

## FORGETTING BEHIND STRAINING AHEAD

Philippians 3:13b

We are now one week into a new year! We do not know what this new year holds for us—personally or as a spiritual community—yet, we can be fairly certain that there will be challenges that confront us. Some of these challenges we can control while others will be out of our control. The challenge of paying more attention to my health is within my control, while the challenge of facing a hurricane is out of my control. But regardless, how we respond to our challenges, those we have control over and those we do not, is a choice that we do make.

Paul, the author of the letter to the church at Philippi, understands life itself to be a challenge—and specifically the spiritual life. In regards to his spiritual life Paul says that he presses on, that he keeps moving, that he does not give up, that he keeps growing. And the way he does this is by forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead.

When writing to the Philippians Paul found himself in debate with those who believed that they had already arrived; they believed they had attained perfection in their spiritual lives. They were relying on all that they had done and were content with that. They did not feel they needed spiritual growth. It is this setting of debate that brings Paul to say that he has found it necessary to forget his past spiritual accomplishments in order to strain forward, to keep growing. Paul even writes to the congregation at Philippi that if there is anyone who has the spiritual/religious credentials to say, “*I have arrived,*” it is he; yet, he does not say so.

The congregation at Philippi looked upon Paul as a model believer. He was their example of how to live the life of Christ. Yet, when Paul examines his own life he confesses that he has yet a ways to travel—I press on, I am straining forward to what lies ahead.

To explain his belief in moving forward Paul compares life to a race. Paul understands that when one is running a race their progress is hampered by continually looking backward. Every time a runner looks backward they lose ground—they lose seconds off of their time. Of course those who believed that they had already arrived could not relate to Paul’s words. They placed all of their hope on the past. I want to say that again, they placed all of their hope on the past. Do you hear the irony? Hope is about anticipation, looking forward and optimism. There is no hope in the past. We cannot anticipate anything about the past. We cannot be optimistic about the past. We can glory in the past and even regret the past but we can never hope in the past. Hope is found by straining forward.

When my sons were young and we would take trips they would ask many times, “*How much further is it, how much longer will it take, when will we get there?*” They never asked, “*How far have we come,*” or “*How long has it been since we left.*” Their anxious mind was always on where we were going never on where we had been.

Even though Paul was debating the perfectionists, those who felt that they had arrived, there are other folk who are the opposites of the perfectionists. These are the ones who feel so miserable about their past failures that they are unwilling to look to the future. They too have lost hope. Either because they feel their past failure is so great that any future success will not matter or they have decided that they might as well not try anything new because

they will just fail at it as well. They are using yesterday's defeat as a seed for tomorrow's failures.

Friends, when writing to the congregation at Philippi Paul is making it clear that not only does clinging to our past failures, with feelings of regret, hinder us from moving forward but also clinging to our past successes can hinder our forward movement. The feeling of spiritual arrival can paralyze one from further accomplishment. There is no spiritual arrival! When it comes to our spiritual life we are always talking about journey never arrival!

A true musician never stops practicing—they always believe they can do better. The musician is always on journey, never arrival. Just imagine what it would be like if a physician felt like they had arrived and did not keep up with medical advances. This physician would soon find herself to be incompetent in her chosen field. The physician is always on journey, never arrival. Whenever we feel we have spiritually arrived it is a sure sign that we have given up hope and that we are depending solely upon the past.

In regards to my personal growth and to facing the challenges of the new year I fully embrace Paul's concept of forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead. Still, I do not want to miss the present. I do not want to be so focused on tomorrow that I miss today. The older I become the more I realize that in most cases the journey is as important, and in some cases more important, than the destination. Imagine what it would be like if all we knew about Jesus was his birth and his death but nothing of his life—of his journey. It was Jesus life that made his birth, his death, and even his resurrection significant and powerful and gave them meaning.

In a daily inspirational piece titled *The Time is Now* John Sklare writes, "*The past is history. The future is mystery. The now is a gift. That is why they call it the present.*" So friends, as we forget what is behind and we strain forward in hope to what is ahead let us be sure to accept the gift of the present, of the journey.