

The Upward Call of God

Ecclesiastes 9:11-12, Philippians 3:1-21

September 13, 1998

“One thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” For several weeks, in my prayers and preparations for this Sunday, these words have been impressed upon my heart and soul: “forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead.” The image is of a runner not wanting to lose even a fraction of a second by looking back where he has already been, or checking on the competition, but instead focusing on the goal, the finish line, the victory, and the prize. And to think that the Apostle Paul used this dynamic language while locked in prison and awaiting trial and likely execution for proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul set aside all that he had suffered and all that he had accomplished, and he was sustained by looking ahead to the glory of salvation: “the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” He writes this not only for himself, but also for the Philippians and so for us: “Let those of us who are mature be thus minded.”

How much there is that lies behind, and so how much there is to forget! Most of us think of this in highly personal terms: the follies of misspent youth and lost opportunities; the hurt we have caused to the ones we love and who, inexplicably, love us; the help we have not extended to those in need. The old prayer of confession puts it well: “We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; and we have done those things which we ought not to have done.” At least part of what the gospel of Jesus Christ means is that even though we cannot undo the past, even though we cannot make up for the past, even though we cannot escape the past on our own, Jesus Christ can and has forgiven our sin, taken away our guilt, and restored us to good relationship with God our Father. That is a wonderful and glorious part of the gospel for which I am eternally grateful, but it is not at all what Paul is talking about here. He talks about forgiveness of sin at many other places, and nothing he says here contradicts or denies it, but that is not what he is talking about here.

How much there is that lies behind, and so how much there is to forget! What Paul is talking about here is what appears to be otherwise justifiable self-righteousness! “If any other man thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law a Pharisee, as to zeal a

persecutor of the church, as to righteousness under the law blameless.” The problem being dealt with here is not how bad Paul was but how good he was. The problem being dealt with here is not Paul the miserable sinner but Paul the upright citizen and thoroughly religious, spiritual person. And so the problem is not only that our worst is so terribly bad, as we are all so keenly aware, but also that our very best is nowhere nearly good enough. And that may hurt even more.

It is bad enough that our filthy, stinking sins need to be forgiven. We know that. It is even worse that our filthy, stinking righteousness is not much better. That really hurts. Oh, of course, there are vital and dramatic differences between doing good and doing evil. We all know that. We want to preserve that. We want to discourage evil and encourage good. That should go without saying, but it does not, so we say it often. But today what we are saying is something different. It is not enough to be good. It is not even enough to do good. We want to be good and to do good, and maybe some days by the grace of God we succeed in small and partial ways. But that is not the point. Even our very best, our most religious, our most highly spiritual does not gain us access to Jesus Christ. Therein lies the problem.

What is there to do? Paul says, “Whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as refuse, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own, based on law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith.” That is, Paul not only threw out the garbage in his life, which of course had to be done, but also he threw out the treasures in his life and counted them as garbage. Now, that is hard to do. How is that possible? Only by comparison with Jesus Christ. Only by comparison with Jesus Christ does everything else fade into insignificance, waste, and burden. Are you the most wonderful person who has ever lived? Would you like to hang onto that, or would you like to meet Jesus Christ? Are you the richest person who has ever lived? Would you like to cling to that, or would you like to meet Jesus Christ? Are you the smartest person who has ever lived? Would you like to keep believing that, or would you like to meet Jesus Christ? None of this is to say that there are not wonderful, rich, smart people in the world, or in Philippi, or in this room, or in our radio audience. None of this is even to say that those things are not nice or even good in and of themselves. It is not to say that they cannot be put to good use. But the point is, what is most important? What are our priorities? Do we want to cling to all of our self-righteousness, which today we might call self-importance or high self-esteem, or do we want to meet, to get to know and to follow and to obey the Son of God, Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior? We cannot have it both ways. Choose one or the other. The problem of the human condition cannot be

helped by increasing self-esteem. Paul says to throw out the trash and go with Christ. Do not even look back at how wonderful you think you have been, just go with Christ.

We must understand what Paul means by all of this. He says that the purpose of counting the treasures as garbage is so “that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that if possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.” Life had been good on the outside. Paul was a preacher and a scholar. He made tents and started churches. Oh, there was the occasional stoning and misunderstanding. But he was traveling the best cities of the known world, preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. Now, he was in prison. He was awaiting trial. Life was hard, and he would probably be executed. What did it all mean? Was the gospel wrong? Was he being punished for his sins? Had he dedicated his life to the wrong cause? Did all of this contradict and falsify the gospel? No, Paul was being carried forward to the next stage, the next level, the next place in the Christian life. Once he had preached the suffering of Christ, now he lived and shared the suffering of Christ. Once he had preached the death of Christ, now he anticipated his own death as a becoming like Christ in death. The fact that the leading preacher of the gospel in their day was locked in prison should not scandalize the Philippians or cause them to lose their faith, but instead should verify the gospel and confirm their faith. If everything had been going well for Paul, they would have had to have asked what he possibly could have known about the sufferings of Christ. But the fact that he wrote from prison meant that he knew whereof he spoke. The fact that he did not miss what had gone before meant that he appreciated what he had been given in Christ. The fact that he cared more about them than about himself meant that he knew something about the love of God. The fact that this letter is the letter of joy meant that he somehow already anticipated the glorious resurrection of Christ as the promise of his own. All of this confirmed the gospel. It gave proof and power to what he said. Christ had not forgotten Paul. Christ was doing Paul the honor of allowing Paul to share in his life, his sufferings, his death, and therefore his resurrection. As Paul writes, “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.” That is the key to it all: not what Paul did or owned, but who owned Paul.

Can you imagine what all this meant to those who first read it? Some little house church in Philippi received this letter from prison, in full expectation of persecution for their own faith, and they were made bold to face the soldiers of the Roman Empire and the gladiators and lions of the coliseum. They would rather give up the dearness of all they held dear than to go through life without Christ. They would rather give up life itself than go to death without Christ. The preaching of the

gospel of Jesus Christ always arouses enemies of the gospel and therefore of those who believe in the gospel. This disappoints us, but it should never surprise us. It has always been so. People reject the gospel. Some cling to their sin. Some cling to their self-righteousness and self-importance. And they attack the proclamation of the gospel, even from inside the church. “If in anything you are otherwise minded, God will reveal that also. . . . Many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is the belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things.” But some who hear the gospel are moved to believe and to obey. Some are made brave and bold to cling to the cross and to suffer what may come. “Our commonwealth is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will change our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power which enables him even to subject all things to himself.” Does the gospel of Jesus Christ have the same effect on us?

“One thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” Paul is forgetting not only his sin which has been forgiven but also all of his self-worth, all of his accomplishments, and all of his religiosity. We need to be clear that he does not forget, and does not encourage us to forget, the history of the goodness and grace of God. He does not forget, and does not encourage us to forget, the history of the people of God. He does not forget, and does not encourage us to forget, the scriptures as the revelation of the word of God. Most of all, he does not forget, and does not encourage us to forget, Jesus Christ the Son of God. All of these things from the past help us to know who we are, what we are about, and, most importantly, where we are going, what the goal is toward which we are striving. We spend a great deal of time and effort here at church rightly trying to learn and remember scripture, grace, faith, and history. That is at least part of the reason that we read and preach from the scripture each week, and why we installed all of these Sunday School teachers today for a massive educational program. What Paul does forget is his plausible claim to self-importance, and we would do well to do the same.

As Paul writes, “Brethren, join in imitating me, and mark those who so live as you have an example in us.” Most of us will want to apply today’s reading in our own personal lives. There is much both good and bad that needs to be forgotten and left behind. You know better than I what these are. Can we do this in our own lives?

At the same time, this is a wonderful and powerful passage to apply to our life together as a church. There is much both good and bad that needs to be forgotten and left behind. You know that as well as I. There is no use in dwelling on the evils we have done or suffered, and there is no use in dwelling on the good old

days, whenever we might think they were. Instead, there is much ahead of surpassing great value toward which we have the opportunity and therefore the responsibility to strain forward with all our strength. There is a goal and a prize beyond all description. Today is the first day in a new year in this church's life. What wonder, what glory, what high privilege by the grace of God in Jesus Christ, that we should have been called together in this time and place for just such a day as this. Are you ready to let go? Are you ready to move ahead?

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To God be the glory, forever and ever! Amen.

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