

LOOKING AHEAD

Lincoln Park Baptist Church, West Newton, Massachusetts
November 8, 1964

Scripture passage: Philippians 3:2-21

Introduction

The Scripture passage that we have read today presents in 20 verses the whole meaning and compass of the Christian message. We do not have time this morning to consider it in its entirety. We only want to call your attention to verses 12 to 15: *“Not that I have already attained this or am already perfect; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ has made me his own. Brethren, 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 Jesus Christ.”*

From this text three things become clear:

1. Paul comes from a past which he has left behind.
2. Paul in the present has received the call of God through Jesus Christ. Christ has made him his own.
3. Paul knows that the salvation that he has received is still outstanding. Perfection is not here yet but is only a future possibility. The past, the present and the future of the life of a Christian receive meaning from this passage.

Let us consider in turn each one of these aspects.

I. Christian life is always a life with a past. And not only that, but this past is also a present reality. We can remember the past with pride or with shame.

A. Those who remember the past with pride:

Pride in one's pedigree – To put emphasis on one's heritage and forefathers belongs to the sphere of the flesh. Paul says: *“I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh. 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.”*

These were his credentials. In the world in which he was born and moved, nothing could be higher.

But see what has happened. *“But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of*

Christ. Indeed, I count everything a 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.” Any boasting about his past accomplishments or credentials is gone.

Yet this is true of us. We too have a pedigree and often boast about it –

- Hispanic heritage
- D.A.R.
- Pilgrim Fathers

To boast about these things is to boast about fleshly things, things that pass away.

Christianity has usually been more successful among the lower classes –

- India
- Puerto Rico

They do not expect anything from the world and therefore are willing to accept life as a gift.

When those of the upper classes accept Christ, they cannot put stock any more in their pedigree. They cannot look back to the structures that gave them security. These structures are perishable and therefore offer an insecure and unstable foundation on which to establish life.

- B. Those who remember the past with shame. The past is like an open wound, still bleeding. The past is like the barnacles that attach themselves to a boat, slowing its movement and even sinking it. The past does not merely refer to time. Psychologically it means the total life of our past experiences. The past is a reality, very often a sordid and morbid reality.

There are wounds that others have inflicted on us-- for example, the teacher who publicly insulted one of her students (Mrs. Aponte); hatred of father, mother, of other people.

There are sins and mistakes that we have committed. We seldom meet people who, if they are honest, will not admit that even though they have led reputable, normal lives, there are pages in their Book of the Past which they would like to see torn out, and other pages with great gaps telling of good things they ought to have done and did not do.

This is not to deny that we may find people who claim that they have never done anything they were or are ashamed of.

The question is: Is there complete healing for a deep-rooted bitterness, a hidden hatred, a nasty injustice, a father going to jail, a mother coming home drunk? Shadows, shadows thrown onto innocent, young budding lives. What a horrid power and reality sin is.

We can keep looking at the past and become frozen -- like Lot's wife.
-- like the albatross

- II. But Christians do not live out of the past but out of the present and future. In the present, they experience God's righteousness – God's word of reconciliation and forgiveness. Paul says:

“Indeed I count everything a 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 which depends on faith, that I may know him and the power of the resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that if possible I may attain the resurrection of the dead."

What do we have now?

1. The righteousness of God
 God's word of reconciliation and forgiveness.
 Our past has been taken care of. We are forgiven sinners.
 Thanksgiving and joy. God is happier over a sinner that repents than over 99 just persons who need no repentance.
2. Share in his sufferings:
 We do not do away with the limitations of human life. Sin, death and suffering beset us. But these realities have lost their sting.

III. The future is full of promise.

We cannot base our lives on things that pass away: --pedigree
 --nationality
 --power over other people
 --money

The resurrection and the fullness of the life to come are not with us yet:

"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. Brethren, 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 calling of God in Christ Jesus."

"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 their glory is their shame, with minds set on earthly things.

"But our commonwealth is in heaven, and from which we await a savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will change our body to be like his glorious body, by the power which enables him even to subject all things to himself."

Conclusion:

We cannot live out of the past. We do not glory in it, although we might learn from it. We have put our sins in the hand of the Lord. At the present time we experience his word of forgiveness, the cross our measuring stick. We accept the limitations of human life – suffering, death, finitude.

We live from hope – we do not look backward – we look ahead.