

July 18, 2021

## **A Letter from Paul – Philippians**

### **IX. Faith, Hope, and Love**

#### **Philippians 3:12-16**

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Our passage can be seen as a summary of sorts regarding pretty much everything Paul has said in his letter thus far. *“Not that I have already obtained this,”* he begins – the *“this”* referring not only what he said last week about gaining Christ and being found in Him<sup>1</sup>, but also to what he said in chapter two about how we are to have the same mind that was in Christ Jesus, who took the form of a servant and so forth<sup>2</sup>. *“Not that I have already obtained this . . . but I press on to make it my own”* he writes – the *“pressing on”* referring back to what he told the Philippians in chapter one about their manner of life becoming worthy of the gospel of Christ<sup>3</sup>, and also back to what he said in chapter two about the necessity of working out our salvation *“with fear and trembling”*<sup>4</sup>. *“Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own.”*

But as much summary as Paul is packing into that introductory sentence, it’s what Paul says next which is the meat of this passage for us this morning. Paul explains what he means by *“pressing on to make it my own”* – or, more specifically, describes what this looks like and how it is accomplished in the life of a disciple of Jesus. And it’s all there in verses 13-14: *“Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But 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.”* Now Paul says this is all one thing – forgetting what lies behind, straining forward to what lies ahead, pressing on toward the goal – but I would like to treat it as three separate things, and take each one in turn.

Number one: *“Forgetting what lies behind.”* Forgetting what lies behind. For how can Paul run this race if he is still being weighed down by what has been in the past? I think of the ghost of Marley in Dickens’ *Christmas Carol*, wearing that great iron chain of his sinful past around his shoulders, each link forged by some sin committed, some good not done – and how are you going to press forward, run the race, when wearing such a burden from the past? Forgetting what lies behind – and, let’s face it, Paul himself had a lot of behind to forget. As he freely told us last week, he not only at one time despised Christ, but was as an active and eager persecutor of the church of Christ. And, for that matter, how do you just “forget” your past – and how does you forgetting it change anything about it? When Paul says, *“forgetting what lies behind,”* surely he means more than just that.

And, of course, he does. What Paul is talking about – the tool that enables us to be unburdened of the past so as to move forward into God’s future – is faith. Faith, specifically, as

that absolute trust in what God has done for us in Jesus Christ upon His cross. Faith as believing, knowing, trusting, and accepting that when Jesus Christ died for our sins He both died for all of our sins, and He died that they might all truly be forgiven us. *“As far as the east is from the west, so far does the Lord remove our transgressions from us.”*<sup>5</sup> Faith in the saving death of Jesus Christ is what enables us to forget what lies behind – and so to move forward, forgiven and unburdened by the past, into the future God has laid out for us in Christ. As Paul himself writes to the Romans: *“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”*<sup>6</sup> Our past has been forgiven, is being healed, and we are freed from its burden.

In one of his wonderful books, Richard Foster tells of a man who had lived in constant fear and bitterness for twenty-eight years. He would wake up at night, screaming and in a cold sweat. He lived in constant depression – his wife said he had not laughed in years. One day he came to see Foster and told Foster the story of what had happened so many years before that had caused such a deep sadness to hang over him. The man was in Italy during World War II, and was sent out on a mission in charge of thirty-three men. They became trapped by enemy gunfire. With deep sorrow in his eyes, this man told Foster he had prayed desperately for God to get them out of that mess. But it was not to be. He sent his men out two by two and watched them get cut down, one by one. Finally, in the early hours of the morning, he was able to escape along with six others – four of them seriously wounded. He was barely scratched. He told Foster that the experience had turned him into an atheist. And certainly his heart was filled with rage and bitterness and guilt.

After the story was finished, Foster said to him:

*“Don’t you know that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who lives in the eternal now, can enter that old painful memory and heal it so that it will no longer control you?” He did not know this was possible. I asked if he would mind if I prayed for him – never mind that he was an atheist; I would have faith for him. He nodded his consent. Sitting beside him with my hand on his shoulder, I invited the Lord Jesus to go back those twenty-eight years and walk through that day with this good man. “Please Lord,” I asked, “draw out the hurt and the hate and the sorrow and set him free . . . Amen.”*

*The next week he came up to me with a sparkle in his eyes and a brightness on his face I had never seen before. “Every night I have slept soundly, and each morning I have awakened with a hymn on my mind. And I am happy . . . happy for the first time in twenty-eight years.”*<sup>7</sup>

All of us have a past. Maybe not as dramatic as that tormented soul – but all of us have a list of things we ought not to have done that we did anyway, and of things we ought to have done but did not do. And all of us have had things done to us or not done to us which have inflicted their own forms of hurt and harm. All of us have things in the past which weigh upon us like Marley’s chains.

But, in Christ – truly – we can forget what lies behind. *“Forgetting what lies behind”* – through faith in what Jesus did for us on His cross, through faith that in His sacrifice He truly did

take away the sins of the whole world, through faith believing that when Jesus says to us as he said of the woman who anoints Him with oil in the house of a Pharisee – that her sins, our sins, though many, are forgiven – believing that this is really true. We have faith that we have been set free from the past – it need no longer control, deform, or hold us back. We have faith that in the cross of Jesus a new and better future really has opened up before us. We have faith that all the hurts and harms of our past can and shall and even now are being healed.

It is said that Michelangelo, upon laying eyes upon a great, misshapen, dirty lump of marble immediately told his assistant, *“Take it to my studio. There is an angel imprisoned in that marble and I can set it free!”*<sup>8</sup> Faith is knowing that this is precisely how Jesus Christ feels about you and me and our past. And that He died on the cross so that we should be forgiven, and should indeed be set free.

Number two: *“Straining forward to what lies ahead.”* But what is it which lies ahead, and how can we be sure we will ever get there from here? If we can accept in faith that Christ has overcome our past, still how can we be sure that we will possess the future He is calling us towards? And the answer to that question is, of course, hope. Now, Christian hope is not mere optimism, it is not a Pollyanna wish that tomorrow will be a better day. Hope, for Christians, is anchored in Christ’s resurrection.

For the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is nothing less than God’s promise and proof to us that nothing is ever going to be able to separate us from His love for us.<sup>9</sup> God’s promise to us that, in the end, God will always have the final word, will bring all things round to good for those who trust in Him.<sup>10</sup> It is God’s promise to us that, as Paul wrote in chapter one, He who began this good work in us *“will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.”*<sup>11</sup> Hope is not wishing upon a falling star. Hope is standing before an emptied tomb, knowing now that nothing, nothing will ever be able to hinder God as He builds for us His Kingdom – and rebuilds us for His Kingdom. We strain forward to what lies ahead because He has given us hope – the assurance that what lies ahead is His Kingdom, and the reassurance that He will get us from here to there no matter what now lies in the way. Hope born of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead is what enables us to strain forward to what lies ahead. And it is what assures our hearts in dark hours that all will be brought round to good by our God, in the end.

J. P. Eppinga, a retired pastor, tells of a dream he had one night. In the dream, he was led around town by an angel guide. They came first to a church of great size and grandeur. Inside were beautiful wooden pillars reaching to the rafters. As he stood there with the angel, admiring the sanctuary, a man with a bucket of paint walked by; and there was a button on his coveralls reading, *“Quiet! Genius at work.”* The man placed a ladder alongside one of those wonderful pillars and began to slop paint all over the place in a careless and talentless manner. Eppinga is stunned. Clearly this painter is no genius, and the beauty of the sanctuary is going to be ruined.

His angel guide then leads him outside where, on the sidewalk, they come to an artist working on a street scene. They look over her shoulder while she works. And Eppinga notices that she, too, is wearing a button that reads, *“Quiet! Genius at work.”* But her painting is not very genius-like. Her painting seems to make no sense; it looks nothing at all like the street scene in

front of her. In fact, they are not even sure what it is that she is painting. And Eppinga is again very disappointed.

They move on. The angel leads Eppinga to a diner where they see on a sign in the window that same phrase, *“Quiet! Genius at work.”* Peering in through the window, they see the chef at work making a stew. But they cannot tell what kind of stew because the chef is carelessly throwing into the pot all sorts of ingredients and seasonings that don’t go together; and the smell emanating from the diner is both strong and extremely revolting. This chef hardly seems to be a genius. But the angel insists that they should go in and eat some of the stew. Eppinga tries to resist, but the angel won’t take no for an answer. And to Eppinga’s surprise, he tastes the stew and finds that it is excellent – the best food he has ever placed in his mouth. He is duly impressed.

As they leave the restaurant, they again pass by the artist on the sidewalk. Her painting is now finished. Again they look over her shoulder at her work – but this time they are stunned by it. It not only is beautiful, but it seems to have captured the very essence, the very life of the street in front of her.

And then, finally, they return to the church, where the pillars are all now painted in a rich and beautiful black. And the sanctuary, which was beautiful before, is now breathtaking to behold. Eppinga feels himself being effortlessly drawn into worship by the sheer beauty. But one thing is still confusing to him – that sign he has seen everywhere, *“Quiet! Genius at work.”* His angel guide laughs at his question about that sign, and then replies, *“Oh, that. Well that is Psalm 37:7: ‘Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him.’”*<sup>12</sup> God was the Genius at work in all three, the painter, the artist, the chef – bringing to completion the good work He had begun in them, through them, and with them. And so God will do in us, through us, and with us. *“Straining forward to what lies ahead”* through the hope that is ours in Christ Jesus – that empty tomb, God’s promise and proof that nothing will be allowed to stand in the way of the work He has begun in you and in me and in all this earth.

*“Forgetting what lies behind”* through faith, *“Straining forward to what lies ahead”* through hope – that is two things, and I did say there were three. Any guess as to what the third might be? *“I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus”* – that is the third thing. But we have to go back up to the verse before to really hear what this third thing is telling us: *“I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.”* There it is – *“because Christ Jesus has made me his own.”* In fact, say that with me: *“Because Christ Jesus has made me his own.”* Say it again, *“Because Christ Jesus has made me his own.”* Say it one more time and point to yourself as you say it: *“Because Christ Jesus has made me his own.”* And why do you think Christ Jesus would go to all the trouble of making Paul and you and me His own? Our third thing: Love. In fact, God’s love for us is what sets this whole business in motion, and sustains it through to the end – just how much God loves Paul and you and me. Do you know, truly know, how much God loves you?

Hilary Holladay, a professor at the University of Massachusetts, tells of the commencement speech she heard when she graduated from the University of Virginia – best commencement speech ever, she says. The commencement speaker that day was the then Governor of Virginia, Chuck Robb. But as the ceremony began, a drizzle started falling – and this was an outdoor

graduation. By the time Gov. Robb was introduced, the drizzle was edging towards full-on rain. So, Gov. Robb announced that, given the conditions, he would not give his speech. He got a standing ovation.

So, what then was the world's greatest commencement speech that Holladay claims she heard that day? As the graduates left their seats and began searching for their families, Holladay saw her family coming towards her across the campus lawn. And her mother, normally a reserved person, while still a good way distant from daughter, cried out in a loud voice just about everyone could hear, *"Do you have any idea how much we love you?"* Holladay writes, *"So I didn't hear an official commencement speech when I graduated from college . . . But I did hear a speech of sorts that day in 1983. My mother had said something I have never forgotten."*<sup>13</sup> *"Do you have any idea how much we love you?"*

And that, finally, is how and why in faith we forget what lies behind; and also how and why, in hope, we strain forward to what lies ahead. It's all because God sent Christ into this world – not just to die for our sins upon the cross, and not just to defeat the power of death for us through His resurrection – but also that, through both of those things and through so much more, we should at last come to know how much God loves us, each and every one of us. Jesus Christ has laid hold of me with His love – that's what this is all about, says Paul. Jesus Christ has laid hold of us each one with His love – and that is what, in the end, enables us to forget what lies behind in faith, and empowers us to strain forward to what lies ahead in hope. Because we now, in Christ Jesus, possess a very precise and soul-thrilling idea of just how much God loves us.

*"So now, faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love."*<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Philippians 3:8-9.

<sup>2</sup> Philippians 2:5-8.

<sup>3</sup> Philippians 1:27.

<sup>4</sup> Philippians 2:12.

<sup>5</sup> Psalm 103:12.

<sup>6</sup> Romans 8:1.

<sup>7</sup> Richard J. Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), p. 205.

<sup>8</sup> Leslie Weatherhead, "Supposing You Met Jesus," in *A Treasury of Great Preaching*, Vol. 11, eds. Clyde E. Fant, Jr. and William M. Pinson, Jr. (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1995), p. 133.

<sup>9</sup> Romans 8:35-39.

<sup>10</sup> Romans 8:28.

<sup>11</sup> Philippians 1:6.

<sup>12</sup> As told in James R. Van Tholen, *Where All Hope Lies* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), pp. 218-219.

<sup>13</sup> Hilary Holladay, "Mom trumped pomp and circumstance," *The Christian Science Monitor*, June 6, 2005. Accessed on-line at [www.csmonitor.com/2005/0606/p18s03-hfes.html](http://www.csmonitor.com/2005/0606/p18s03-hfes.html).

<sup>14</sup> I Corinthians 13:13