

THINGS BEHIND AND BEFORE

A Word for 2009

“This one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before” Philippians 3:13

J.P. Thackway

Having crossed the threshold of the New Year, and now into 2009, we find nearly twelve months before us, if we are spared. At this juncture, it is good to reflect upon where we are - not only in relation to the calendar, but also in relation to our souls: where we are *spiritually*. One year more means one year less in this world. We are now twelve months nearer death, nearer eternity, nearer the Judgment.

If we want seriously to take stock, we will do two things: look back, and look forward. Doing these wisely can bring us gracious encouragements, leading to a new year of spiritual blessing. I want us to try to do this now with the help of the verse that heads this article. Here, Paul makes a resolution, “This one this I do, etc.”

Desire

He was in prison at Rome when he wrote these words. His desire is not to escape, but to let go certain things in the past, and reach forward to new things ahead. He has already mentioned one of the future things in verse 11, “If by any means I might attain unto the resurrection of the dead.” Paul is ambitious for the glorious immortality of the body. And no wonder, because this is the consummation of our salvation: then we shall be perfectly and finally conformed to our Lord Jesus Christ forever (verses 20,21). Everything in life is to prepare us for this, when “we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2).

The “if” in verse 11 is not Paul expressing doubt, but determination. He knows that it is not easy for a Christian to make it to the end. Many temptations, afflictions, hindrances and conflicts lie in the way. Therefore great grace is needed to persevere, that we might be “accounted worthy to obtain that world, and the resurrection from the dead” (Luke 20:35; cf 14:14). So Paul is not only resolute but also realistic.

Therefore, he acknowledges in verse 12 that has not yet “attained” this resurrection, since it is yet future; neither does he yet know that “perfect” state still to come. “But,” he says, “I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus” (verse 12). The life hereafter, in the body in a better world, is one of those things for which the Lord arrested Paul on the Damascus road. Not only for himself, but to preach to others also (Acts 26:16-18).

Therefore comes Paul’s single-minded resolution of our text, “This one thing I do, etc.” What is more worthy of past-renouncing and forward-looking zeal than the resurrection (Titus 2:13)? What is “the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus” but this happy prospect (Philippians 3:14)?

Following this resolve, then, can help us. Let us seek to understand what it involves. If we imitate Paul here, we will make an excellent New Year's Resolution.

1. Things Behind

"Forgetting those things which are behind." We should draw a line under certain things that are now past, and move on. Why? Because dwelling on them can hold us back from real progress in the Christian life.

1] We need to qualify this.

Certain things we must never forget. The apostle Paul remembered what he was before his conversion, "Who was before a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious" (1 Timothy 1:13; cf Acts 22:4; 26:11). The painful memory of our unregenerate days should never leave us, even though the Lord restores to us the years the locust has eaten (Joel 2:25). It is "those things whereof ye are now ashamed" (Romans 6:21), and rightly so. Such recall keeps us humble, thankful, careful, trusting – and ensuring that we give God all the glory for anything gracious in us (Isaiah 26:12; 1 Corinthians 15:10).

Also, all God's providential mercies should never be forgotten, "They shall abundantly utter the memory of thy great goodness" (Psalm 145:7). Israel was exhorted to "Remember all the way which the LORD thy God led thee these forty years in the wilderness" (Deuteronomy 8:2). If we forget these, we forget to be thankful and fail to use each "Ebenezer" to help us trust Him for future needs.

We should also remember the kindnesses of others. Paul was eternally grateful to Onesiphorus for his prison visits, and said so (2 Timothy 1:16). His gratitude to the Philippians for their gifts and prayers shines through this epistle (e.g. 4:18). Acknowledging our indebtedness like this is Christian politeness (1 Peter 3:8). Someone has wisely said, "He who receives a good turn, should never forget it: he who does one, should never remember it." If we could recount the number of kindnesses received throughout 2008 we would be astonished – and perhaps ashamed that we did not say "Thank you" more often.

Concerning these, we should *not* be "forgetting those things which are behind." A keen, retentive memory would make a big difference to our spirit and to our outlook on life.

2] Paul means other things.

"Forgetting those things which are behind." What are those things best left behind and not brought into 2009?

a] Past sins and failures.

We have committed many sins during the last year. Things we should have done, but have not done; things we ought not to have done, but have done: sins of omission and commission. Sins against the Lord, and against others, and against ourselves. Mistakes, foolishnesses, wasted time, distractions, lost opportunities, laziness. Added to these is the mixed nature of even our *right* things. Never is any obedience perfect, nothing we do is pure, everything is spoilt by the corruptions of remaining sin.

We rightly grieve over these, and deplore the fact that we are miserable sinners at best (Matthew 5:4; Romans 7). However, the devil can blow any of these up into proportions that overwhelm and depress. It is necessary to be sorry and penitent, but we must still put it all behind us. What we *should* remember is God's word on the matter,

"As for our transgressions, thou shalt purge them away."

"The iniquity of Israel shall be sought for, and there shall be none; and the sins of Judah, and they shall not be found: for I will pardon them."

"For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more."

"He will have compassion upon us; he will subdue our iniquities; and thou wilt cast all their sins into the depths of the sea."

"All his transgressions that he hath committed, they shall not be mentioned unto him."

(Psalm 65:3; Jeremiah 50:20; Heb 8:12; Micah 7:19; Ezekiel 18:22).

Drawing a line under past failures and sins is simply gospel gratitude. If we do not, and allow them to burden and trouble us, we are in danger of denying the Gospel we profess. The amazing and wonderful fact is that *God* draws the line under them all! Divine forgiveness always means a new beginning.

b] Our inability to forgive ourselves.

It may be a sin of which we are deeply ashamed. A perverse way of punishing ourselves is to feel that we can never forgive ourselves for it. This is understandable, given that repentance includes self-loathing (2 Corinthians 7:11). However, if God has forgiven us we should forgive ourselves: "Now therefore be not grieved, nor angry with yourselves" (Genesis 45:5). C.S. Lewis made a good point: "I think that if God forgives us we must forgive ourselves. Otherwise it is almost like setting up ourselves as a higher tribunal than Him." Let us draw the line under that great sin because God has first drawn that line.

c] Our hurts and grudges.

We remember things done against us more than kindnesses done for us. A "root of bitterness springing up" can take the form of an unforgiving spirit, deep resentment, self-pity, jealousy and "thereby many be defiled" (Hebrews 12:15). Such heart-sins will only hurt us and others. We find it hard to forgive someone who has wronged us. Yet, how can we withhold that forgiveness when God, for Christ's sake forgives *us*? (Ephesians 4:32; cf Matthew 6:14,15).

Moreover, if we say we *have* forgiven, it ought to be the end of the matter. How often in marriage a past hurt, supposedly forgiven, is dragged up and used against one's spouse! Real and frank forgiveness is rarer than we think. However, in this and in every like instance, we really must "forget," draw a line under it, and move on if there is to be any progress.

d] Past disappointments.

Paul had his share of these - John Mark (Acts 13:13), Demas (2 Timothy 4:10), his loneliness (Philippians 2:20), the Corinthian church, prayers not answered, hopes not fulfilled, blessings not seen. We may well have had our share too, in people and events. However, let us not forget Providence in this. They do not come of themselves, "Our disappointments are His appointments." And neither are they for nothing,

Disappointments, His appointments,
Change one letter, then I see
That the thwarting of my purpose
Is God's better plan for me.

God does not disappoint us in anything to hold us back, but to trust Him. 2009 may well see some changes re these. The God of hope is the God who says "better is the end of a thing than the beginning thereof" (Ecclesiastes 7:8).

e] Any spiritual declension.

There may have been times when we have grown lukewarm, become negligent and careless. If we are honest, we probably have lost some ground. Paul's "one thing" has not been *our* one thing. Whenever religion ceases to be single-minded and whole-hearted, it becomes backsliding. Let us not take this with us into another year! Let us deal with that undisciplined lifestyle, compromise on the Lord's Day, slack attendance at church, "little sins" – let us repent of them and reform concerning them (the best evidence of repentance). Let us leave them all behind and move on. "Come, and let us return unto the LORD" (Hosea 6:1).

2. Things Before

"And reaching forth unto those things which are before." This is language taken from the Grecian games of Paul's day. A runner does not look back over the track but strains forward to breast the tape. We dare not do any less if we are to "obtain" (1 Corinthians 9:24; cf Acts 20:24).

1] Paul's being in prison at Rome is part of this perseverance.

It was the Lord's appointed way for him, as "the prisoner of Jesus Christ" (Ephesians 3:1; cf Psalm 69:33) – not the prisoner of Nero. This experience would not hinder but help his "attaining unto" the resurrection, because it had two benefits,

a] It furthered the gospel.

In chapter 1 verse 12 "But I would ye should understand, brethren, that the things which happened unto me have fallen out rather unto the furtherance of the gospel." He then explains that his steadfastness in prison has emboldened Christians in Rome to witness more, resulting in its spread even to Caesar's court. Paul may be bound but the word of God was not (2 Timothy 2:9). "The blessed hope" (Titus 2:14) was beaming its light even into the gloom of Paul's internment.

b] It furthered Paul's spiritual growth.

Again, in chapter 1, verse 19 "For I know that this shall turn to my salvation through your prayer, and the supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ." Paul's development as a saved man was being "worked out" (Philippians 2:12,13) even

more through this experience. And this surely lies behind his straining towards the resurrection and the glories that awaited him as a "recompense" (Luke 14:14).

2] Afflictions, if the Lord sanctifies them, help us heavenward.

"Our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory" (2 Corinthians 4:17). Adversity does us more good than prosperity. In prosperity, we are prone to forget God; in adversity, we are made to feel our need of Him. Thomas Watson expressed it like this,

"Are we in great trouble? There is a promise that works for our good, 'I will be with him in trouble' (Psalm 91:15). God does not bring His people into troubles and leave them there. He will stand by them; He will hold their heads and hearts when they are fainting. And there is another promise, 'He is their strength in the time of trouble' (Psalm 37:39). 'Oh,' says the soul, 'I shall faint in the day of trial!' But God will be the strength of our hearts; He will join His forces with us. Either He will make His hand lighter, or our faith stronger."

Let us then, in every trial, pray with good Bishop Ken,

Teach me to live, that I may dread
The grave as little as my bed;
Teach me to die, that so I may
Rise glorious at the judgment day.

How wonderful that there is a future for us, given we get stuck in the past and feel discouraged regarding what's to come. Let us remember that He who "apprehended" Paul has also captured and conquered us. He will not let us go, neither will He go back on His Covenant purpose to sanctify us to the end (Jeremiah 40:32; Philippians 1:6).

The Lord calls us to go forward. He is the God of new beginnings. We might say that Today is the first day of the rest of our life. 2009 is bright with His promises, His great faithfulness in Christ – and with the prospect of glorious bodies in a renewed and glorious world (2 Peter 3:13). Let us leave the past and go on to the future, and make 2009 part of that future!