

Dealing With A Bad Past

“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 Christ Jesus.”—Philippians 3:13-14

Many of us have done things we are ashamed of. We are terrified of being found out. We fear that the sins and mistakes we have tried hard to forget will be discovered, and our family and friends will turn their backs on us or look at us differently, negatively. Or maybe they already know, and we are entangled in the vice-like grip of their perception. We are like a frightened man walking through a forest knowing that he is being stalked by an animal intent on devouring him. Paul was such a man. God deliberately sent Paul to minister to the people he had hunted and tormented, people who had reason to hate or distrust him. God’s mission for Paul was like sending a former leader in the Ku Klux Klan to minister to black people or having a former officer in the German SS minister to Jews. If Paul feared his past disqualified him from the ministry, he was correct. If he feared he was unworthy, he was correct.

God did not tell Paul to pretend the past did not exist. The Greek word translated here as “forgetting” is “epilanthanomai” and it means to forget, to neglect, to no longer care for. Christ has not erased our past. He has done something infinitely better: He has redeemed it. Our sins no longer have eternal consequences for us. Our past can no longer blight or ruin our relationship with the Living God. We no longer need to fear it because Christ’s blood covers every bit of it. The sins of our past, present and future do not condemn us if we are in Christ Jesus.

Christ is greater than any sin we have committed. If we look at our past with satisfaction, we are in danger of becoming prideful. King Nebuchadnezzar said: "Is not this great Babylon, which I have built by my mighty power as a royal residence and for the glory of my majesty?" For his pride God made him like a common beast for seven years. On the other hand, focus on our past can lead to anger or depression. We dwell on missed opportunities, failures, mistakes. Pride, despair and fear all lead us to see our past as bigger than Christ. We must repent of our past sins and learn from them, but we must not dwell on them. Christ must be our focus. Dwelling on the past with pride, fear or despair ruins our focus on Christ. The problem is taking our eyes off Christ. Our focus must be the life, death, resurrection and eternal reign of Christ. Our past, like our present and future, is in His hands alone. Christ may reverse the temporal consequences of our past, but He has not obligated Himself to do so. However, He has obligated Himself to love us¹, to be with us every minute of every day² and to prepare a place for us with Him in heaven³.

It is a blessing to realize that I am nothing and have nothing; that all is Christ. We should not lament in getting what we deserve, but rejoice in receiving what Christ deserves and shares with us. Our past is dung no matter how illustrious or blighted it may be. Christ is our great need and He has promised us that we belong to Him. To dwell on anything else is sin. We tremble when we think people might find out the truth about us, our meanness, inconsistency and hypocrisy. But Jesus has promised

¹ John 10:14

² Isaiah 41:10

³ John 14:3

that the truth shall make us free. Jesus is Truth. He knows us inside and out. Indeed it is He who reveals us to ourselves. Why should we worry about being exposed when we already stand naked and exposed before the God who created us and saved us, and He still loves us with an infinite love? Christ is all. He is our everything. He is our reputation. We are naked before Him so that He may clothe us in *His* righteousness.

The flesh is at war with the spirit. The flesh loves asceticism as much as it loves debauchery. It revels in slavery. It doesn't care whether it is guilt or addiction that enslaves us so long as we do not experience the peace we have in Christ. The flesh revels in our enslavement and cannot abide freedom in Christ. The spirit revels in freedom and cannot abide enslavement. Which do you choose: freedom or enslavement? Christ or something else? We must stop looking in the mirror and look instead at the cross. Regarding the past in a worldly manner produces self-congratulation or self-condemnation. Past successes should serve to reveal God's providential care. Past failures should serve to highlight God's grace.

When the beast draws close, we must preach the gospel to ourselves: "Yes I have done terrible things. I am a sinner. But Christ who loves me has redeemed me. All my sins were nailed to the cross. I am determined to press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Christ has redeemed my past, has blessed my present and has secured my future."

"Though my sins rise to heaven, thy merits soar above them... All things in me call for my rejection; all things in Thee plead my acceptance."⁴

⁴ *The Valley of Vision*, "The Broken Heart", pg. 150-151