Leaving Behind and Reaching Forward
Scripture Text: Philippians 3:12-16

Introduction

On New Year’s Day, we considered the idea of trusting God with our future because God is always faithful. We know that God is always faithful because of who God is and what God has done. Because God has proven Himself to be faithful, we can trust Him with what He plans to do. Like the Israelites who were in Babylon, we can trust God to do a “new thing” in our lives. Something to consider: Are our best days in the past? Like the Israelites probably felt while they were in Babylon, we may wonder if God has mainly blessed us sometime in the past. We may wonder if He has anything “new” planned for us. I believe that He does, and to encourage us in this, I thought Paul’s letter to the Philippians would speak to us. In Philippians, we read about several things. We read about joy. We ought to rejoice that we are in Christ. Rejoice that Christ is proclaimed. Rejoice with others who minister. Rejoice in good times and in suffering. We also read about contentment, that we ought to be content with whatever we have. We need to learn to live with little and with much, and in all things give thanks to God for everything. We also read about not giving up. We should not give up serving God and trusting Him to continue what He has started. To do this, we need to focus on the goal. We need to leave the past in the past. We need to press on to what lies ahead of us.

Focus on the Goal

One thing that is necessary in life is goals. We need goals, for without them, we are hardly motivated to achieve whatever it is we need to do. Around the beginning of each year, people focus on goals called “resolutions”. They resolve to do something new or something different in the new year. They resolve to be different. Resolutions are good, but we do not need to wait to do them in January. We can and should resolve to do something new whenever a change is needed. If you are traveling down a road and notice that you are going the wrong way or there is a better way to your destination, it would be prudent to change what you are doing then. However, we must know the goal of what we are doing in order to get to where we are going. The Apostle Paul expressed his desire to achieve a certain goal. Paul had a specific goal and he sought to reach it.

Philippians 3:20–21 20 But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, 21 who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.

The goal Paul was referring to in this passage was becoming complete in Jesus Christ. He was probably referring specifically to the day he would obtain his complete salvation, when he would become a fully mature disciple of Christ. He looked forward to the resurrection from the dead. All believers are all on a “salvation journey” that will be completed when they are resurrected to new life like our Lord. Some, however, think God saves them to keep them out of hell. That is only part of it. The main reason, the goal of salvation, is for people to become like Jesus Christ. God saves us not just from
our sin, and from the punishment of sin, but He also saves us to be conformed to His Son, Jesus Christ. Paul realized that he was not yet there. God was still working on him. Paul looked ahead to the completion of his salvation, when he would be raised to a new body without the struggles of sin. That should be our desire and it should humble us.

And yet, some people are not humbled by that. Some people think that they have arrived, that they are some “super Christians” or “special children of God” who never need improvement. They confuse the moment they were saved with the process of the Holy Spirit molding them into the image of Christ. Also, some people focus on the wrong things. Their goal is not the goal they should have. For instance, some focus on temporary, earthly things. These are things that do not matter in the grand scheme of eternity. Paul called these people enemies of the cross of Christ (vss. 18-19). But that is not so for the true church of God. The true church of God knows the goal and focuses on that. They focus on becoming like Christ. What is your goal in life? Why are you here? What is the goal of the church? Why are we here? The answer to these questions will dictate what you or we do and how we reach that goal. If our goal is to be more like Jesus, then our choices will reflect that. If our goal as a church is to worship Jesus and make more disciples for Him, then our choices and what we do will reflect that. Let us focus on the right goal. But, that is only part of the issue here. How do we get there?

**Leave the Past in the Past**

To have a goal means to go forward. To go forward also means to move away from something else. For instance, if we make a resolution to do something, but we never change, we stay where we were, we will not reach that goal. If I resolve to lose weight or to be healthier, but I never change what I am doing, I will not reach that goal. Similarly, if we stay in the past, if we keep doing the same things we have always done, we will not move forward to where we need to be. I remember my wedding day. I remember being with my wife on the stage and the preacher saying something like, “Do you promise to love and obey and do whatever she tells you.” At least that is what I am told he said. Seriously, I remember how wonderful it was to finally be married to the woman God had given me. That was then. We have had thirteen wonderful years since that day. If we had lived in the past, we would have never grown into the husband and wife that we are today. We would never grow into the people God desires for us to be. The same is true for our salvation. If we get stuck on the day we accepted Christ, or the day we were baptized, or the day we joined God’s church, and we never move from that experience, we will not grow into mature disciples of Christ. We will not experience all the new things God has planned for us. We cannot move forward if we stay parked in the past. Paul realized this about his relationship with God. Thus, he wrote in verse thirteen about leaving behind the past. Look at the following verses.

**Philippians 3:12–13**

12 Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. 13 Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead,
Paul considered his past was not worth comparing to his present relationship with Christ or his glorious future with God. You might say that once Paul accepted Christ, he did not dwell in the past. Paul kept his eye on what was ahead of him, on the goal God had created for him, and not what was behind him. Paul had to keep moving. He could not afford to get stuck in the past. He wrote in this verse that he was forgetting the past. If the past meant his attempt to attain his salvation through the Law or by doing works, then he should forget that. We all should. Many Jewish Christians had a hard time letting go of their past and pursuing their future in Christ. When Christ came and offered salvation by grace, many of them were still trying to incorporate the legal demands of the Law with the freedom they received in Christ. Thus, Paul had to remind them to stop living in the past and embrace the grace and freedom of Christ. Are you still trying to earn your salvation? Are you still trying to live by the Law of God? Are you stuck somewhere in the past, where God wants to move you forward?

Forgetting what lies behind should include both our shortcomings and our successes. A way to “forget the past” is to not dwell on what has happened, whether good or bad. We should not let past guilt enslave us and make us ineffective. If God forgives you, you are forgiven indeed. I do not need to beat myself up about my past failures. I need to learn from them and use those lessons to improve myself now and in the future. But, we also do not need to rest on our past successes either. We must not live in the “good ole days” when great things had happened. We cannot let what was dictate what is or what will be. We should not allow ourselves to become paralyzed in the past, or become complacent with the present. Maybe things are different now. What was done was done! Some churches have a difficult time “forgetting what lies behind”. For many believers, the past becomes a hero to them. Many of them think the way things were was the best way. The past contained the glory days when things were the way they should be. It is good to remember the good times and to celebrate what was good, but we cannot live in the past if we want to reach our goal. We must “forget” what lies behind and “reach forward” to what lies ahead. This leads us to the next point.

**Press On to What Lies Ahead**

So, we must focus on the goal. We must leave the past in the past. But, we also must press on to what lies ahead. If you take a trip, would you stop along the way and remain at some point along the journey? If you really wanted to get to your destination, you would press on no matter what the conditions of the road were and no matter what scenic spot you found. You would remain focused on where you wanted to be. Some may say that the present is all that we really have. We cannot live in the past, but we cannot live in the future either. We have to live in the here and now. Some believe in taking it one day at a time. That is true. In terms of time, all we have to work with is the present, and we need to use it well. When the present is gone, when that time has been spent, it cannot be reclaimed. It is gone forever. Therefore, we must make the most of the time we have. However, for the one who follows Christ, we also have the faithful promises of God. We have God’s promise of something better that He has prepared for us. Therefore, Paul exhorted us to press on and work hard for the goal that God has set before us. Look at the next verse in this passage.

Scripture quoted from the English Standard Version (ESV) unless otherwise noted.
Philippians 3:12, 14  

**Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own...**

**I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.**

Paul mentioned that he was pursuing something. He was pressing on toward a goal. Earlier in verse twelve, Paul wrote that he was pressing on to his resurrection, to the completion of his salvation. The goal of completing his salvation was like a finish line in a race. The word for “press on” is an athletic metaphor that brings to mind straining muscles, clear focus, and complete dedication of the runner in his race to the prize. Paul was describing exerting oneself to the uttermost, like stretching out to reach something. It is like a runner straining his muscles and having complete dedication in order to finish the race and to win the prize. To do this, we have to leave the past in the past and move forward to what God has planned for us in the future. Paul constantly aimed toward a heavenly goal. Here, Paul mentioned that he was pursuing the call of God in Christ Jesus. The call is probably associated with the final resurrection where on that day there will be a call for us to go to heaven. Like a victory in a race, Paul lived for the day when he would hear God’s announcement that he had indeed finished the race. This motivated Paul to work harder for Christ. Rather than slack off, as some are prone to do, Paul’s anticipation of that victory call motivated him to work harder and seek harder the things of God. He kept reaching for the completion of God’s work in his life.

To pursue something stresses an active commitment to Jesus Christ. Becoming like Jesus is the goal, but notice the reason why Paul pressed on for that goal. In verse twelve Paul wrote, “I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.” It is because Jesus had made Paul his own, because Paul belonged to Jesus, that Paul pressed forward to the goal of a life in glory. We press on, we work hard, because we belong to Jesus. We press on to know Jesus Christ better, to have a perfect fellowship with Him because He knows us. We press on to know Christ better because our citizenship is now in heaven (Philippians 3:20). Our pressing on to know Christ better, however, involves the whole church. Pressing on to the call of God involves the whole church working together, side by side. But, why do some not press on? Why do some not reach forward? Because, it becomes too hard. They want it easy and quick. They do not want hard work. Also, we do not press on if pressing on involves change. Sometimes in order to reach forward to what lies ahead means that we must change what we are doing. To reach our goal often means to change and that is not always easy. Change is good...unless we are asked to change! Are we willing to press on to the upward call of Christ even if it means changing or giving up something? Are we willing to do whatever it takes to be faithful to God and to reach others for Him?

Philippians 3:16  

**Only let us hold true to what we have attained.**

Paul focused on the goal of His calling to Christ. He looked forward to that day when the race would be over and God would call his name as the victor. Paul did not allow his past circumstances, good or bad, to derail his journey forward, but rather he pressed on to what God was preparing for him. Are we willing to do whatever it takes to serve Jesus, even if it means doing things differently? In all we do, may we be faithful to Him.

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Conclusion

In closing, maybe the resolution we should make for this new year is to press on toward the same goal as the Apostle Paul did in this passage. The goal of every Christian ought to be to finish the race well — to become like Jesus Christ. Christians who want to finish the race well will do these three things: They will focus on the goal of being like Jesus. They will refuse to be paralyzed or complacent by the past. They will also intensely pursue the calling of the Christian life until God calls them home. This is not just an individual calling, but one that involves the entire church. We must work together and help each other to become more like Christ each and every day. We have to run this race together. What does God have planned for each of us this year? What does God have planned for the whole church this year? Will we press on toward whatever He has planned for us? Will we press on toward “the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” regardless of the change or sacrifice it may mean? God does not promise that the work He gives us will be easy. He does not promise that the way forward will be easy. But, whatever He has planned for us, it will be rewarding. Will you press on to it? May it be so! Amen!