

PRESSING TOWARD THE GOAL

by Walton Weaver

All of us are challenged by the incredible faith of Paul, the beloved apostle to the Gentiles. Once he had been “laid hold on” by Jesus Christ he set out on a journey, a pilgrimage if you will; a remarkable journey of faith in Jesus Christ. His aim was to “lay hold of that for which also [he] was laid hold of by Jesus Christ” (Phil. 3:12, NASB). He had not yet come to the point of perfection in his quest as he wrote this letter as a prisoner in Rome. Though it was late in his life, he still saw the importance of “pressing on” (Phil. 3:13).

Paul was a pilgrim with a purpose. Having been confronted by Jesus Christ and converted to him, the great ambition of his soul from that point forward was to “be found in him” at the end of the way (Phil. 3:9). This meant that he must come to “know him” by coming to know the power of his resurrection, the fellowship of his sufferings, and being made conformable unto his death (Phil. 3:10). Without this knowledge of Christ he would not be able to “attain unto the resurrection from the dead” (Phil. 3:11).

The knowledge of Christ that Paul sought was not an end in itself. He wanted to come to know Christ in order that he may be “found in him,” or as he says in verse 14, he was pressing “toward the mark of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.” To come to know Christ in the way he has described would assure him that he would finally arrive at this goal of winning the prize of final salvation which was ever before him. For him to be successful two things would be required:

Forget the Things Behind

In verse 13 Paul states the first requirement for his success: “But this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind.” Of course, it is not possible to erase the memory of all of our experiences. Paul remembered much of the past, and sometimes he spoke of those things he had done in persecuting Christians. What we do with what we remember is what matters. Its much like an editor once said, “the true secret of editing is to know what to put in the waste basket.” There is much in our memories that needs to be put in the garbage where it belongs. *Sins of the past should be forgotten.* Any sins that have been forgiven by God have been forgotten (Heb. 8:12; 10:17), so why shouldn’t we leave them in the past. We need to read those passages of scripture that assure us of God’s willingness to forgive, repent of them, confess them, and then take God at his word that they have been forgiven and forgotten. John says, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 Jn. 1:9). The psalmist says, “as far as the east is from the west, so far hath he removed our transgressions from us” (103:12). Micah 7:19 assures us, “Thou wilt cast all their sins into the depths of the sea.”

Paul had many terrible things to remember because of his persecution of the church. So how had he forgotten them if he still remembered them? He forgot them by not allowing them to

haunt him. He knew they were forgiven. He found forgiveness in Christ, and as someone worded it, he “let that sin skeleton stay buried.” Christians are wrong in letting their previous lives of doubt and unbelief unduly disturb them. Once we have been forgiven, nothing in the past must be allowed to hinder us in our progress as Christians.

The hurts and sorrows of the past must be forgotten. Think of things of this kind that Paul could have allowed to hinder him (2 Cor. 11:23f.): beaten three times with rods, five times he received thirty-nine lashes, suffered shipwreck three times, stoned once, imprisoned many times, etc. But he did not allow himself to dwell upon these things. He rarely mentions them in his letters, and when he does it is in his own defense as a apostle.

Unfulfilled ambitions of the past must be forgotten. We may have dreamed of certain things we would like to do, or we would like to accomplish (even in the Lord’s work), but we have been unable to do them. Paul and those who were accompanying him on his second missionary journey wanted to go into Bithynia, or northern Asia, “but the Spirit suffered them not” (Acts 16:7). God chose to send them to Europe. No doubt there was great disappointment. A dream had been unfulfilled. But Paul did not lament over his dreams of former years. He forgot them.

The successes of the past have to be forgotten. Paul had many of them to remember. But our successes and accomplishments of the past can hinder us just as much as our failures. We must not look back and feel that “that is enough.” There is yet much to be done.

The Forward Reach

Having forgotten the past, we must continue our journey by “reaching forth unto those things which are before” (v. 13b). The word rendered “reaching forth” suggests a runner with his eyes fixed firmly on the goal, his hands stretching out towards it, and his body bent forward as he moves swiftly towards the end of the race. In v. 14, Paul continues, “I press toward the mark.” The word “press” suggests strenuous effort being put forth. The runner keeps his eyes on, or he watches, the goal. This is what Paul calls the “mark.” Only if we successfully arrive at this mark or goal will we win the “prize” of final salvation.

The “upward call” to final salvation, or the end of our faith, the salvation of our soul (1 Pet. 1:9), is ever moving us forward to the prize of our calling. This appears to be the same as what Paul earlier called being “made perfect” (v. 12) in Christ by attaining unto the resurrection from the dead. We hope to one day “be conformed to the image of his Son” (Rom. 8:29). The process begins in this life (2 Cor. 3:18), but it will not be completed (“perfected”) until the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. The goal is not so much paradise as it is perfection. Our pilgrimage will take us to glory, not the grave. We can be assured that it will be worth the effort!