

# Forgetting The Past And Looking Ahead

## *Series on Philipians*

When I was 15 years old there were two important things in my life. One was important to my parents and the other was important to me. Both of these important things required study, patience, discipline, determination and effort. The important thing for my parents was that I pass the High School leaving exam which would enable me to get into University. But passing that exam wasn't top of my priority list. So I concentrated on the thing that was important to me, which was getting my driver's license. I studied the road code, disciplined myself to learn the traffic rules, practised my driving on the farm tractor, and watched the driving of others when I was a passenger in the car. I finished that year failing my school exam, which didn't please my parents, but passing my driving test, which pleased me immensely!

Isn't it interesting how we can be determined in one area of our lives, and yet be so slack in another? If we are determined to buy a car or house, we can save, take on extra jobs, cut back on expenditure and do anything we need to do to achieve the goal. If we are determined to gain a qualification, we will stay up half the night studying, reading, writing essays and doing assignments to get the marks that will give us a pass. If we are determined to lose weight, it's amazing how disciplined we can be if we really put our minds to it. If we set ourselves a goal of running the London marathon next year, we would get ourselves out of bed on cold and frosty mornings and be out pounding the pavement to get our body into shape. To achieve these things requires determination, drive, grit, gumption, energy, vision, single-mindedness and commitment. It takes all those things to last the distance. Most athletes interviewed at the Olympics talk about their achievements being the result of what was going on in their heads. It's making a decision and following that decision through with commitment.

The same is true of the Christian race. The Apostle Paul describes the determination needed by using the image of a runner with his mind set on the finish line. Every muscle, every ounce of energy, every thought is focused on the finish. He paints this picture of us giving it everything we have got, straining forward for the prize at the end. Listen to the sense of determination that comes through in today's passage of scripture: ***"But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ--the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. 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.***

***Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: 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."*** (Philippians 3: 7-14)

So how determined are you in following Jesus? These verses of scripture come as a bit of the shock in these days of flabby Christianity. We go to church if we feel like it. We use our money for the Kingdom if we have any left over. We teach in Children's ministry, or help out with the teenagers if we can be bothered. We go to a prayer meeting if it's not too cold or if it's not raining. It's not very popular to talk about the disciplined Christian life these days. Mostly it's about doing what feels good. A few weeks ago I mentioned the great concert pianist Paderewski. Of the pianists of the last hundred years, he was recognised as one of the world's best. How did he get to be so good? He practiced the piano eight hours a day for more than 50 years of his life.

So how do we get to be a determined follower of Jesus? Paul says that if we are going to be finishers in the Christian life, we have to forget what lies behind, and press on to what lies ahead.

- **Forget what lies behind.**

No one ever won a race by focussing on what has already past. If we are going to stay in this race until the very end, we are going to have to develop the habit of forgetfulness. Some of you are probably thinking that you don't even have to work at this one, as it's happening anyway. On June 12, 1999, George Bush Senior celebrated his seventy-fifth birthday by jumping from an aeroplane. His wife Barbara Bush was not amused. "If the jump doesn't kill him," she said, "I will!" In fact, Barbara nearly got her wish. George "forgot" to pull the rip cord on his parachute! Fortunately he was tandem skydiving, and the instructor activated the parachute. Some clever person has changed the "Serenity Prayer" into the "Senility Prayer" **"God grant me the senility to forget the people I never liked anyway, the good fortune to run into the ones I do, and the eyesight to tell the difference"**. Here are three things to forget if we are to finish the race.

- 1. Forget the sins that have been done by us**

There are sins that we have committed in the past that will cripple us if we don't deal with them and put them behind us. Paul had a past, but in order to be effective for Christ, he had to leave his past behind. He used to beat up Christians and have them put in prison. He was an accessory to Stephen's murder. What sort of useless disciple would Paul have been if he hadn't confessed his sins of the past and asked the Lord for forgiveness? You can't run a race when you are dragged down by the guilt of the past. It's like trying to run a race with lead boots on. If you are going to be free from the guilt of your past, you have to confess it, ask the Lord for forgiveness, lay it at the foot of the Cross, and choose to walk away from it. The Lord will forgive you, but if you choose to not forgive yourself, you are making a choice to stay trapped in your past.

- 2. Forget the sins that have been done to us**

If you have lived on this earth for any length of time, you will have had people who have hurt you. That's a consequence of living in a fallen world. Unless you are going to shut yourself away in your home and never have contact with people, that sort of stuff is going to keep happening. You have no control over other people hurting you. But you do have control over how you deal with it. You can either spend your whole life going back to the hurts of the past, or you can forgive. Going back over all the ways people have hurt you will consume all your energy, and will make you a hard and bitter person. Eventually, unforgiveness will kill you.

In 1880, James Garfield was elected President of the United States, but after only six months in office, he was shot in the back with a revolver. He was taken to hospital, where the doctor probed the wound with his little finger, to see if he could locate the bullet. He couldn't. He tried different probes, but couldn't locate the bullet. They kept the President as comfortable as they could, and over the next three months, sixteen different doctors each had a go at trying to find the bullet. Each one probed and poked. Through the months of summer the President got weaker and weaker. Finally, he died. He didn't die from the bullet wound, but from infection. All the probing, which the Doctors thought would help him, eventually killed him. That's what happens when we keep probing the wrongs done to us and don't release them to God. Infection sets in, and eventually it kills us.

All of us have bullet wounds from things that others have done to us. Forgiveness is the only thing that brings healing. Paul had every reason to be bitter about this past. He was beaten with rods on three occasions. Five different times he was whipped with 39 lashes. Once he was stoned. Many times he was put in prison. If he had kept probing and poking those wounds, the infection of bitterness would have set in and killed him. But he was able to give all that to the Lord and then forget it. Can you do that? Can you give those bullet wounds to the Lord and then forget them? When Jesus taught his disciples to pray he said this: **"This, then, is how you should pray: 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.' For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins."** (Matthew 6: 9-15)

If you are going to run the race, you will need to ask the Lord to forgive your sins, and to forgive those who sin against you. Then, having been forgiven, and having forgiven others, we need to forget what lies behind.

### **3. Forget our Successes**

There is something else to leave behind too. We need to leave behind all our successes. Coronation Street is the longest running soap operas in the world. One of the characters from the first 17 years of the show was Albert Tatlock. Albert was a returned soldier who was always telling patrons of the Rovers Return his stories about the war. It was the same stories, year in and year out, and people got tired of listening. He was a sad character. It was as if his boring life was punctuated by one brief burst of glory, then he spent the rest of his life living off the memories. But there are Christians like Albert Tatlock. God used them in some mighty way in the past, and now they are living off the memories. They are like the children of Israel who tried to store up the manna in the desert, when they should have been out trusting God for fresh manna each day. It went rotten. It was full of maggots. When we try and live off yesterday's adventures with God, it becomes stale and full of maggots. You can't live an adventurous Christian life today, by looking back on the glories of the past. You can't live a vital Christian life on stale grace. It can happen to individuals. It can happen to churches. I can think of churches that once knew great blessing from God. They were packed full. People were getting saved every week. They were brimming with life and vitality. But the people stopped looking forward. They settled down, and became self satisfied, full and contented, living on their reputation. As a result, they withered and died. No matter how good the past was for Westlake, we have to leave it behind.

- **Press on to what lies ahead.**

Paul says this: **"But one thing I do: 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."** While he was still running the race, Paul had this vision of him standing on the rostrum before King Jesus, and hearing Jesus say "Well done!". That was his focus. His eyes were on the prize. He was looking ahead. Some of you that are elderly and have run a good race are looking ahead to your graduation day, when you stand before your King. Some of you that have recently retired are looking ahead to the adventure of retirement, when you can finally get to do things for the Lord that you never had time to do in your working career. Some of you that still have family at home are looking ahead to the time when the children are out of the house, and you have a bit more financial freedom to be able to do things for God that you are unable to do at present. Some of you are just launching out on a career, or marriage, or have a young family, and you are looking ahead to the exciting possibilities of living these next few years in an adventure with God. There are students and teenagers who have just begun the romance of Christian living, and your mind is beginning to open up to the amazing dimensions of the Kingdom of God, and how you can spend the rest of your life serving the Lord. Some of you are children, and you are just beginning this race, all excited about knowing Jesus, and following him for the rest of your life.

Wherever you are in this race, press on. Strain towards what is ahead. Give it everything you have got. It's going to take everything you have, but with Gods help, you will make it to the end. Let this be the motto for the rest of your life - **"But one thing I do: 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."**

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