

FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH, 5-31-15 PM NOTES
"CHOOSING A FORWARD FOCUS"
PHILIPPIANS 3:12-14
#4 in Series, "Dealing with Your Past"

Acts 7:58 (NKJV) "and they cast *him* out of the city and stoned *him*. And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul."

Acts 8:1a (NIV) "And Saul was there, giving approval to his death."

I. A Proper Assessment (vv. 12a, 13a)

Romans 8:29 (NKJV) "For whom He foreknew, He also predestined *to be* conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren."

Philippians 4:11-12 (NIV) "¹¹I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. ¹²I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want."

"This life is not intended to be the place of our perfection, but the preparation for it."

—Richard Baxter

II. A Passionate Pursuit (v. 12b)

"Instead of 'Let go and let God,' we should be saying, 'Trust God and get going.'"

—J. I. Packer

1 Corinthians 15:10 (NASB) "But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me."

III. A Precise Focus (v. 13b)

1 John 4:17b (NKJV) "...because as He is, so are we in this world."

2 Corinthians 10:5b (NKJV) "...bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ."

Philippians 3:10 (NKJV) "that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death."

IV. A Pressing Motivation (v. 14)

2 Timothy 4:6-8 (NKJV) "⁶For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure is at hand. ⁷I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. ⁸Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing."

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The Apostle Paul had a horrible past. He had not only rejected Christ, he persecuted those who followed Christ and even had a part in the death of some believers. It is likely that Paul (called Saul before his salvation) instigated and supervised the first martyr of the church. We read in **Acts 7:58 (NKJV)** ⁵⁸ and they cast *him* [Stephen] out of the city and stoned *him*. And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul." There is some historical evidence that the outer clothing was laid at the feet of the one instigating the stoning. We also see that implied in **Acts 8:1a (NIV)** "And Saul was there, giving approval to his death." Paul really had a horrible past that he had to deal with, but when he came to Christ, while he was humbled by his past and was ashamed of his past, he chose to focus on what Christ had done for him and turned his energies to building the church that he tried to destroy before he came to Christ. Our past has the potential to control our present.

There is another way that our past can control. For some, the pain of the past is not in the sin they perpetrated, but in sin perpetrated on them. It may have been an act of rejection by a parent or a spouse. It may have been abuse of one kind or another. It may have been an inheritance stolen by a sibling. It may have been someone who cheated you in a business deal. It may have been someone who wounded or put you down with their words. Allow me to share an extreme example from history of how a focus on the past can drastically affect a person's life in the present. Caligula was born about 12 AD and as a young man desperately desired to be the Emperor of Rome. It seemed impossible since he was not in the line of succession from the current Emperor (Tiberius) He went to consult a fortune teller and demanded that she prophesy that one day he would rule the empire. She made him pay her first, and then the old fortuneteller said with a sneer on her face, "... you can no more be emperor than you can ride a horse across the Bay of Naples. Now get away from me you arrogant pup." Caligula stomped away but left this parting comment, "You'll regret your insolence." Caligula never forgot this perceived wrong done against him. He continued to focus on this incident and his bitterness grew through the years. In time, through political maneuvering and murder, Caligula became the Emperor. One of his first acts was to send troops into the city to find the old fortune teller. The soldiers however returned with news that she had died years earlier. Caligula was enraged and decided that if he couldn't get revenge against her, he would get it against her ghost. He remembered her comment that he could no more be Emperor than he could ride a horse across the bay of Naples. The Bay of Naples was a 6 mile wide body of water, but Caligula knew how he would get his revenge. He ordered the harbormasters throughout Italy to send all ships to the Bay of Naples. About 3,000 ships were sent but that wasn't enough. Caligula ordered another 1,000 ships to be built to accomplish his mad scheme. Finally, all the boats were tied together and stretched all across the Bay. The decks were covered with dirt and packed down to make a road. Then Caligula on his horse led a 200 horse Calvary and 2,000 Infantry men across the Bay of Naples. On the other side of the bay he launched a party of drinking and rioting that nearly destroyed the town. Over 300 people were trampled or knocked into the bay during the rioting. The rioting and partying drained the royal treasury. Because all the ships had been taken from their owners, and ½ of them had been sunk in a storm that hit the bay, they couldn't import grain from Egypt and a famine swept the land and multitudes died. All this was because of Caligula's focus on a past perceived wrong done to him. His choice to focus on the past greatly crippled the Roman Empire. Admittedly that's an extreme example, but I wonder how much suffering and misery have been caused because of a person focusing on the past and especially wrong done to or by them in the past.

Tonight I want us to deal with some stuff in our past and then learn how to choose a forward focus and even grow through the things we did in the past and also the things that were done to us.

I. A Proper Assessment (V12a, 13a)

In the Greek, the word translated "attained" in verse 12 and the word translated "apprehended" in verse 13 are from the same root word. Both words mean to obtain or lay hold of. What is Paul referring to about

himself that he has not laid hold of or obtained? Let's look farther. He tells us in the last part of verse 12, "...that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me." What is the ultimate purpose for which we were saved (laid hold of by Christ)? The immediate answer is "to glorify God and enjoy Him forever", and that is certainly correct, but what is the ultimate expression of that? It's when we are conformed to the likeness of Christ. **Romans 8:29 (NKJV)** "For whom He foreknew, He also predestined *to be* conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren." The ultimate purpose of God for His children is that we be conformed to the image or likeness of Christ. Our God is so committed to that purpose that He has predestined it. In these bodies of flesh, even the Apostle Paul had not attained to, laid hold of that lofty desire. What he is speaking of here is not our position of being "in Christ" and being a partaker of His life and his righteousness. He is talking about our walk, our behavior, our manner of life in this evil world filled with values that are the opposite of what God values. Paul was never satisfied with his progress in moving toward Christ likeness. Are you? Someone may say, "Didn't he tell us in Philippians 4:11 that he had learned to be content in every circumstance?" Yes, but let's look at the context. In Philippians 4:11 Paul is talking about his external conditions that God chose for him. **Philippians 4:11-12 (NIV)** "¹¹ I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. ¹² I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want."

In our text, Paul is not talking about perfectionism. He's talking about a hunger and thirst for spiritual growth and maturity and Christ likeness. Our problem is that we tend to compare ourselves with one another instead of with Christ. There are so many people who come to church with a sign around their neck – "Do not disturb". They are satisfied. When we become satisfied, He's not!

Verses 12a and 13a are the death blow to the false doctrine of perfectionism or "total sanctification" that some groups teach. Many of the holiness groups believe in a second work of grace whereby we can live completely above sin. The Apostle Paul was undoubtedly the most spiritually mature, dedicated, committed Christian who has ever lived, and he tells us two times in two verses that he has not arrived. The Puritan Richard Baxter said, "This life is not intended to be the place of our perfection, but the preparation for it".

II. A Passionate Pursuit (V12b)

A literal translation of this last part of verse 12 would be "I am pursuing that I may lay hold of that for which I was laid hold for." That phrase "press on" pictures aggressive behavior. It was used of an athlete who runs without swerving from the course and is straining every muscle as he runs. Spiritual maturity and victory over sin does not come easy. It's not a flippant "Just let go and let God" approach to walk victorious over sin and to grow in Christ-likeness. Certainly, we cannot walk in this constant victory in our own power, by simply being disciplined and focused. We must have God's enabling grace. I love the balance of Dr. J. I. Packer: "Instead of 'Let go and let God', we should be saying 'Trust God and get going.'" You see that perfect balance between our purposed heart and trusting God for the power to obey when the Apostle Paul said in **1 Corinthians 15:10 (NASB)** "But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but **I labored** even more than all of them, **yet not I**, but **the grace of God with me.**"

III. A Precise Focus (V13b)

Paul was determined to narrow his focus and desires down to one thing. His focus was not on his external conditions (he had learned to be content whatever they were); his focus was not on whether he lived or died physically. In Philippians 1:20b he says, "... so now also Christ will be magnified in my body whether by life or by death." Paul was determined to focus on one thing – magnifying Christ by manifesting Christ's life in Paul's daily walk. That is what John spoke of in **1 John 4:17b (NKJV)** "...as He is, so are we in this world." This "one thing" of pleasing God and manifesting Christ's life as long as the Father let him here consumed Paul. Whether he had plenty or lived in abject poverty didn't really matter. Whether he lived or died physically didn't really matter. All that mattered was that he press on to

that for which he was saved – to be conformed to the likeness of Christ and thus magnify Christ in his body.

The difference between a mighty river and a swamp is not necessarily in the amount of water. It is in the fact that the river is channeled or focused. Our problem is that we are swamps always being divided between what the world offers and our desire to be conformed to the likeness of Christ. Instead of “one thing I do”, it’s “these 300 things I dabble in”. Are you determined to do whatever it takes, remove anything questionable in your life that the Father reveals, pay any price to see Christ magnified in your body? I am convinced that the devil’s main tactic with us is to divert us and cause us to lose our focus on the main thing.

This focus involves forgetting some things, (V13b) “forgetting those things which are behind”. The word “forget” doesn’t mean to erase from our memory banks. It means to no longer be influenced by or controlled by things from our past. When we talk about forgetting those things that are behind, we are talking about dealing with the past and then refusing to linger and let it control us today or tomorrow or forever.

What are some things we choose to forget? First, we must forget past glories. When we focus on past successes and past good times, it can either puff us up with pride or make us nostalgic and desire to live in the past. That is deadly! We celebrate what God has done and give Him glory because it was all a gift of His grace, but then we refuse to live in or be controlled by past successes and glories. Second, we choose to forget past Guilt. Once we deal with our guilt by confession and repentance, we refuse to dwell on and allow our past to control us. Let me give you a little tool to dissuade the enemy to keep bringing us your past sins. Every time your past failures come to mind (know that God didn’t bring them back) just start praising God for his grace and mercy in forgiving you of those sins. When the enemy sees that his accusations become an opportunity for you to praise and worship the Lord, he is reluctant to bring them up. I saw something on a church sign once that said, “The next time Satan reminds you of your past, you remind him of his future.” When thoughts of past sins and failures come back to our mind, we choose to obey **2 Corinthians 10:5b (NKJV)** “...bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ.” Many times the continual wallowing in past sin is rooted in pride. Our continuing to be controlled by our sin and being miserable is a way of paying for our sin. Only the blood of Christ cleanses us from sin!

A third category of what we must forget is Grudges, wrongs done to us. You need to realize how holding a grudge (bitterness) affects us. Holding a grudge or harboring bitterness is simply a failure to forgive someone who has wronged you. That bitterness (unforgiveness) will bring you under its control and divert you from the “one thing” in verse 13. You will never be able to forget wrongs done to you in the sense of wiping the hurts out of your memory banks, but you can forget them in the biblical sense of that word. “Forget” means that we deal with the offense by forgiving the person and placing them in God’s hand for any retribution, punishment, discipline or vengeance that needs to be carried out and we refuse to go back to the offense to dwell on it, re-live it or hold it over the head of the other person. Forgiveness is a one time decision followed by a lifetime of discipline in choosing to forget daily the offense done against you. We choose to forget past glories, guilt, past grudges. There are more things we need to forget, but those are the three most common.

Notice the direction we choose to focus on – “...reaching forward to those things which are ahead”. That phrase “reaching forward” refers to stretching in a race to break the tape. We break the power of the past when we reach forward to the future, when we focus on God’s plans, God’s assignments, and ultimately God’s “well done” when we go to be with Him. When a runner in a race looks backward it slows him down and often causes him to stumble and sometimes even to fall. That phrase “reaching forward” is a present tense and refers to continuing action. I think that the thing we are reaching forward to is best summarized in **Philippians 3:10 (NKJV)** “that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death”.

Understand this; we do not live in denial of the past and try to bury it, repress it, and play mental games. We recognize it, understand how it has programmed our flesh, take the Biblical action required which is to repent and confess our sins, and if the past includes having wrong done to us, we forgive the wrong, and claim God’s healing grace. Then we choose not to dwell there (forget), and set our eyes on the future

and the goal of a life of obedience and abiding in Him so that our walk magnifies Him and we become more and more Christ like in our manner of life.

IV. A Pressing Motivation (V14)

The word “goal” is literally “goal marker”. It is the end of the race, the tape. The word “press toward” is an intense word. It was used of a hunter diligently pursuing his prey and an athlete straining every muscle as he runs for the tape. The prize is not getting to go to heaven. The prize involves an “upward call”. What is that? Chrysostom was one of the early church leaders who lived 1700 years closer to the time this passage was written than we do. He said that in the games (much like our Olympics) the retired greats sat on a raised platform on the field. Their task was to hand out the rewards (like our medals). Normally, they would go to the athlete and reward him, but when someone had an exceptional race or event, they would be called up on the platform to be rewarded. This was known as the “upward call”. Paul is saying, “As long as God leaves me here I want to strain every muscle and focus on pleasing Him in the time I have left and daily becoming more like Christ and keep my eyes on the finish line so that when my race is over I will get the upward call and hear my Savior’s ‘well done good and faithful servant’.” That upward call will not come as long as we focus on the past and allow our sins to weigh us down, like running a race with 15 pound weights strapped around our ankles. The upward call will not come if we refuse to forgive those who have wronged us that we have held on the bitterness and refused to forgive. I’m not saying that those who focus on the past will not go to Heaven; I am saying that they will lose reward and more importantly lose the opportunity of hearing the Lord’s “well done”.

CONCLUSION

I want to encourage you to look back and ask God for wisdom to know what you need to forget. I mean to receive insight as to how your flesh was programmed, and to understand why you tend to fall into certain sins and have certain weaknesses. Then, deal with it biblically and forget it (choose not to go back there). Now, focus your entire being on this one goal – to magnify Christ in your body and to experience **Philippians 3:10 (NKJV)** “that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death”.

We have the glorious privilege of seeing the very end of Paul’s life recorded. 2 Timothy was written a few days before Paul was martyred. He recorded these words in **2 Timothy 4:6-8 (NKJV)** “⁶For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure is at hand. ⁷I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. ⁸Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing.” That is the equivalent of a sprinter’s fist pump!