

## Opening Words

Does your personal history propel you to the future or imprison you in the past?

### 44 Phil – Forgetting What Lies Behind

Do you remember the old line that so many comedians began jokes or stories with? Here it is: “A funny thing happened on the way to” and then they would complete their sentence and go on with their joke or story. That phrase was their way of saying they were on their way to one place when something unusual or unexpected happened to them to steer them off course.

Well, the same thing happens to Christians, we can be on our way to lay hold of our destiny, to lay hold of that for which Christ laid hold of us, and a funny thing happens on the way, except that, it’s not really funny and can often be tragic. Something can happen to us to steer us off course and prevent us from laying hold of our purpose.

Today we are going to listen to a brief statement from Paul where he describes one of the obstacles that stands in the way of so many Christians from reaching forward and laying hold of the prize. It was an obstacle that Paul had to overcome. What is that obstacle? It is our past. Our past can keep us from pressing forward into the future.

Listen to Paul:

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 love the black and white nature of Paul’s statement. He says, “I forget what lies behind and I reach forward to what is ahead.”

I’m glad that Paul uses athletic imagery here because I like sports and enjoy playing and watching sports. I remember watching a football game years ago when Joe Montana was the quarterback of the 49ers. He was in his prime, winning Super Bowls and the commentators were explaining one of the many reasons for his greatness. They said: “he quickly forgets mistakes and goes on to the next play.” He could throw an interception one play, but the next time he was on the field, he was not lamenting that play but was moving his team forward toward the goal. He forgot what was behind and reached forward to what was ahead.

Recently I have been watching some basketball and I have noticed that a player can make a great basket but he has no time to celebrate. He must immediately run as fast as he can to defend against the next play by the opposing team. He has to forget what is behind and stay focused on the next play because the goal is not just to make one or two great plays. It is to win the entire game.

This is what we must learn to do – we must learn to forget what lies behind and reach forward to what lies ahead. Paul did it. Paul looked at his past and he could have let it control him in two ways. First, he could have looked at his past accomplishments, especially when he was sitting in jail

and thought, “did I make the right choice? I used to be #1 and applauded but now I am Public Enemy #1 and hunted down.”

This is what Paul is primarily talking about in this passage when he says he forgot what was behind him. He was talking about all his achievements because they were rubbish compared to what he had now. Paul did not let the past control him.

Paul could have let the past control him in a second way. He could have let guilt control him. He could have looked at his past and remembered all the wrongs he did to persecute the church, to pursue men and women, drag them out of their house, take them to trial, vote against them, and watch as they were executed. That did affect Paul at some times. In his first letter to Timothy, in chapter 1:13-15 he said:

I was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor. Yet I was shown mercy because I acted ignorantly in unbelief; <sup>14</sup> and the grace of our Lord was more than abundant, with the faith and love which are *found* in Christ Jesus. <sup>15</sup> It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost *of all*.

Paul did not let the past control him – in any way – to give him pride, to cause him to change directions for life, or to send him into depression. In this passage, in 1 Timothy, he speaks about his sins. He remembered them very well but he always remembered them in the context of the grace of Christ. He may have considered himself as the chief of sinners but he also considered himself as the chief recipient of grace and that is why he moved consistently to the future and did not let the past control him.

Let me ask you today. Does your personal history propel you to the future or imprison you in the past?

The past can imprison you in the same way that it could have imprisoned Paul. Perhaps you achieved great things and then you came to Christ and lost it all for him. At first, it seemed wonderful to follow Christ but as time wore on you wore down and that past life starts to look pretty good. You start to question, “did I make the right choice? Is it really worth it to follow Christ? When I didn’t have Christ I had more money, more possessions, more pleasures, more friends, more whatever and now look at me?”

I read a story in one of Chuck Colson’s books about a Soviet officer during the Cold War. He was advancing and was on the fast track to a prestigious job in the Kremlin. But then he met Christ and his life was changed. His superiors found out and when he would not renounce Christ he was stripped of his rank and shipped off to a remote site in the far reaches of Russia where few people lived. And there he lived for the rest of his life sweeping floors.

He could have looked back and regretted his choices but he did not let his past triumphs control his future with Christ. What was in the past was gain to him and lost to Christ and he learned that it was rubbish. He wanted Christ so he reached forward to what was ahead rather than back to what had been. The story concluded by saying that as he lived out his life in that lonely cold place,

sweeping floors, his character changed into the character of Jesus Christ and he became one of the saintliest and godliest of men with his example being a great encouragement to other Christians in the area. Don't you know that he is now glad that he continued to follow Christ and not let his past control him. He laid hold of that for which Christ Jesus laid hold of him and he has no regrets today for the choices he made. He forgot what was behind him and reached forward for the prize ahead of him.

The past can imprison us in other ways – our failures. I would like to read to you an excerpt of chapter 3 from my book, *The Prodigal Son and His Prodigal Father* where I talk about the past in my life. Here is what it says:

Romans 8:28 is a special and powerful verse. It is like a wall of protection, or like a roadblock to keep us from driving off a cliff. It will keep us from despair, give us hope, and move us in the right direction. I distinctly remember one day when God "opened the curtains" of my mind and flooded it with light. I was brooding over past failures and poor decisions. I knew God and others forgave me. I knew I would live with Him forever. Yet, regret continued to fill my soul. One day, it's as if God said, "Stop thinking that way. You don't know what would have happened if you had made other choices. Let the past go and trust Me to work out everything in your life. Quit holding yourself captive. Release yourself because I will get you to the goal that you thought you missed. I will work out everything in your life. I am the God of Romans 8:28."

God released me from my past, and I started enjoying forgiveness in the inner dimension for my bad choices and sins just as God and others had forgiven me. I moved into the light of God's new day as I trusted Him to be wise and powerful enough to take the jumbled mess of my life and bring order and beauty to it if I would trust and cooperate with Him.

What about you? Do you regret your bad choices? I hope in one way you have because all of us need to confess our sins but we must not let our past sins imprison us and keep us from the future. Remember how Paul talked about his past? He talked about it in the context of grace. Yes, he was the chief of sinners but God's grace was greater than his sin just like in the old hymn – "Grace, grace marvelous grace, grace that is greater than all our sin."

The great Baptist preacher C.H. Spurgeon said, "You cannot sin as much as God can forgive. If it comes to a pitched battle between sin and grace, you shall not be as bad as God is good. We can only sin as a man, but God can forgive as a God."

Maybe your past isn't about your sin. Maybe your past is about the sins of others towards you. I have worked with so many people who cannot move into the future because they are chained by the events of the past where someone traumatized them and fed them with lies. They have continued to walk with lies in their hearts up to this day – lies such as "I am worthless," "No one loves me," "It was all my fault," and a thousand other lies that bring us down.

But Jesus Christ can set you free from that past as well. I have seen it happen on numerous occasions where people get quiet before God and they let God speak to them, break the chains of the past, and heal their wounded hearts. I have seen people walk in with despair and walk out with joy,

walk in with tears of sorrow and walk out with a smile on their face, walk in chained to the past and walk out with strength for the future – all because of the power of Jesus Christ to set them free.

This is what Paul experienced. He forgot what was behind him. He reached forward to what was ahead and you can do the same through Him.