

Essays in Philippians- Forgetting What Lies Behind

Phil. 3:13-14

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Philippians chapter three is a warning about false teachers. There was an adamant group of men who demanded adherence to the Law of Moses for salvation. They had been working against Paul since his days in Antioch (Gal. 2:12). Paul called them dogs, evildoers, self-mutilators, and enemies of the cross (Phil. 3:2, 18). They were a real and present danger. They needed to be taken seriously by the Philippians.

While Paul was harsh and direct in his characterization of these men, he could relate to them. At an earlier time in his life, Paul was one of them. He shared their fervor against those of “the way” (Acts 9:2). In this section of the letter, Paul is deeply revealing of himself to the saints at Philippi. Regarding his past, he wrote, “Though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else 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 of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless” (Phil. 3:4-6).

We cannot help but be impressed with Paul’s honesty in describing his past. Like the Judaizing teachers, Paul had been blinded by self-righteousness. This deception caused him to think he had earned salvation. The delusion of self-righteousness gave him a false sense of superiority.

Paul never tried to hide his past or diminish the harm he had perpetrated against saints. He once described himself as the chief of sinners (1 Tim. 1:15). He had been forgiven; however, he could not change his crimes. His past sins must have haunted him. Some have suggested that Paul’s thorn in the flesh was emotional anguish for the sins of his past (2 Cor. 12:7). Regardless, his past must have been difficult to accept.

Addressing Our Past

Everyone has a past. Everyone’s past has sin. Everyone has displayed attitudes and behaviors in their past for which they are ashamed. But, how can we cope with our past? How do we reconcile our past with our present? To help answer these types of questions, notice what Paul wrote, “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” (Phil. 3:13-14).

Paul describes a runner in a race. A runner cannot focus on how much ground he has covered or who is behind him. If he does, he will trip and fall. Rather, he must focus on what is in front of him. He must keep his eyes on the finish line. While this is a relatable analogy, what does this mean in terms of coping with our past sins?

Well, forgetting what lies behind does not mean living as if our past never occurred. Some foolishly try to live as if their past did not happen. They try to avoid responsibility for their sins. This is not how Paul coped with his past sins. The passage of time does not forgive the sins of our past. Rather, Paul acknowledged and accepted full responsibility for his past. He named and shamed his sin: "...formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent...The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost (1 Tim. 1:13, 15).

After admitting responsibility for his sins, he trusted Jesus to forgive him. He obeyed the Gospel. He was baptized for the remission of his sins and then put into ministry (Acts 9). Forgetting what lies behind is about trusting Jesus to forgive our sins. It is about learning to take comfort in God's grace. Incidentally, this was God's response to Paul's request to remove his thorn in the flesh: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness..." (2 Cor. 12:9).

Yet, trusting God's saving grace is often where we struggle. The guilt of our past sins becomes our prison. We often become trapped by the shame of our past sins. We feel worthless and useless. As long as we are focusing on our past, we will never gain the strength to run the race, much less finish it and win the prize.

As Christians, we must not dwell on what we were, but what we are becoming. We are to be motivated by the knowledge of our sins being forgiven. We are to grow in our new life. By faith, we can have joy and peace. We can flourish in hope of eternal life. In the conclusion of Romans, Paul states the goal of the Gospel powerfully working in our lives: "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope" (Rom. 15:13). Abounding in hope is about looking to the future, not living in the past.

But, how do we strain forward to what lies ahead? We must live by faith. Faith can be a strain at times. Our faith can become weak and vulnerable. The path forward can become rocky and dim. There are times when we may become tired. Yet, we must learn to trust God's word to guide us. This is what Paul was doing. He did not know his future. He did not know if he would be released from prison. Yet, he was encouraged by the promised prize of eternal life to continue moving forward.

Conclusion

We all have a past. There is nothing we can do to change our past sins. Thankfully, our past sins can be forgiven through obedience to the Gospel. We can learn from our past sins and seek to do better in the future.

Forgetting what is behind and straining forward is not easy. Living by faith is a challenge. The tender-hearted will always feel a sense of embarrassment and remorse for their past sins; however, this godly sorrow can be used to transform us (2 Cor. 7:10).

If we persevere in faith, we will succeed. God will not allow the forgiven sins of our past or the struggles of our present to hinder us from gaining the prize of eternal life. By faith, God will protect us and give us the strength we need to finish the course victoriously.