

AN EXPOSITION OF PHILIPPIANS 3:13: HOW TO FORGET YOUR PAST!

~ Rev. Paul R. Shockley

Philippians 3:13

*Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do:
forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead,*

I. Introduction:

Sometimes our past is our worst enemy.

Have you ever found yourself telling someone about an unpleasant experience you've had whereby you have been wronged in some way. As you tell the story anger or pain builds up inside of you, you get excited and emotional, your skin becomes red, and your facial muscles become distorted. And when they ask, "When did this happen," you reply, "Five years ago this March."

There is so much in that moment of re-telling stories. Memory can bring back the pain of that event as if it happened yesterday. Many people have difficulty forgetting wrongs done to them in the past, saying something like, "How can I ever get over the hurt of being betrayed by who I thought was my best friend?" "I can never trust my spouse again." "How can I ever forgive my parents, my siblings, my neighbors?" "How can I get beyond the rejection of my own children?" "My boss is a fiend!" Other still find it difficult to forget the years spent in rebellion against God and that past comes back to haunt them, whether they are non-believers or believers. Regardless, *they consider themselves useless to God*. Some of these people do want to serve God, but can never seem to take the first step, and take that step with joy. And if even if they do take some steps forward, they lose endurance to finish the race well. Then there are those who live in the past, with nearly every conversation turning back to their past accomplishments. I remember when I...or "I always did it this way"...they are people who always speak in *past tense*, whose lives are neutralized by their past accomplishments, achievements, and traditions.

I say all that to say, so many of us struggle with our past, finding it almost impossible to forget it about it and move forward, whether it is past mistakes or great accomplishments. Yes, indeed, all too often our past can be our worst enemy. "*We find it easy to forget what we should remember, and remember what we should forget.*" ~ Mary Whechel

Transition:

What does the Apostle Paul mean by forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead. This morning we are going to examine what the apostle Paul means in Philippians 3:13. We will then proceed to consider how we should live. We will ask ourselves questions like "How was the apostle able to get beyond his own past mistakes and great accomplishments?" In particular, I will be focusing on how to forget the past so that this will not continue to keep us from reaching for the prize of the upward call of Jesus Christ.

Context:

Let me begin by setting the context:

Though the apostle Paul was a spiritual giant in the eyes of the Philippian saints, he explains to them in Phil. 3:12 that he has not yet “*gained possession*” or “*laid hold of*” all that he seeks to be when he says, “*Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me.*”

Let’s consider the apostle Paul:

1. Historically, Paul’s salvation experience had taken place about 30 years before he wrote to the Philippians. He had won many spiritual battles in that time for he has been greatly used by God to extend the gospel of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles in Asia Minor.
2. Unlike the Judaizers, whose influence was prevalent among the Philippians, the apostle did not claim to have attained spiritual maturity.
3. As we look at verse 12, we realize that even though the Apostle Paul had grown much in those years, he candidly confesses in this verse that he had not gained possession of all that he seeks to be; in other words, he has not reached the state of completion as a Christian (v. 12). So, Paul presses on (present tense verb), or pursues continuously with all deliberate speed to receive the prize Christ has for him.¹
4. At the end of verse 12, he states, “*but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me.*” He is going to seize Christ just as Christ seized him. If you recall, Christ had dramatically and suddenly seize Saul on the road to Damascus, and his life was never the same; Saul became Paul. So, in the same way, Paul seeks to grasp Christ, to know and love Jesus as much as Jesus loves and knows Him.

In sum, Paul pursued Christlikeness with the enthusiasm and persistence of a runner like those who participated in the Greek games. Unlike the Judaizers, the apostle did not claim to have attained spiritual maturity. He was still pressing on, pursuing Christ Jesus in the same way He took hold of him. Nor had Paul yet taken hold of or attained perfection or ultimate conformity to Christ.

II. Exposition of Philippians 3:13:

The Apostle Paul, addressing the brethren at Philippi states:

Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead,

¹ According to the NET BIBLE, The adjective *perfect* comes from the same root as the verb *perfected* in v. 12; Paul may well be employing a wordplay to draw in his opponents. Thus, *perfect* would then be in quotation marks and Paul would then argue that no one – neither they nor he – is in fact perfect. The thrust of vv. 1-16 is that human credentials can produce *nothing* that is pleasing to God (vv. 1-8). Instead of relying on such, Paul urges his readers to trust God for their righteousness (v. 9) rather than their own efforts, and at the same time to press on for the prize that awaits them (vv. 12-14). He argues further that perfection is unattainable in this life (v. 15), yet the level of maturity that one has reached should not for this reason be abandoned (v. 16).

Better yet, I like the way the *NET Bible* translates verse 13:

3:13 Brothers and sisters,¹⁹ I do not consider myself to have attained this. Instead I am single-minded:²⁰ Forgetting the things that are behind and reaching out for the things that are ahead,

1. But one thing I do: “*I do*” or “*This one thing*” (I do)
 - A. **First observation: The Apostle Paul is focused.** Though the words “*I do*” are supplied, the phrase, “*This one thing*” is not:
 1. He is not divided; Paul’s statement implies a singular-minded perspective.
 2. It is purposeful and pro-active.
 - B. Second observation requires examining the word “*forgetting*” in “*forgetting what lies behind...*”

In English the word “*forget*” has six nuances:

1. **Not remembering**, that is to fail or be unable to remember something.”
2. **Leave behind.** Ex. *I’ve forgotten my keys again.*”
3. **Neglect somebody or something:** to fail to give due attention to somebody or something. Ex. “*Don’t forget who your friends are.*”
4. **Stop thinking or worrying about somebody or something** such as “*I’d just forget about it if I were you.*”
5. **Failing to mention someone or something.**
6. **Lose control:** To lose control of your manners, emotions, or behavior. For example, “*Oh dear, I am forgetting myself! Let me take your jacket.*”
 - a. **Synonyms:** “not to remember, not to recall, fail to remember, overlook, stop thinking about, put of your mind, disregard, put behind you.”
 - b. **Antonyms:** “Opposite of forgetting is remembering, thinking about.”

2. Unlike the English, Greek notion “forget” possesses two basic nuances:

- A. **Forget** (Matthew 16:5; Mark 8:14; Philippians 3:13; Heb 6:10; Jas 1:24+); or
- B. **Neglect, overlook** (Luke 12:6; Hebrews 13:2, 16)²

²Swanson, James: *Dictionary of Biblical Languages With Semantic Domains : Greek (New Testament)*. electronic ed. Oak Harbor : Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997, S. GGK2140

1. On the latter usage, one example might suffice. Hebrews 13:2: “*But do not forget to do good and to share, for with such sacrifices for God is well pleased.*”
 2. Going back to the first Greek nuance for “forget”: ἐπιλανθάνομαι^a; ἐπιλησμονή, ἧς f: this word means, “to not recall information concerning some particular matter—‘to forget, to not recall.’ ἐπιλανθάνομαι^a: ἔν δέ, τὰ μὲν ὀπίσω ἐπιλανθανόμενος ‘the one thing (I do), however, is to forget what is behind me’ Php 3.13.
 - a. This word is also used in James 1:25: ἐπιλησμονή: οὐκ ἀκροατῆς ἐπιλησμονῆς γενόμενος “do not be one who hears and then forgets”.³
 3. Therefore, the context cannot be “neglect” or “overlook”:

“but one things I do, I overlook or neglect those things which are behind.”
 4. Rather, Paul is using the first nuance, “to not recall information.” Paul is not saying I am forgetting some things or am partially remembering. So, our second observation is that the word forget and how it is used here means, “**forgetting completely**” or “**not recalling at all.**”
 5. In fact, the participle in the Greek is in *present tense* (deponent verb) with directive force. So, he is completely forgetting.
3. In light of all this information let me now retranslate this portion of the passage, “***I am single-minded, I, in fact, am forgetting completely the things that are behind,***”
 4. What does he mean by “*forgetting completely the past*”? Second, how is this even possible?
 - a. Earlier in chapter three the Apostle Paul does in fact recall his past heritage (the good, bad, and the ugly) as reflected in Philippians 3:5-7 and his accomplishments in 3:8 that he attained.
 - b. Looking more closely at this issue, let’s turn to Phil. 3:2-7 [read this passage]:
 1. **Regarding his past heritage**, he considered them to be unimportant. In fact, the word “*loss*” indicates that which is damaged or of no further use.
 - a. The bottom line is that those things which the apostle Paul thought considered important became unimportant after being confronted by the Resurrected Jesus Christ.
 2. **Regarding his accomplishments**, verse 8 states, “*Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my lord, who whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ, 9, and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith.*”

³Louw, Johannes P. ; Nida, Eugene Albert: *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament : Based on Semantic Domains*. electronic ed. of the 2nd edition. New York : United Bible societies, 1996, c1989, S. 1:347

- a. In essence, the value of knowing Christ surpasses everything else. In fact, any accomplishment he obtained or received, he counted as rubbish. This word “*rubbish*” in the Greek has a very strong association. It has been used to refer to anything that is detestable and worthless such as filth, manure, food that is un-nourishing (left over parts), or food that is thrown away from the table; it is unusable, it points to something that has absolutely no value.
3. Thus, the Apostle Paul does recall both his past activities and his accomplishments. It would be a totally gross misinterpretation to argue that he doesn't remember.

Rather, our conclusion is that Paul refused to be controlled or absorbed by his past heritage (vv. 5-7) or his attainments (v. 8). This is substantiated by looking at the rest of verse 13 and verse 14:

“and reaching forward to those which are ahead,¹⁴ I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”

4. Paul uses an illustration here of a Greek runner completely forgetting his opponents whom he is leading in the race. Just as a runner's speed is slackened should he think of those behind him, and the thud, thud of their pounding feet, so the Apostle Paul knows that his onward progress is hindered should he dwell on the past full of accomplishments, failures, sins, heartaches, discouragements, disappointments, and even thwarted hopes and plans.⁴
5. The winner in those games was called to the place where the judge sat in order to receive his prize. This prize Paul may have referred to could be ultimate salvation in God's presence or receiving rewards at “the judgment seat of Christ” (2 Cor. 5:10).
6. Therefore, Paul is focused on one thing: winning the prize, doing what God has called him to do. He is candid to tell us that he doesn't have his act totally together, and he's in the process of becoming what God desires him to be. *But* in order to do that, he knows that he must forget what is behind and focus on the future.
7. Once more, let's think about Paul's past:
 - a. Zealous persecutor of the church; his enemies were those who identified with the Lord Jesus Christ, persecuting and killing Christians for their faith, before his conversion.
 - b. Paul was a failure, defeated by sin, for he says:

⁴Wuest, Kenneth S.: *Wuest's Word Studies from the Greek New Testament : For the English Reader*. Grand Rapids : Eerdmans, 1997, c1984, S. Php 3:13

1. **Romans 7:24-25**, “*O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? I thank God-through Jesus Christ our lord!*” All of his plans for serving the God had not succeeded even though he worked so hard in obeying the law and did his best to earn eternal life by self-effort.

The apostle Paul came to the realization that he could never, ever be good enough for salvation; salvation is by receiving God’s grace, not by doing noble deeds. Rather, he came to the realization, in his discourse in the Book of Romans (chapters 3-5) that the moment we believe that Jesus is God, that He died on the cross for our sins and rose again, receiving that gift of salvation by faith alone in Christ alone, we receive eternal life that can never be taken away, loss; it is all encompassing. Our past is redeemed, our present condition is redeemed, and our future is secure. We are liberated by the penalty of sin (eternal death), the enslaving power of sin (present condition), and will one day be saved perfectly, whereby we will no longer have the capacity to sin (perfect sanctification).

2. In his confession in **Romans 7:15**, Paul says, “*For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do.*”
 - c. Paul also had relationship problems in his past:
 1. He had a disagreement in his ministry with Barnabas over Mark.
 2. People questioned his office of apostleship.
 - d. He also had much success in his past, much he could be proud of: his planting of numerous churches across Asia Minor, the author of many N.T. manuscripts, the recognition by N.T. apostles like Peter, and witnessing the incredible use of God’s power as He shared the Gospel of Jesus Christ from Jerusalem to Rome. But that also had to be forgotten. The apostle knew he couldn’t live in the victories of the past and still be effective in the Lord’s work.

So, he determined to forget what was behind him in order to attain the heavenly goal that was before him. How did he do it was refusing to be controlled or absorbed by his past heritage (vv. 5-7) or his attainments (v. 8). Rather, his focus was acute, his goal was set: Jesus Christ.

III. HOW SHOULD WE THEN LIVE?

For some of us it seems very hard to progress forward because of past situations and attainments. It as if you have this bungee cord wrapped around your waist, if not your neck, fostering resistance with every step you make. Finally, exhausted from the strain, you just give up, then let go, and...smack, there you are again! Same place, same song! You still dwell in the past, never able to look forward to see what God has in store for you.

If our past, present, and future is redeemed and past activities and self-accomplishments are considered rubbish before Christ, then how can we refuse to be controlled or absorbed by the power of our memories and attainments?

As N.T. Scholar Hawthorne states: "Forget those wrongs done, e.g. the persecution of the church (v 6), and so on, whose memory could paralyze one with guilt and despair. Forget, too, those attainments so far achieved as a Christian, the recollection of which might cause one to put life into neutral and to say, 'I have arrived.' Forget in such a way that the past, good or bad, will have no negative bearing on one's present spiritual growth or conduct."⁵

The following ten principles might help us learn not to allow our past to dominate our present reality and potential future as we strive to walk intimately with God.

1. **Remember that sin is conquered by God's forgiveness;** there is no exception. Forgive yourself because you are a recipient of God's grace. Every time you feel the regret well up inside of you, and you confessed that sin, you asked for forgiveness by those whom you hurt, dismiss it; don't feed it. The reason why is, if you are a believer, your past is covered in God's grace. We have to count it to be true that God has forgiven us. *If the God of the Bible has forgiven us, shouldn't we forgive ourselves?*
2. **You can never forget your past apart from God.** If you have find yourself absorbed by your memories, pray and meditate on the biblical doctrine of grace, counting it to be true. Without God's grace, a victimized mindset, an unforgiving spirit, or past regrets can foster into bitterness. And bitterness robs joy, poisons peace, sours love, and makes others who love you-miserable.
3. **Deliberately choose not to allow your past to control you; it is a choice you must make.** The Apostle Paul is continuously making that choice; he is not going to allow his past regrets or accomplishments to haunt him; they are worthless to him. Forgetting your past does not mean that it excuses the other person's sin nor does it guarantee that he or she will not hurt you again. Rather, forgetting the past means you are not going to dwell on it. Moreover, you aren't going use the past to manipulate or control the present or potential future.
4. **Forgetting involves asking forgiveness of others.** If you have wronged others:
 - a. Acknowledge what you did wrong.
 - b. Ask for forgiveness to the hurting party.
 - c. Recognize the consequences for your wrongdoing without argument or excuse.

⁵Hawthorne, p. 153. Gordon Fee, *Paul's Letter . . .*, p. 347, believed that the Apostle Paul was referring to looking at the other runners in the race when he spoke of not looking back; that seems to lack support to me in view of the meaning of "forget" and its use elsewhere.

- d. Reflect upon how you are going to act differently the next time; be determined not to pursue that course of action again.
1. "Bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you." (Col. 3:13);
 2. The Lord's Prayer... "Forgive us of our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil for Thine is the kingdom, the power, the dominion forever. Amen."
5. **God understands the challenge of forgiving those who hurt us.** He does not forbid the believer to feel the result of a wrongdoing...but He does ask us to forgive them:
- a. Matthew 18:21-22:

Then Peter came and said to Him, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven."
 - b. Mark 11:25:

"When you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father who is in heaven will also forgive you your transgressions."
 - c. Ephesians 4:32:

"Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace."
 - d. Colossians 3:13:

"Bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you."
 - e. 1 John 1:9:

"If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."
6. **Human credentials can produce nothing that is pleasing to God.** If we are living upon past accomplishments we need to ask ourselves the following questions:
- a. Does my life qualify as a success in God's eyes?
 - b. Am I being a good steward of the things God has given me (health, prosperity, family, work, home, church, etc)?
 - c. Have the goals I set for myself been honorable to God;
 - d. Have they been worthy of the years and energy I poured into them?
 - e. When I stand before the Jesus Christ at the Judgment Seat of Jesus Christ, will I hear "Well done, my good and faithful servant. You are an overcomer!"

- f. How can I be sure that the legacy I leave is one that my family will inherit?
7. **Those of us who think we have attained spiritual superiority--give it up;** it is pride puffed up; common sense people can see right through it. Rather, God asks us to be people of humility as reflected in chapter 2...willing to minister and be ministered to.
 8. **If you aren't pro-actively walking with God, don't be surprised to discover that forgetting the past is difficult.**
 9. **Learn to recognize haunting memories for what they are--an attack from the flesh, energized by dark spiritual forces.**
 10. **Don't wait until you can get the past behind you before you start focusing on God; start where you are.** You can't change the past. What's done is done. Move on because you are redeemed by God's grace and make sure that if you are ever in that situation again, you will choose that which will demonstrate your love to God the most.

IV. CONCLUSION:

Corrie Ten Boom and her family secretly housed Jews in the home during WW II. Their "illegal" activity was discovered and Corrie and her sister Betsie were sent to the German death camp Ravensbruck. There Corrie would watch many, including her sister, die.

After the war she returned to Germany to declare the grace of Christ. She writes:

It was 1947 and I'd come from Holland to defeated Germany with the message that God forgives. It was the truth that the needed most to hear in that bitter, bombed-out land, and I gave them my favorite mental picture. Maybe because the sea is never far from a Hollander's mind, I liked to think that where's forgiven sins were thrown.

"When we confess our sins," I said, "God casts them into the deepest ocean, gone forever. And even though I cannot find a Scripture for it, I believe God then places a sign out there that says, 'NO FISHING ALLOWED!'"

The solemn faces stared back at me, not quite daring to believe. And that's when I saw him, working his way forward against the others. One moment I saw the overcoat and the brown hat; the next, a blue uniform and a cap with skulls and crossbones. It came back with a rush—the huge room with its harsh overhead lights, the pathetic pile of dresses and shoes in the center of the floor, the shame of walking naked past this man. I could see my sister's frail form ahead of me, ribs sharp beneath the parchment skin. Betsie, how thin you were! That place was Ravensbruck, and the man who was making his way forward had been a guard—one of the most cruel guards.

Now he was in front of me, hand thrust out: "A fine message, Fraulein! How good it is to know that, as you say, all our sins are at the bottom of the sea!" And I, who had spoken so glibly of forgiveness, fumbled in my pocketbook rather than take that hand. He would not remember me, of course—how could he remember one prisoner among those thousands of women? But I remembered him. I was face-to-face with one of my captors and my blood seemed to freeze.

“You mentioned Ravensbruck in your talk,” he as saying. “I was a guard there.” No, he did not remember me. “But since that time,” he went on, “I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well. Fraulein,”-again the hand came out-“will you forgive me?”

And I stood there-I whose sins had again and again to be forgiven-and could not forgive. Betsie had died in the place. Could he erase her slow terrible death simply for the asking? It could have been many seconds that he stood there-hand held out-but to me it seemed hours as I wrestled with the most difficult thing I had ever had to do.

For I had to do it--I knew it. The message that God forgives has a prior condition: that we forgive those who have injured us. ‘If you do not forgive men their trespasses,’ Jesus says, ‘neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses.’ And still I stood there with the coldness clutching my heart.

But forgiveness is not an emotion-I knew that too. Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart. “Jesus, help me!” I prayed silently. “I can lift my hand. I can do that much. You supply the feeling.” And so woodenly, mechanically, I thrust out my hand into the one stretched out to me. And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes.

“I forgive you, brother!” I cried. “With all my heart!” For a long moment we grasped each other’s hands, the former guard and the former prisoner. I have never known God’s love so intensely, as I did then. But even then, I realized it was not my love. I had tried, and did not have the power. It was the power of the Holy Spirit.

~ Corrie ten Boom, *Tramp for the Lord* (Berkley, 1978), pp. 53-55.