

Today, we're going to be talking about our past; our future; and what that means for us, for today...

Years ago, I was in a church where we did an evangelism course. And at one point, we were being taught how to share our testimony. And they used the example of this great old hymn, "This is my Story, this is my song..." And I really liked that example – it helps us to understand what a personal testimony is...

We all have a story (a past), that has been our life journey, up until the point where we had a significant encounter and experience of God.

And my story might be different to your story:

- You might've been a drug-addicted armed robber, in jail for attempted murder, when you became a Christian;
- The goody-goody-two-shoes, who grew up in a Christian family, and learned to love Jesus from the day you were born

We all have a story – that brought me to this point.

And this is our song – This is my experience of God – this is the significant encounter that I've had with God...

- This is the life of forgiveness
- Freedom
- Future I have in Christ
- This is what God has done, to turn my life around..

And this is what I look forward to

- The final day, when I see Jesus face to face;
- The resurrection
- Being in glory with Him...

And so, as disciples of Jesus, we have the past (the way we once were). We have our future – the way we will be...

But what of our present??? What about today???

You see, as disciples of Jesus, we are a people, who are living in the now, but the not yet.

We are not the same, as we once were. At one time, we were

- part of the Kingdom of Darkness / Kingdom of Light.
- children of the Devil / Children of God.
- Objects of God's wrath / now we glory in Him
- destined for punishment/destruction/hell/torment, but now we are destined for glory and eternity in the glorious presence of our Lord...

We're not the same as we once were... But we're not there yet...

Now, as I read and prayed through this passage for today, and as I thought about the church **of** today, it seemed to me, there's 2 serious extremes that are common, and we should guard against falling into these:

So, living in the now:

- The first extreme, is to look back, and to live as we once were.

- The second extreme, is to act as if we've already arrived...

And in this section of Paul's letter to the Philippians, he's addressing both of these.

Alright, so he's been talking about "Counting everything as loss", in order to:

- Gain Christ
- To be found in Him
- To receive a righteousness from God (not depending on his own righteousness)
- To share in the sufferings of Christ
- To become like Him in His death; and
- To attain the resurrection of the dead

And when we're living in the now, but the not yet, the natural human, fleshly inclination, often wants to just skip over things like:

- Sharing in the sufferings of Christ
- Becoming like Him in His death (dying, possibly in a horrible way);
- Daily striving for righteous living

And the natural human inclination, is to grasp hold of certain promises of Christ (that He has prepared for our future), and to expect to have them now.....

(like opening our Christmas presents a month before Christmas Day)

But Paul's saying, "I **haven't** already attained this. I'm **not** already perfect.

but I press on to **make it my own**, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.

What a profound statement that is... “**I press on to make it my own**” Paul’s pressing on. He’s not living in the past. He’s living in the now. But he knows that the future isn’t yet his. And it **won’t** be, until the day of resurrection... And so he presses on.

What gives Paul the confidence to press on? He says it’s “**because Christ Jesus has made me his own.**”

The literal Greek says something more like:

I press on to grab it, because I was grabbed (grasped) by Christ Jesus.ⁱ

I press on to lay-hold-of it, because I was laid-hold-of by Christ Jesus

Paul knows that the day of resurrection (and all of the blessings that that entails), isn’t at all wishful thinking – it’s a certainty.

At one time, Paul had a wrong idea of God. In fact, he was dead against those Christians – he couldn’t stand them... You think you know somebody who doesn’t like Christians – they don’t have a patch on Paul...

But there, on the road to Damascus, Paul was on his way to arrest Christians, to have them put on trial for blasphemy against God... And there on that road to Damascus, Jesus Christ laid-hold-of him...

Acts 9: (ESV) ³ suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. ⁴ And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" ⁵ And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. ⁶ But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do."

Jesus laid hold of him, and Paul would never be the same again. And if you're a disciple of Jesus, you should know what I'm talking about. Jesus has laid-hold-of you (it might not have been as dramatic as the way that Paul was laid-hold-of, but you've been laid-a-hold-of, nevertheless), and you will never be the same...

And so this path that Jesus has set us on – the path of being a disciple of Jesus, is because He has laid-hold-of us – He has made us His own.

And **that's** why Paul has confidence, of the coming day of the Lord... And that's why he wasn't living in the past any more.

He says: V13

¹³ Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward ¹⁴ to what lies ahead, ¹⁴ I press on

toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Now, I want to make something clear: when Paul talks about “forgetting” “forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead” , he’s not talking about “forgetting about ‘the way we once were’, and ‘what God has rescued us from’”.... He’s talking about “forsaking it”...

e.g. When God led the people of Israel out of Egypt, there came a time that they looked back. And they remembered the bits that they enjoyed about being in Egypt (primarily, they were thinking about their bellies [tucker]) And they longed for what they once had...

Numbers 11: (ESV) ⁵ We remember the fish we ate in Egypt that cost nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. ⁶ But now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at."

Alright, they looked back, and they remembered Egypt, but it was a longing to return to where they once were... And God was angry about this. He didn't want them to be looking back. He had rescued them from this...

But did that mean that he wanted them to forget about Egypt; and to forget about the way they once were; and to forget what He had rescued them from??? Not at all. In fact, time

and time again, He said, “Remember”. Remember where you were; Remember how it was, and how I rescued you; Remember how you were once slaves yourself in Egypt...

The whole Passover celebration, was to remind them of the bitterness of their past, and the way that God has rescued them from it.

And for us, it's really important for us to look back, and to remember what God has rescued us from... It gives us reason to praise Him...

But we've forsaken our old life, and so, when he's saying “Forget about what lays behind”, he's saying, don't go back to it. Don't desire it any more...

There's a theological term called “sanctification”. God is transforming us, to become more and more like Jesus... And this is an important part of our journey. It's the way ahead. Perfection in Christ, is the goal. And while we keep our eyes fixed on the goal, and keep moving on ahead (not looking back, and not longing for our old ways[the ways of the world]),,, we're pressing on, and God is sanctifying us, and transforming us, making us more like Christ... But we haven't achieved perfection yet. Nor will we, until the day of resurrection...

Which is why Paul says:

¹⁴ I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Alright, so let's not look back. Let's no longer crave the things of the world (the things that we've left behind)...

- At one time, you may have enjoyed getting drunk with your mates
Not anymore, because Christ laid hold of you, and now you're pressing on to the goal, not looking back.
- At one time, you might have enjoyed being involved in the dirty talk / rude jokes / porno images shared amongst your mates...
Not anymore, because Christ laid hold of you, and now you're pressing on to the goal, not looking back.
- At one time, you might've had the aim to store up money and possessions, or maybe just to 'kick-back', and look after numero-uno – all about self
Not anymore, because Christ laid hold of you, and now you're pressing on to the goal, not looking back.

Alright, so the first extreme looks back – it looks back to our past, and it desires the old way we used to live, before Christ took-a-hold of us.

But the second extreme, is to have the belief that we've already arrived... Alright, we're living between the now and the not yet, but this extreme teaches (and therefore expects), that all of the blessings (or at least, **most** of the blessings) are available to us right now...

Some people claim it, in relation to holiness/sinlessness. They believe, that we can overcome sin completely, right now...

Some churches, rarely (if ever), pray a prayer of confession, because they believe that the day you decided to become a Christian, Jesus took away all of your sins – all of you past, present and future sins, and so, you don't need to confess the things that you've done any more,,, as if it doesn't matter...

But do you know how Jesus taught His disciples to pray?
Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us...

And numerous times throughout the New Testament, when Christians sin, they are told to repent...

I guess I can tell you honestly, from my own life experience, I long for the day, when sin will be completely overcome in me, but right now, I find that every day, is a day that I struggle with sin... And in this, I'm in good company. The Apostle Paul says "I haven't already attained this, and I'm **not** already perfect"...

And I'm pretty sure, you know what I'm talking about, because we all experience it... Where we long for the day, when sin will be completely overcome, and temptation won't affect us anymore... Well, be encouraged, "That day's coming – It's just not here yet"...

And as disciples of Jesus, yes, we strive for perfection. We strive to live as obedient sons and daughters of God, but let's **not** give up because we've discovered that we're not as perfect as we want to be... We're living in the now, but the not yet... But the good news is, today, as we live in the now but the not yet, the grace of God is powerful. And when we repent and confess our sins, and ask for forgiveness, we are indeed forgiven.

So, that's one example. Perhaps a more common example of the extreme that acts as if we've already arrived, is what often gets called, "Prosperity theology", or "The Prosperity Gospel"...

And most of us will probably recognise this sort of teaching – it's teaching that tells us that, a lot of what Jesus promises us, we can claim right now... In fact, it'll even go back into the old testament, and claim some of the promises that God made to Israel, and claim that we can expect **these**, right now.

It's a teaching that claims things like:

- Riches;
 - possessions;
 - health;
 - well-being;
 - even respect, honour and position,
- can (and should) be claimed (& spoken into being), right now...

It's a teaching that says, that in the Name of Jesus,

- we can claim that promotion at work;
- we can claim a financial blessing;
- we can claim a trouble-free life...

It's a teaching that says that no Christian:

- should ever die of cancer; or
- should ever suffer any sickness or disease...

They believe that when Jesus died to conquer sin & death, and the Scriptures tell us that it's by His wounds that we are healed, and they take this as a physical healing, and that it's a physical healing and a physical provision that's available right now...

What do you think??? Well, all of those things that I've just listed, are earthly things, aren't they... And a heart that's set on earthly things, will crave these things. And not only do they pray for these things, they almost demand them... Earthly things...

Ideally, I would've liked to have taken today's reading and next week's reading, at the same time, and go right through to the end of this chapter, and into Chapter 4... And next week, we'll get there, but just a little taster, where Paul talks about enemies of the cross... How do we tell them??? **Their god is their belly** (that means they're worried about physical stuff); they **glory in their shame** (they're proud of things they should be ashamed of); and their **minds are set on**

earthly things... That's the characteristics of enemies of the cross...

So, let's not set our minds on earthly things. You see, the cross is about the sacrificial giving of self, rather than the grasping of worldly things for self... And Jesus told us, that to be His disciples, we take up our own cross to follow Him... We leave behind earthly things, to strive towards the spiritual, eternal blessings...

Now, some of you might say to me at this point, "So Michael, don't you believe in healing?"

And my answer to you, is "No, I don't believe **in** healing. I believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. And I **do** believe in **His** power to heal. And I believe in His authority to Heal. And I believe that He is Lord, and that He knows best – That He knows what's best for you and I – That He knows what's best for His purposes and for His kingdom...

And so, in accordance with the Scriptures, when those among us are sick, we pray for their healing. And in accordance with the Scriptures, we do pray for blessings... We don't pray for wealth and prosperity, but we pray for the blessing of daily bread... And I can testify that Jesus has never let me down there – He always gives us what we need...

And in accordance with the Scriptures, when we pray for healing:

- we don't demand it – it's not our right...
- we don't try to speak it into being – we're not God;

- we don't go on&on&on / get louder and try to shout it into being, because that's how the pagans do itⁱⁱ. God knows what we need before we ask Him.

When we pray for healing:

- we humbly seek the mercy of God;
- we make our request, Lord, please Heal;
- and in accordance with the Scriptures, we pray, Yet not my will Lord, but Your will be done...

Some people will tell you, if you pray for healing, and you don't get healed, it's because you don't have enough faith... But do you know what true faith looks like??? Do you know what a real, powerful faith looks like??? It's a faith that says, "Lord, it's in Your hands, and I'm asking for healing, but whether this person is healed, or whether they die, I will glorify You, and I will Love You, because you've taken a hold of me, and my mind isn't set on earthly things – I'm looking forward ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

That's real faith...

And yet, some people would consider what I just said, as being "unspiritual"... And it's not uncommon for those who chase after the physical earthly blessings now, - the whole name-it-&-clam-it thing – it's not uncommon for these folk to accuse those who **don't** do the name-it-&-clam-it thing, as being "unspiritual"... But in truth, it's exactly the opposite...

Paul's been showing us, that we're living in the now but the not yet. We've left behind our life of sin, but we're not yet perfect. And we're on our way to the blessing of the resurrection – a time where there will be

- no more sickness;
- no more death;
- no more hunger;
- no more thirst
- the streets are going to be paved with gold – I don't think we'll be chasing riches any more...

But that time, is not yet...

And then he says:

¹⁵ Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you.

You see, if we start thinking that “we've made it”/“already got the blessings”, that's immaturity...

And he says an interesting phrase here, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you.

You see, when a person truly believes that they're more spiritually mature than what you are (even though they've gone off on an unbiblical tangent) rarely will you be able to convince them otherwise... They believe they've got the anointing/faith/spiritual know-how, and you're just religious & know nothing of the spirit... And you won't be able to convince them otherwise. Only God can do that.

This prosperity theology I was talking about (Health; wealth; long life), is a luxury of the rich and healthy...

Sometimes in the sovereignty of God, in His mercy, He gives the gift of healing... And what a time to rejoice that is....

But sometimes, the sovereign will of God, is for the person not to be healed and for them to suffer, and to die... Now, if your mind is fixated on this earthly life, you won't be able to cope with that statement... but if you have the same mindset as Paul, to live is Christ, and to die is gain, you'll understand it very well...

And so:

- in our living, we give glory to Christ
- in our plenty, we give glory to Christ
- in our poverty, we give glory to Christ
- in our health, we give glory to Christ
- in our suffering, we give glory to Christ
- in our dying, we give glory to Christ

V¹⁶ Only let us hold true to what we have attained.

What have we attained???

We hold on to Christ, because He took a-hold of us, and we continue to follow Him, until the day we die, and the day of resurrection. And we're going to talk more about the resurrection next week.

Let's pray,

Lord Jesus Christ,

We want to thank You, that You have taken a-hold of us;

And so Lord, help us to hold on to You.

Lord Help us, by Your Holy Spirit, to keep our eyes fixed on You, as we;
press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus

And Lord, we pray for Spiritual maturity;
Help us to stop being so focused on earthly things;
Even our own lives/health – earthly things....

Lord, help us to not be so focused on these things, but to seek first the Kingdom of God, and Your righteousness...

As we look forward to the day when we will see you face to face, in Glory...

Amen.

ⁱ *I still press on so as to grasp [it] because I was indeed grasped by Christ [Jesus]*

In : O'Brien, P.T., 1991. *The Epistle to the Philippians: a commentary on the Greek text*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

ⁱⁱ Matthew 6:7–8 (ESV)

⁷ “And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. ⁸ Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.