Every church will say that they believe in Christ, but look carefully. What do they proclaim?

[28 : 00] Do they say they have Christ, but what they are constantly proclaiming is health and wealth? Do they say they have Christ, but what they are constantly proclaiming is their pastor?

Do they say they have Christ, but what they are constantly proclaiming is political talking points? And if we are electing church leaders, which of course is the season we are currently in, then we need to make sure we are encouraging them to keep this aim in mind.

For if we do, we are the ones who benefit, don't we? Because then we'll have leaders who are committed to the faithful, ongoing ministry of the word, which is of course how we grow.

If we have elders and deacons who protect that, prioritize that, and model that in their own lives, elders and deacons who will keep pointing us back to Jesus gently, clearly, and consistently, we will all mature.

And at this point, I just want to say thank you to all the leaders who have served alongside me in my years here, because you have not hindered, but encouraged the ministry of the word.

[29 : 22] So why bother with gospel labor? Because we've seen Christ is our precious treasure, and proclaiming him faithfully is our God-given primary aim.

But there is one more reason. So thirdly, because God has given us a power source. A power source.

You see, at this point, you might be saying, Pastor, it's not that I'm not on board with what you are saying. I can see it from the scriptures. We do want to labor for the gospel.

But sometimes I get really tired. sometimes I face disappointments and setbacks. Sometimes things just don't go our way.

And that's when I feel like not bothering. Well, if that is you, thank you for being honest. And as I mentioned right at the beginning, well, that would be Paul's experience too.

[30 : 26] So how does he cope? Well, he copes first of all by understanding the true meaning of his suffering. Look at verse 24. 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.

Now this is arguably the hardest verse to understand in the whole of Colossians. What does Paul mean? Let's first say what he cannot mean.

Paul cannot possibly mean that somehow Christ's atonement was not enough. He cannot mean that something went wrong at the cross which he has to somehow top up. That makes no sense in a letter in which he has consistently stressed that Christ is the fullness of God and that he is all we need.

So what does he mean? let's try to unpack this. Let's figure out first what is still lacking. If it is not Christ's atoning work that is lacking, what then is still missing?

the answer has to be the proclamation of Christ's atoning work, isn't it? There are still more places where the gospel can be brought out in its fullness.

[32 : 00] there are still more people who have yet to be brought to Christ to be made mature in him. And that is where Paul steps in. You see, he knows who he is.

He is a servant of the gospel, verse 23. He is a servant of the church, verse 25. And that is why he is so eager to go out and proclaim Christ, especially to the Gentiles.

But as he does that, he is under no illusion. He knows that proclaiming the gospel will also mean suffering for the gospel. That's what God told him right from the start, back in Acts 9, verse 16.

You see, Paul stands in a long line of God's servants, like those in Isaiah 40 to 55, who also face affliction as they carried out their mission.

And just as Jesus suffered in his flesh for the sake of his people, so now Paul suffers in his flesh for the sake of the church.

[33 : 09] In fact, he is willing to take up whatever suffering is needed to fill it up, as he puts it, so that the gospel might take root in places it hasn't yet.

That is the cost he's willing to bear because Christ is worth it. And my friends, that is what we need to understand. Laboring for the gospel involves suffering for the gospel.

You can't separate the two. But it is meaningful suffering because it is suffering so that others might have treasure, so that others might have the fullness of Christ.

And perhaps that also gives us a fresh lens for how we think about church. When we are looking for a church, maybe one of the questions we should ask is, are the people here willing to suffer for the gospel?

Are they willing to make sacrifices for the sake of Christ and his mission? That's not usually on our checklist, is it? But it is biblically necessary.

[34 : 21] to very slightly adapt something John Stott once said on the screen, the place of suffering in service and of passion in ministry is hardly ever taught today.

But the greatest single secret of ministry effectiveness is a willingness to suffer and die. It may be death to popularity, by faithfully preaching the unpopular biblical gospel, or to pride, by the use of modest methods in reliance on the Holy Spirit, or to racial and national prejudice, by identification with another culture, or to material comfort, by adopting a particular lifestyle.

But the servant must suffer if he is to bring light to the nations, and the seed must die if it is to multiply. But here is the good news.

chapter 1, verse 29. To this end, Paul says, I strenuously content with all the energy Christ so powerfully works in me.

We can't depend on our own strength, Paul says. We don't know how to suffer on our own, but we do have a power source. We have Christ's energy to energize us.

[35 : 46] to quote one commentator, when Paul is in agony as he struggles in his ministry, Christ graciously fills him with divine power that far surpasses what any energizer battery or power rate drink, basically Red Bull, could ever begin to supply.

So yes, gospel labor is hard work. Now I think I felt it especially in recent weeks. And I'm sure many of you who work hard feel it too.

And if that's you, then can I encourage you to make sure that you stay plugged in to the power source. Remember how Christ is your treasure. Remember the hope of glory he offers.

Now these are the things I need to remind myself and I need you to remind me even as I try to remind you. And if you do, then you and I can be like Paul too.

For did you notice one more thing? Did you notice how he begins and ends this letter? With rejoicing. In verse 24 he says he is able to rejoice in his sufferings.

[37 : 05] And then down in 2 verse 5 he is delighted because he knows what gospel labor produces. Christians who are disciplined and firm in faith.

So brothers and sisters, if you are laboring and suffering for the gospel, you can rejoice because what you are going through is not insignificant.

You might think that all you're doing is just teaching Sunday school to just a few four-year-olds or preparing a simple Bible study for just a few 65-year-olds.

But really, you are suffering like Christ and for Christ to present people fully mature in Christ.

That's what you are really doing. And let me tell you, that is something pretty incredible. So let's come full circle.

[38 : 07] What should we look for in a church? Answer, one that labors for the gospel. And why is gospel labor with it?

Because we have one precious treasure, one primary aim, and one power source. So let's make Colossians 1 verse 28 to 29, not just a ministry slogan, but our shared mindset, our shared heartbeat.

For Christ, the hope of glory lives in us, and that changes everything. let's pray. Father, as we reflect on these words of Paul and his ministry, I pray we will take it all to heart.

I pray you will remind us again of the precious treasure that we have, all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge that is found in Christ, treasures that we have yet to fully grasp.

So by your Holy Spirit, we ask that you help us to grasp this treasure that we have more and more. And as we do so, will you help strengthen our resolve to make it our aim to proclaim Christ in the words that we say to one another, in the lives that we live.

[39 : 34] And Lord, we know that this labor is a labor that is hard, that is tiring, that is draining at times. So we ask for your help. We ask for that energy to help us to keep going.

And not to give up. So may our church be a church that labors for the gospel. And may our church be one that brings glory to your name. We pray all this for your name's sake.

Amen.