

GETTING PAST THE PAST

How many of you have made New Year's resolutions for the new year? Hold up your hand. Now, how many of you feel confident that you will still be keeping those resolutions two months from now? Two weeks? Two days?

Weight Watchers and Nutri-System and all other diet plans have their biggest months in January. Things start to slack off in February though.

In addition to losing weight, millions will also resolve to pursue an exercise program. I did say millions, I did not say everyone. I heard of one brother who said that he doesn't believe in exercise. He argues that if God meant for us to touch our toes, He would have put them up farther on our body. Another man said his doctor suggested he try running in place. The man asked, "In place of what?"

I do not know what your focus will be for the new year. Perhaps it will be on losing weight, starting an exercise program, or doing away with some habit that you are tired of.

- I hope that some of you will attempt to read the Bible though,
- establish a daily quiet time with the Lord,
- resolve to lead X number of people to Christ,
- or to come to know Jesus in a new and living way.

However, there is another resolution that I want to place before you this holiday. I understand that it may not pertain to everyone here, maybe not even the majority, nonetheless, it is what I feel that I must deal with today -- even if it only speaks to two or three of you this morning.

I want you to resolve to put the past, your past, in the past.

- Perhaps you are having to deal with some past failure.
- Maybe it was some past act of immorality.
- Maybe it is an act of betrayal or dishonesty that is tripping you up.
- Then, too, it could be some violent deed committed against another human being.
- I have known men who couldn't get past the death of their spouse or the loss of a job.
- Others still have trouble getting over a slight or some other long ago offense.

The list is seemingly endless.

Someone has noted that living while tied to the past is like driving a car while looking in the rear-view mirror. You may do all right for a little while, but eventually you are headed for a big crash and serious injury! Progress is definitely going to be both limited and short-lived!

Will Rogers, the famous humorous noted, "Don't let yesterday use up too much of today." That's good advice!

So for the next minutes together, we are going to endeavor to do just that. OK?

LET'S NOW LOOK FOR A MOMENT AT PHILIPPIANS 3:13.

The Apostle Paul wrote: "**Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken**

hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead....”

Phillips Translation has it: **“I concentrate on this: I leave the past behind and with hands outstretched to whatever lies ahead I go straight for the goal....”**

The passage here in Philippians 3 is teaching us that we Christians are like runners who refuse to look around or look back but keep running with our eyes fixed on the goal. To look back at past successes or failures, or to look around at what others are doing or saying, is to invite defeat.

Someone once noted that:

- “The past is what you remember,
- imagine you remember,
- convince yourself you remember,
- or pretend to remember.”

Regardless, Paul said that he was putting it -- the past -- behind him. His cry was “forward march!” We would be very wise to follow his lead.

Jesus said in Luke 9:62: **“No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.”**

Jesus knew that a farmer can not plow a straight line unless his eyes are fixed on some tree, fence post, or other fixed object up ahead. So it is that the child of God can not walk a straight path toward the Kingdom of God while looking backwards over his shoulder.

Israel tried this and it got them in a heap of trouble. Numbers 11:4-6 states: **“The rabble with them began to crave other food, and again the Israelites started wailing and said, ‘If only we had meat to eat! WE REMEMBER the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost--also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic. But now we have lost our appetite; we never see anything but this manna!’”**

They were looking back. They were ready to put the whole show in reverse!

Not only that, their memory of the past was not all that good.

- They had been in Egypt for 430 years. They had hated the place!
- They cried unto God for deliverance.
- They were slaves there and had been treated very cruelly.

And now they wanted to return!

Listen to Exodus 16:2-3: **“In the desert the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The Israelites said to them, ‘If only we had died by the LORD'S hand in Egypt! There we sat round pots of meat AND ATE ALL THE FOOD WE WANTED, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death.’”**

How silly!

We humans have a tendency to make our past look somewhat better than it really was (as with Israel here) or else we darken the events of our past and make it look much worse than it was in reality.

Regardless, Jack Hayford wrote in his book, *Taking Hold of Tomorrow*, “The past is a dead

issue. We can't gain any momentum moving toward tomorrow if are dragging the past behind us."

THEREFORE, PAUL SAYS FORGET IT!

Nothing is served in reliving it. Forget it! Give it a quick and decent burial!

The Greek word translated "forgetting" in Philippians 3:13 actually means: "To forget, forgotten, given over to oblivion, uncared for." In other words, the past is given up to history. It is no more. Again, it is given over to oblivion.

The greatest example of this is seen in the way that God deals with our past when we come to Him as sinners. He forgets it all.

Notice now these verses: Psalms 103:9-12: **"He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger for ever; he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us...."**

Micah 7:18-19 adds: **"Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives...? You will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea."**

As seen here, God throws our sins into the depths of the sea and puts up a sign on the shore that reads, "No fishing." In ancient times the depths of the sea were completely inaccessible to man. The limits were how far a man could dive with one lung full of air. In modern times we have submarines that can go anywhere on or below the sea's surface, so we do not fully appreciate this figure of speech. Perhaps the inaccessible aspect would be clearer if we changed the statement to "God has cast all of our sins into a nuclear waste dump." That's truly inaccessible! And that's God's forgiveness.

- Isaiah 1:18 states in *The Living Bible*: **"...Even if you are stained as red as crimson, I can make you white as wool!"**
- Isaiah 44:22 then adds: **"I have swept away your offenses like a cloud, your sins like the morning mist."**
- Also Hebrews 10:17 cries in part: **"Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more."**

When God forgets, He forgets! This is not a case of senile forgetfulness, nor is it a overblown case of Alzheimer's disease. Rather it is an example of total divine eradication. God totally removes our sin record from His memory; it is no more!

When Clare Boothe Luce, then seventy-five, was asked, "Do you have any regrets?" she answered: "Yes, I should have been a better person. Kinder. More tolerant. Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night, and I remember a girlhood friend of mine who had a brain tumor and called me three times to come and see her. I was always too busy, and when she died, I was profoundly ashamed. I still remember that after fifty-six years."

Hear me, the Lord is not pleased with such self condemnation. He is not happy when we His children stay tethered to such painful memories for 56 years! Learn from the failure then mercifully lay it to rest. Follow God's example; give it over to oblivion!

WHY IS IT SO HARD TO FORGET?

I can't for the life of me understand why it is that people who have a hard time remembering if they are coming or going can recall word for word and blow by blow every detail of an argument that they had with a brother some thirty years ago!

Forgetting is so hard at times and yet again it is one of the easiest things in the world to do. Why?

1. SOMETIMES WE CAN'T FORGET BECAUSE OTHERS, SUCH AS A SPOUSE, A BOSS OR A PARENT, WILL NOT LET US FORGET.

The past is always and forever being thrown up in our face.

A man who was telling his friend about an argument he'd had with his wife commented, "Oh, how I hate it, every time we have an argument; she gets historical." The friend replied, "You mean hysterical?" "No," he insisted. "I mean historical. Every time we argue she drags up everything from the past and holds it against me!" Maybe some of you relate.

2. SOMETIMES WE MAKE A CONSCIOUS DECISION TO NOT FORGET SOMETHING.

The taste of the pain is bittersweet.

Thoughts of revenge give special purpose to life.

To forget would rob the individual of something that he or she cherishes!

Believe it or not, I have known people like this.

Let me tell you about Jesse. She played the piano in one of my earlier pastorates. The thing that I most remember about Jesse, though, was her terrible hatred for her sister. They were both beauticians by trade as well as professing Christians. Nonetheless, Jesse refused to have anything to do with healing the breach between the two ladies. She seemed to enjoy feeling bad. Her dislike of her sibling added something to her otherwise drab life. How sad. I am ashamed to have to admit that there are a goodly number of people like Jesse out there in this mean and cruel world.

3. THE MIND IS A MARVELOUS INSTRUMENT. IT REFUSES TO TURN LOOSE OF CERTAIN THINGS. IT SEEMINGLY SEEKS TO CARRY THEM TO THE GRAVE.

I want to see the hands to those of you who can remember your first kiss.

How about your most embarrassing moment?

How about your most frightening experience?

If you have been hurt in a particular way, the mind will especially want to cling to that memory. It isn't that you want to remember, it is almost as if you have no choice.

I recall a particular *Peanuts* cartoon from several years ago. It seems that Lucy and Charlie Brown were discussing a just completed baseball game. Lucy had once again failed to catch a fly ball. When asked why, she said that she couldn't help but remember all the other fly

balls that she had dropped in previous games. Then she declared, "I guess the past got in my eyes."

Are you having a hard time forgetting a certain something? Could Lucy's problem be your problem? Have you let the past get in your eyes?

4. MAYBE YOU LIVE WITH A CONSTANT REMINDER OF SOME TERRIBLE EVENT OF YOUR PAST.

Perhaps you feel as if you married the wrong person.

Maybe you suffered some awful handicap due to a war or due to some terrible accident.

Could it be that you have had an abortion or that you have harmed yourself by an attempt on your own life?

- David's sin with Bathsheba resulted in these words in Psalms 51:3: **"For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me."** *The Living Bible* says here: **"For I admit my shameful deed -- it haunts me day and night."**
- Cain was marked after he murdered his brother.
- Jacob had a limp for the rest of his life after he wrestled with God.

Sometimes some THING or some PERSON constantly serves as a reminder of our tragic failure. It is a spot that just won't go away!

5. SATAN LOVES TO THROW OUR PAST UP TO US.

The book of Revelation says that the devil is the accuser of the brethren (Revelation 12:4). I appreciate the bumper sticker that declares: "If Satan reminds you of your past, remind him of his future."

To be honest, I know that I have barely scratched the surface here, but I must move on.

I NOW WANT US TO LOOK AT SOME THINGS THAT WILL EITHER HELP US TO FORGET OR AT LEAST SUCCESSFULLY DEAL WITH A PAINFUL PAST.

1. LET GO OF THE PAST. DO IT NOW. THE TIME IS RIGHT, THE PLACE IS HERE, THE LORD WILL HELP. JUST DO IT!

I want everyone of you to make a tight clinched fist. Come on. Now I want you to envision every one of your painful memories as being in that hand. They are all there. Now you have a choice, you can keep them locked tight within your grasp, or you can let them go. Right now you are at the point of decision. You have to either continue to hold on to them or you have to release them. The choice is yours to make. What will you do?

One of my favorite Bible stories is found in John 5. The Lord is in Jerusalem for a Jewish feast. While there He happened to go past a certain pool. Please listen as I pick up the story at verse three: **"Here a great number of disabled people used to lie--the blind, the lame, the paralyzed. One who was there had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, 'Do you want to get well?' 'Sir,' the invalid replied, 'I have no-one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone**

else goes down ahead of me.’ Then Jesus said to him, ‘Get up! Pick up your mat and walk.’ At once the man was cured....”

The notes in my *Life Application Bible* says regarding this miracle: “Jesus appropriately asked, ‘Would you like to get well?’ After 38 years, this man’s problem had become a way of life. No one had ever helped him. He had no hope of ever being healed and no desire to help himself.”

In order to be helped, you have to be willing to receive help. I encourage you right now to be healed. Let the healing sanctifying Word of God restore you even as I preach. Open your hand, let go of your past, and let the problem go straight to the heart of a compassionate healing God!

A friend of Clara Barton, founder of the American Red Cross, once reminded her of an especially cruel thing that had been done to her years before. Miss Barton, though, did not seem to recall the incident. “Don’t you remember it?” her friend asked. “No,” came the reply, “I distinctly remember forgetting it.”

Wow, pastor that is hard to do. I know that forgetting is not easy. Again Paul said in Philippians 3:13 (*The New Living Translation*) that he was: **“focusing all my energies on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead....”**

Paul’s past was terrible! Forgetting it was not easy, in fact, it took all of the resources that he had to do it. It will not be all that easy for you either. Nonetheless, I encourage you to collect postage stamps, or collect coins, but don’t collect painful memories. There are times when we need to let go and forget it all.

In Charles Flood's book, *Lee: The Last Years*, he tells of a time after the Civil War when Robert E. Lee visited a Kentucky woman who took him to the remains of a grand old tree in front of her home. There she cried bitterly that its limbs and trunk had been destroyed by Union artillery fire. She waited for Lee to condemn the North or at least sympathize with her loss. Lee paused, and then said, “Cut it down, my dear Madam, and forget it.” There comes a time when that is the only wise course of action: simply, “Cut it down, and forget it.”

2. REMEMBER THE BIG PICTURE.

Every day when she did the dishes, a Midwestern newspaper columnist would look out the window at a beautiful flowering tree. “I loved that tree,” she says. “The leaves would flutter like butterflies in the wind.” When her husband began pruning shrubs, she specifically asked him not to touch the tree. But when she got back from shopping, the tree was gone. “I had to cut it,” her husband said. “It looked scraggly after I’d pruned it.”

Despite his explanation, she was furious. She wrote: “I kept playing the offense over and over in my mind.

- Why did he go back on his word?
- Didn't he realize how much I cared about that tree?”

After days of making herself--and her husband--miserable, she forced herself to stop and think. “I realized that I was letting my negative feelings get the better of me and our marriage--and that if this were the worst thing my husband ever did, I would be one lucky woman. **HE'D**

HAD AN HOUR OF INCONSIDERATENESS THAT I HAD TO BALANCE AGAINST A LIFETIME OF CONSIDERATION.”

To prevent drowning in old hurts, stick to the most recent disappointment--resolve it promptly, as it happens--and resist the temptation to revisit the past.

3. REMEMBER ETERNITY.

Now I would not be a bit surprised if some of you are wondering what eternity has to do with painful memories. I understand your concern. Listen as I explain.

When we are wedded to this world we tend to lose sight of eternity. As that happens, we oftentimes compromise and allow things into our lives that God does not approve of such as some of the painful sinful feelings that I have earlier described in this message.

Billy Graham wrote in his excellent book, *Hope For The Troubled Heart*: “In my travels I have found that those who keep Heaven in view remain serene and cheerful in the darkest day. If the glories of Heaven were more real to us, if we lived less for material things and more for things eternal and spiritual, we would be less easily disturbed by this present life.

1 John 3:2-3 promises: **“Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure.”**

A proper view of eternity and Heaven works to purify the mind. It acts as a disinfectant that helps eliminate the impure and ugly thoughts and memories that can pollute the heart of the saint. We must ever be on guard lest we allow something in us here that God will not allow in us up there.

While I am on heaven, I want to share with you another simple observation. The Bible notes in Revelation 21:4 that there will not be any tears in heaven. They will be taboo. What will happen to them? The Word says very clearly that God Himself wipes them all away.

- Funeral tears,
- regret tears,
- divorce tears,
- failure tears,
- memory tears,

they will all be wiped away by the loving hand of Jehovah God!

Listen, friends, you don't have to wait until Heaven. If you will turn loose of your past, God can wipe your tears away right here; right now. You can have a bit of Heaven here on earth!

4. WALK IN FAITH

Remember, friends, life goes on. You must continue living too. Don't let some awful experience or the memory of some tragic event of the past cripple you.

- Exercise faith.
- Sing.
- Play praise music on your stereo.
- Praise the Lord and offer up worship.

- Go to work.
- Attend church.
- Get involved in some support group.
- Do what you would ordinarily be doing if you weren't depressed, frustrated, or whatever.
If you go through the motions, eventually your emotions will follow suit.

Jesus told the lame man at the pool to get up and walk.
He told the blind to see.
He told the dead to come forth out of the grave.

In that same spirit, I am telling you to smile, if you haven't been able to smile.
Laugh, if you haven't been able to laugh.
Sing.
Praise the Lord.
Learn a new and faith-filled lifestyle!
Do it and in time your emotions will catch up with your motions!

Your past has sapped your spiritual strength long enough. Come on; don't fake it, faith it! I believe that the Lord will honor your faith and you will be healed. What have you got to lose? Believe it!

5. TAKE THE MEMORY TO CHRIST JESUS

Go to Him.
Be honest and explain how you feel.
Admit that you have problems and secrets that you haven't fully resolved.
He already knows all about the situations anyway.
He's just waiting for you to ask Him for His help.

Jesus said, **"Ask and you will receive. Seek and you will find. Knock and it will be opened unto you."**
But first, you have to ask. Do it. Pray. It will help, you'll see.

I conclude with another passage from the lips of our blessed Lord. In Matthew 11:28-30 He noted: **"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."**

If you are heavily burdened this morning, go to Jesus.
Give it all to Him. Go ahead. You'll be glad you did.
He loves to heal. He would love to help you get past your past! Why not let Him?