

LOOKING BACKWARD

Deuteronomy 8:2

Intro: The new year seems to be always a time when people are inclined to look back over the past. We reflect on the events of the past year. Business take inventory at this time of the year. And comparisons are made with previous years so that the health of the business can be determined. And such inventories are made with the hope that business has been good and that the prospects are there that it will be better in the new year.

Many people do the same thing with respect to their lives. We “take stock,” so to speak. And this is especially true of Christians. We look back over the past and mark especially how the Lord has been dealing with us. We all have to think of things that we wish we had not done, and things that we wish we had not said. But outstanding in all of our lives are the ways in which the Lord has blessed us, and the ways He has led us, and what He has taught us. None of us can undo the past, but we can learn from the past, and we the faithfulness of the Lord in spite of those times when we have not been faithful to Him.

The Bible encourages LOOKING BACKWARD. We have verses like Psa. 105:1-2 which tell us this:

1 O give thanks unto the LORD; call upon his name: make known his deeds among the people.

2 Sing unto him, sing psalms unto him: talk ye of all his wondrous works.

We don't do this as much as we should. The Bible is really a record of what God has done in the past. Even the predictions which are made in Scripture as far as the future is concerned, were all made in the past. The Bible give us the history of creation. It traces God's dealing with His people from Adam down to Christ. And then from Christ to the end of the first century. All of Scripture declares “His wondrous works,” and we must know them, and speak of them, and give thanks to God for them.

But the passage that I want to consider in particular today is found in Deut. 8, verse 2. Moses was speaking to the whole nation just shortly before his own death, and he was seeking to prepare the people for the trials and testing which were before them as they entered the promised land, and then took possession of the land. And this is what he said to the people in this one verse, Deut 8:2:

And thou shalt remember all the way which the LORD thy God led

thee these forty years in the wilderness, to humble thee, and to prove thee, to know what was in thine heart, whether thou wouldst keep his commandments, or no.

— This verse has attracted the attention of the people of God, I am sure, from the time that it was first spoken, and then from the time that it was first written. The people were about to enter the promised land, and while Moses, Joshua, and Caleb were the only ones who started out on what was to be a forty-year journey, the way was well-known to all of them. And the record has been written and preserved for us to enjoy even today. The burden of Moses' message to the people of God he stated in one word:

I. "REMEMBER."

This turned out to be a very important word in this series of messages which Moses delivered to the children of Israel before his death and before the people entered the land. You will find it again *in the latter part of this chapter*, with its companion stated negatively, "forget not," found beginning with verse 11. To "remember" is to "forget not." (Read from verse 11 to verse 18.) You will see both words in 9:7. (Read.)

— We all stand in the present, and can look in three directions. We can and should look at the present, but we must not forget the past, nor should we neglect the future. And I am speaking especially to those of us who, like the Israelites, are acquainted with the Lord.

We run into the word "remember," or "remembrance," in the observance of the Lord's Supper. We are not to forget the Lord, nor are we to forget what He has done to save us from our sins. Memory is a very important ability that we all have, and it can minister to us in countless ways. We remember those who used to be with us, but are now with the Lord. We remember good times that we have had in the past. Our memory also brings regrets to our minds, things which we would probably prefer to forget, but which have been planted indelibly upon our minds. And it is always sad when people lose their ability to remember.

— But Moses was speaking of a very practical matter which ought to occupy the memory of the people he had led and for which he carried such a deep and abiding love in his heart. And he said that it had to do with remembering. If you want to know all that he said to his people, you will have to read the whole book, but first of all today I want you to notice this word, and I hope that our time in this verse today will cause you to notice the

word as it appears in other parts of the Word of God—both “remember,” and “forget not.”

But what at this particular point did he want them to remember?

II. WHAT THEY WERE TO REMEMBER.

You have it in the words, “all the way which the Lord thy God led thee these forty years in the wilderness.”

Now we know that it should not have taken them forty years to make the journey from Egypt to Canaan, but it did! And it took them forty years because of their unbelief when the Lord wanted them to enter the land at Kadesh Barnea. You will find that account in Num. 13 and 14. And Moses himself was not permitted to enter the land because he disobeyed the Lord at Meribah by striking the rock to get water instead of speaking to the rock. So some of the events which they had to remember were not good, because they were times of disobedience, times when the people had disobeyed the Lord.

But I want you to pay particular attention to the way Moses referred to the past forty years. He put it all within the scope of the sovereignty of God, and described their history in the wilderness as “all the way [singular] which the Lord thy God led thee these forty years in the wilderness.” There was not a moment in their whole journey that the Lord was not leading them. He was not responsible for the many times they disobeyed the Lord and rebelled against Him, but He never ceased to lead, and never ceased to bless, never ceased to provide, and never ceased to protect His people. And so it was not a case of just remembering the bad things, but they were to remember what the Lord their God faithfully did for them and their parents all through those forty years.

Now as we apply this verse to our lives, the time is different with each one of us. With some of us it is more than forty years, with some, it is less, but the fact that the Lord has been leading remains the same.

Notice, too, that Moses did not speak of “the ways” [plural] that the Lord had led, but of “the way.” It was God’s plan to get His people to Canaan. In their case they all went the same way. God’s purpose even for all of us is not many ways (as we are going to see tonight), but one way. God’s varies His way with us at different time, but He never changes what His main purpose is.

Obviously if you and I are going to appreciate this verse, we need to know that story that is recorded in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, especially the first three. The bad parts have to do with the sins of the people, but the good parts, the truly amazing parts, have to do with “the way,” “all the way” that the Lord their God led them.

But why was it that the Lord wanted them to remember what He said? Was it just that he wanted them all to be historians? No, it was not that although the more we know about the history of God’s dealings with His people in any generation, the better off we will be. One of our great problems in the church of the Lord Jesus today is that as a general rule the people of God don’t know Bible history, nor do they know church history. If they did, they would not be so upset when they hear about election and particular redemption and the other doctrines of grace. But here in our text the Lord told them why He wanted them all to remember “all the way” that He had led them. And this bring us to:

III. THE PURPOSES OF THE LORD IN THE WAY OF THE LORD.

One of the problems that the children of Israel had, and one of the problems we have even today, with the way the Lord leads, is that we do not understand the purposes that the Lord has in the way He leads. We all get discouraged with unanswered prayer. We don’t understand why we go through many of the trials that we experience. The suffering of the people of God has always been a mystery to the Lord’s people. We often see how good people suffer, and evil people seem to get away with any evil thing that they want to do.

Well, this is where our Bibles help us, and this is how Moses was seeking to help his people—even help them deal with the fact that Moses, that godly man, was not going to be able to lead them into the land of Canaan.

Moses, speaking by the Holy Spirit, here gives us three purposes, or possibly four (depending upon how we related the last two to each other). Let me deal with each one briefly.

A. “To humble thee.”

Do you know what is your greatest problem in walking with the Lord? And do you know what is my greatest problem in my walking with the Lord? It is the same for all of us: **p-r-i-d-e** ! *And have we learned that*

pride in one way or another is involved in every sin we commit? You think about that, and I believe you will agree with me. The children of Israel rebelled time and time again against the Lord because He did not do things their way. It is pride which makes us determined to have our own way, not only with God, but also with other people. When you hear someone say, "Nobody is going to tell me what to do," they are declaring loud and clear that they have a proud heart. That is why people don't want to be told that they are sinners and in need of a Savior. Their pride has blinded them to what their main problem is.

And God hates pride! The Bible tells us that "God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble (James 4:6). And you find that again in 1 Pet. 5:5. And both of these statements are a quotation from Prov. 3:34 as it appears in the LXX.

God hates pride. Listen to Prov. 8:13:

The fear of the LORD is to hate evil: pride, and arrogancy, and the evil way, and the froward mouth, do I hate.

Prov. 11:2 tells us:

When pride cometh, then cometh shame: but with the lowly is wisdom.

Read the prophetic books of the OT, and you will see that the great nations of the past all fell because of their pride. Prov. 16:18-19 tell us,
18 Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall.

19 Better it is to be of an humble spirit with the lowly, than to divide the spoil with the proud.

Our Lord Jesus Christ issued the invitation,

28 Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

29 Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls (Matt. 11:28-29).

What was God seeking to do in all of those circumstances which He brought His people into? He was seeking to show them what they really were—how foolish, how determined to have their own way, how selfish, how proud!

Jacob was giving evidence that the Lord had humbled him when he said in his prayer as he feared meeting Esau,

9 And Jacob said, O God of my father Abraham, and God of

my father Isaac, the LORD which saidst unto me, Return unto thy country, and to thy kindred, and I will deal well with thee:

10 I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies, and of all the truth, which thou hast shewed unto thy servant; for with my staff I passed over this Jordan; and now I am become two bands (Gen. 32:9-10).

That is the prayer of a humble man. The Lord led Jacob the way He did that Jacob might cease being a proud man, and become a humble man.

So let us remember that when God's way differs from ours, and we are inclined to feel resentful, resent is pride, and the Lord is leading us in a way to remove pride from our hearts. The Lord in His prayer in Gethsemane was manifesting the deepest humility when He said, "Nevertheless, not my will, but thine be done" (Luke 22:42).

What was the Lord's second purpose with the Israelites?

B. "And to prove thee."

God never tempts us to sin, but He does test us. We have many illustrations of this in Scripture, but we all know something about this in our own experience.

Charles Simeon, who spent a good part of his life, perhaps most of it, ministering to students at Cambridge University in England, had this to say about the way the Lord tests us:

It is easy to obey God at some times and in some respects in comparison of what it is at other times and in other respects. God therefore puts us into a variety of situations, to try whether we will make him the supreme object of our regard in all. At some times he gives health, and affluence, and honor, to see whether we will suffer these things to draw away our hearts from Him, or whether we will improve them all for Him. At other times He lays affliction upon our loins, to see whether we will retain our love to Him, and bless Him as well when He takes away as when He gives. At some times He permits us to be sorely tempted by Satan, and by the corrupt propensities of our own hearts, to prove whether we will prefer the maintenance of a good conscience to any of the gratifications of sense. At other times He permits persecution to rage against us, that it may appear whether we will sacrifice our interests, and life itself, for Him. In fact, every change of circumstances is sent by Him, precisely as the command respecting the

sacrificing of Isaac was sent to Abraham: by that command “God tempted [tested] him”; and by every circumstance of life He tempts [tests] us, to “prove whether we will obey his commandments or no” (Vol. 2, pp. 302, 303).

But let me hurry on to the third purpose.

C. “To know what was in thine heart.”

How easy it is for us to say good things to the Lord about our love for Him which we cannot back up when the tests and trials of life come along. Do you ever get angry with the Lord because He doesn't do what you want Him to do, or because He doesn't do something when you want Him to do it, or when it seems like He is not even paying any attention to you. When we look back over our lives up to the present, however many years that might be, do we see how the Lord through trials He brought into our lives was bringing things to the surface which we did not like to admit were there? He knows our hearts, and He wants us to see what is in our hearts so we will look to Him to make the changes that need to be made.

Peter is a perfect illustration of a man who did not really know what was in his own heart when He said, “Lord, I am ready to go with thee, both into prison, and to death” (Luke 22:33). And what was the Lord's response? “I tell thee, Peter, the cock shall not crow this day, before that thou shalt thrice deny that thou knowest me (Luke 22:34). Who was right? The Lord was, and Peter was to weep bitterly (see Luke 22:62) when in experience he learned that he didn't know as much about his heart as he thought that he did.

Have you seen things come out of your heart that you didn't know were there, things that made you ashamed of yourself? I don't like to say so, but I have.

And what was always the big test throughout the forty years that the children of Israel were wandering in the desert? It was “**whether thou wouldst keep his commandments, or not.**” That is always the test: the Lord's will, or mine!

Concl: Today as we approach the end of 1997, will you LOOK BACK-WARD with me? You look at your life, and I will look at mine. And perhaps we can see our needs even as we look at ourselves today, and the testing that we may be experiencing at this very moment. Remember

that the Lord our God has placed us where we are. He knows our needs spiritually as well as physically and every other way. He is preparing us for better days when we will be better people, more holy, more humble, and more obedient to His will, joyfully obedient. It is not an accident that we are where we are, facing perhaps some hard situations. Let us look upon our trials and our blessings as especially designed for us because the Lord is working in us “to will and to do of His good pleasure.”

We need to LOOK BACKWARD so we can learn from our past, learn more about the Lord, and learn more about how much we need the Lord, and how we need to trust Him more than we do. May Deut. 8:2 become a permanent part of our lives for the rest of our days! If it is, we will learn to see God in our trials, and to trust Him as the One Who loves us, and is making us day by day more like His beloved Son. The Lord does not try us because He enjoys seeing us have a difficult time, but He tries us because He loves us, and seeks our highest good and our greatest joy.

LOOKING FORWARD

Philippians 3:13-14

Intro: This morning I asked you to LOOK BACKWARD with me, and our text was Deuteronomy 8:2. Tonight I want you to LOOK FORWARD with me, and my text is Philippians 3:13-14.

Years ago I had a friend in Canada, a teacher in a Bible School, who wrote a commentary on Philippians, and he gave it the title, *Paul's Spiritual Autobiography*. I don't know how he could have chosen a better title. That is what Philippians is, *Paul's Spiritual Autobiography*. And it is the most autobiographical in chapter 3. There he opened his heart to the Philippian believers, and to all of us who have had the Word of God in our hands from that day until this. It is one of the letters that the Apostle Paul wrote while he was a prisoner in Rome. But you would think from the tone of this letter that the Philippians were the ones in trouble, not Paul. His joy in the Lord had never been greater.

But there is one thing that may have been impressed more deeply upon his heart because of his imprisonment, and that he mentioned first in chapter 3 verse 12, and then he went on to enlarge upon it in the verses I have chosen as my text for tonight. It is to be seen in these words: "Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect."

Early in my life as a Christian I used to think of the Apostle Paul as a spiritual giant (and I still do), but I didn't think of him as still needing to grow in the Lord. I thought that he knew just about everything that it was possible for a Christian to know, and that, next to the Lord, he was about as spiritual as it was possible for him to be. And then I came to his own words about himself, "not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect." In them I saw that he had not attained perfection, that he still needed to grow in his knowledge of the Lord, and to attain greater perfection as a child of God.

Yesterday in our men's prayer meeting one of our men whom I regard very highly in the Lord, prayed that we would never get to the place in our lives when we would no longer be growing in the Lord. I don't know that I am quoting him correctly, but that was the gist of his prayer.

One thing we will all be able to say as long as we live is, "not as though I had attained, either were already perfect." That is where I stand tonight, and that is where you stand tonight. So as we LOOK FORWARD tonight,

that is where we stand. None of us is perfect in our knowledge of God and His Word, and none of us has reached perfection in our lives. We all have a ways to go. And perhaps the Spirit of God led Paul to write those words so that we would realize, if Paul were where he said he was, then we are, too.

However, one big difference between Paul and many of us is that he not only said it, but he was prepared to do something about it. And so he went on to say,

But I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which I am apprehended of Christ Jesus (Phil. 3:12b).

Paul was in pursuit of that purpose that the Lord had in saving him. Paul was describing his salvation when he said that he was “apprehended of Christ Jesus,” or, *by Christ Jesus*.

I was interested in what F. B. Meyer, who was a contemporary of Spurgeon in London, had to say about this statement. These are his words:

After all, is this not conversion? We grasp the hand of Christ because He has grasped ours, we are apprehended to live after the highest and noblest ideals because his hand has been laid upon us in arrest (*The Epistle to the Philippians*, p. 172).

He also said this:

When a man turns to God, the first thing he realises is that throughout the wild wanderings of his youth, and amid all the fret and war of his manhood, even when he has been most stubborn and rebellious, God’s love has never ceased to seek him... We love because we were first loved; we seek because we were sought; we leave our far country, not only because hunger impels, but because frequent missives from our Father’s house tell us that He cannot be at rest until we are...seated at His table (*Op. cit.*, p. 171).

Paul was not seeking the Lord when the Lord struck him down on the road to Damascus, but the Lord was seeking him, and found him, and drew him to Himself, and forever transformed his life. And the One he had hated so much before, the Lord Jesus Christ, became his dearest Friend and his greatest Ideal, the One he wanted to be like.

We ought to speak of ourselves as people who have been *apprehended by Christ*.

But the expression implies not only that the Lord has laid hold of us and stopped us from going on to hell, but that He has had a marvelous purpose

in apprehending us. And that is what Paul was talking about when he said in verse 12, “not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect.” Paul knew what that purpose was, and he knew that God’s purpose in saving him had not been fully realized. He was not what he had been, and he certainly was not what he might have been, but he was not yet what God wanted him to be, or what he at that moment wanted more than even his release from that Roman prison. However, He was at that moment pursuing the purpose of God in his salvation. As the Apostle Paul LOOKED FORWARD from the year in which he was writing, which was probably about 60 A.D., this is what he wanted. And to see how much he wanted it, we turn now to verses 13 and 14 of this same third chapter of Philippians.

The first thing we have is,

**I. PAUL’S RESTATEMENT OF HIS SPIRITUAL CONDITION:
“Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended.”**

I spoke this morning about the new year as a time when people are taking inventory. Business people take inventory of their businesses, and, hopefully, people take inventory of their lives. Well, this word “count” means that Paul had taken inventory of his life, and he had come to the conclusion that he was not all that he wanted to be. But, what is more important, he was not all that God wanted him to be. He could see some very real spiritual needs in his life, and it concerned him greatly. He knew why the Lord had “apprehended” him, and that purpose had not yet been realized.

This leads me to ask, “Have I taken inventory of where I am spiritually? And if I have, am I willing to admit what the Apostle Paul admitted? He wanted to be an example to the people of God, but at this point in his life he wanted to be a better example. And so he had to face the fact that he was not spiritually where he wanted to be. That is a conviction we ought to have about ourselves continually. If not, we will not be able to say what the Apostle Paul went on to say. What was it?

II. PAUL’S ONE MAIN OBJECTIVE IN HIS LIFE: “But this one thing I do.”

It is probably true of all of us that there is one thing in our lives that is more important to us than anything else. The question is, What is it? With Paul it was his relationship with his Lord.. If it were true that he was

not all that the Lord wanted him to be, then he was prepared to do something about it. And that is what was so wonderful about what Paul had to say here in this passage. It does not mean that he was responsible for his own sanctification, but it does mean that God had given him the means for his sanctification, and he had purposed in his heart that he was not going to stay where he had been spiritually. It is not that there was any major thing wrong in Paul's life, but it was that things needed to be better than they were.

Two other people in the Bible were concerned about this *one important thing* that we all should be concerned about to the point that it is more important to them than anything else.

One of these was David. You probably will remember his words, but let me read them to you again. You will find them in Psa. 27:4:

One thing have I desired of the LORD, that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to inquire in his temple.

The other was Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. The Lord had come to their house, and Martha was irritated with Mary because Mary was not helping her prepare a meal for the Lord. And so Martha asked the Lord to tell Mary to help her. And this is how the Lord responded to Martha:

41 And Jesus answered and said unto her, Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things:

42 But one thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her (Luke 10:41-42).

We all are sympathetic with Martha, and the Lord was not rebuking Martha for wanting to serve the Lord. But the question is, What is the most important—what we do for the Lord, or what the Lord does for us? The Lord said, “One thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her.” The Lord meant that there is really one thing that we cannot and must not do without, and that is the time we spend at the Lord's feet listening to His word.

Job's word of conviction is important at this point. He said,

Neither have I gone back from the commandment of his lips; I have esteemed the words of his mouth more than my necessary food (Job 23:12).

The people of God in Scripture are unanimous in their conviction of what

is the most important thing in our lives if we are to pursue the purpose of God that He has in saving us.

But such an objective requires two things:

A. “Forgetting those things which are behind.”

This morning I spoke to you about remembering all of the ways of the Lord with us in the past. And that is most important. We learn from what the Lord has done for us and with us. But if we are to make progress in our lives as Christians, there are some things that we need to forget—and many of these are things that are good in themselves. In Paul’s case, what were those things that he was talking about?

Well, the place to look for them is right where we are. And so if we look back through the chapter, we find that Paul, in verse 7, wrote about some things that previously had been “gain to me.” And he had just finished saying what they were in verses 5 and 6.

Paul had done some very bad things before he was saved. Believers had been arrested, and very likely many of them had been put to death. But he had done all of that thinking that he was doing God a service. And what he mentioned in verses 5 and 6 are all commendable things in their place. (Read.)

But why did Paul now feel that he needed to forget them. It was because he had looked upon those things as giving him merit with God. Perhaps Paul was saying here that just after he was saved he had looked upon those as being the reason that the Lord had saved him. If so, he was yet to learn the meaning of the word *grace*. Paul had to learn, as we all do, that the Lord did not save him for any good thing in him (because there was no good). And so he needed, and we need, to forget those things which we may feel had a part in our salvation, and see that what God has done in all of our hearts has been *by grace alone*. Spiritually we are totally bankrupt apart from Christ. That is the inventory of one who doesn’t know the Lord, and that is the inventory we have who know the Lord—if we are looking for that which commends us to God. Our standing before God is 100% in Christ. And so one of the first steps we must take in advancing in our relationship with the Lord is to *forget those things which are behind*. And I might add, forgetting the bad as well as what we might think are the good. “Nothing in my hand I bring; simply to Thy Cross I cling,” is the ground upon which we come to the Lord.

But the next step is:

B. “Reaching forth unto those things which are before.”

— Tonight we are LOOKING FORWARD. Great things are ahead of us. How anxious are you, how anxious am I, for those things which are before us? Perhaps what we need to do is to ask the Lord to give us a real desire for the attainment of that very purpose for which the Lord laid hold of us when we were saved. Do we hunger and thirst for righteousness?

Here picture a runner who is running in competition with others, and how stretches himself out to be the first to cross the finish line! How wonderful it is to see a child of God who is always reaching forth! Such a person never can seem to get enough of the Word, or of the Lord.

But there is a third point that the Apostle Paul was making.

C. “I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.”

— “Press” is the same word that in verse 12 is translated “follow after.” It is to run after something like you would if it could get away from you. Does that describe us as it described the Apostle Paul.

What is “the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus”? It is the attainment of absolute perfection. It is to be made like the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul expressed what it means in the last two verses of this chapter, Phil. 3, verses 20 and 21. (Read.) This is the purpose God had in mind when He laid hold of each one of us, and saved us. Paul had not attained, and neither have we. But we need to be pressing on.

What does a Christian do if he is pressing on? Let me suggest four things, and you can see these all through the Scriptures:

- 1) He read and meditates continually on the Word of God.
- 2) He prays, prays much, prays continually.
- 3) He is careful to live in obedience to the Word of God.
- 4) He faithfully meets with the people of God for His own instruction and encouragement and fellowship which is so important to every child of God. All you have to do to see this even in the life of the Apostle Paul is to read his epistles. He loved the fellowship of the people of God. When he was in prison, letters helped to supply that need.

Concl: We have been thinking tonight about the Apostle Paul. This was what he was continually LOOKING FORWARD to. This is not just an annual exercise, but a daily exercise. Even as we are here tonight, we ought to be looking forward to another time in the Word before we go to bed, and then time, even though it be brief, when we can pray to the Lord, thanking Him for what He has done for us today, and asking that if He gives us another day, it would be a day in which our main concern will be to live according to His will which we find in His Word. And then go home LOOKING FORWARD to the next time we can be together to talk about the Lord and to enjoy that special fellowship which only we as the people of God can have.

So our word for 1998 is, *Keep pressing on! Seek greater likeness to Christ, and use the means that He has given us for our perfection. Only He can make them effective in our lives. That is why we need to pray for His blessing and trust Him to fulfill His purpose in us as day by day we seek to "grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.*