

THE SECRET OF A GREAT LIFE  
Philippians 3:8-14

These verses of scripture let us into the secret of one of the most majestic and useful lives that was ever lived. In these most courageous and challenging statements, Paul, the most remarkable Christian of all the centuries, reveals the secret of his marvelous life. As he reviewed the past, surveyed the present, and girded himself for the future, he declared that he wanted to get more knowledge of Christ by experience, to triumph over sin, and to have fellowship with Christ in suffering. But, he declared that he had not been able to achieve his desire. He asserted that he had not accomplished all that was attainable. Furthermore, he was dissatisfied with his attainments.

While on his way to Damascus, in the midst of his career of persecution, Paul was arrested by Christ. In describing that experience, which was one that he never forgot, Paul said: "I was laid hold of (or grasped) by Christ Jesus." The immediate results of that experience were the forgiveness of his sins, the comforting assurance of his acceptance with God, and the complete surrender of his life to Christ for service.

Christ did not grasp or arrest Paul merely to save his soul from destruction. He saved him in order that he might become a witness for Him. He saved him and transformed him in order that through him He might bring His saving and transforming Gospel to others. He wanted him to have a part in a world-girdling task. The end of his salvation, "that for which I am apprehended by Christ Jesus," looks both to personal growth in grace and to personal participation in the service of Christ. What Christ purposed for him became his purpose for himself.

Christ laid hold of Paul for a definite purpose -- to save his soul and to divert his great ability into the right channels and make a great minister and a mighty missionary out of him. Paul yielded to that loving grasp and gave himself voluntarily to Christian service. His influence spread extensively, large cities were permeated with Christian truth, flourishing churches looked to him as their founder, and at least thirteen valuable epistles in the New Testament were written by him. He did many wonderful works for his Lord. When his career was almost ended, and he was thinking over what he had done, he frankly stated that he was not satisfied with what he had done for his Lord who had done so much for him. Some are satisfied with what they have done, and with what they are, but Paul was not. He still had an eager longing for loftier heights.

Although he had not yet attained perfection, he was striving to achieve it. His ruling passion was to get nearer to Christ, to grow in His grace and knowledge, to be more like Him, and to do more and better work for Him. He was anxious to achieve the ideal which Christ had for him when He stopped him in his course and turned him about.

Paul refused to lull himself to ease and to relaxation of effort because of his past attainments. He would not permit the memory of what God had wrought in and through him to encourage self-satisfaction. His attainments served only as a stimulus to greater endeavors for Jesus Christ.

Paul was a man with a single purpose or aim. He said, "This one thing I do." From him we learn that no life can be very happy, or very great, or very useful, without a single aim and a strong devotion to it. Concentration is the secret of strength in politics, in trade, and in the management of all human affairs. It is indispensable to success in every realm of life.

There is no sight so sublime, no heroism so enthralling, no nobility so God-like, and no influence so resistless as that of a human soul forging straight ahead in the way God has marked out for that soul to go.

Success in any calling or undertaking depends largely upon concentration of purpose and effort. Singleness of aim lies at the foundation of greatness. From our text we learn that Paul was a specialist. He was not bent upon a dozen different enterprises. He was not engaged in but one. He was giving all his time, all his attention, and all his vast abilities to one single task. And, mark you, life becomes mighty only as all its energies are concentrated upon the doing of one thing.

Not only was Paul a man of one purpose, but that purpose was altogether worthy. The secret of a great life is a great aim. If we live for trifling things we shall be trifling people. If we live for some glorious aim it will make us glorious. A mighty purpose will lift us above the fascinations and allurements of pleasure, the discouragement of difficulties, and the trifling successes of a passing day.

In a very sensible way Paul went about the realization of his purpose. He said he was going to forget the things that were behind. There are some things we ought not to forget. We must not forget the past mercies of God. We must not forget our obligations to God and to our fellow men. We must not forget the wrong that we have done others, unless we have made it right. It is right for us to sing,

"If I have wounded any soul today;  
Dear Lord, forgive."

But our Lord expects us to do more than that. He expects us to heal the wound so far as it is possible for us to do it. Don't forget the apology you ought to make and the restitution that ought to go with it. It is bad enough to do an injustice to another, but it is worse not to apologize for it, and it is still worse not to make amends, and one cannot make any progress in the Christian life until he does so.

Someone has said that our two greatest enemies are yesterday and tomorrow, meaning regret over the past and anxiety about the future. But the greater enemy by far is yesterday, with its failures, its mistakes, and its sins. Much is going to depend upon the right or wrong use of the past, whether a man's past rules and dominates him, or whether the man rules and dominates his past. The past has the power to bind, to hurt, and to forbid in the present.

There are few faculties so rich as memory. It is one of our greatest possessions. It is more wonderful even than we realize. Nothing in life needs to be managed more carefully than memory, for nothing can hurt us or hinder us more than our stored-up past. Like all great blessings, memory can become a curse when it retains only things which are gloomy, discouraging, and depressing. We are all too prone to dwell on the unhappy and painful experiences of life. We allow one cloudy day to rob us of the memory of many days of glorious sunshine. We permit some distasteful experience, which has occupied but a relatively small portion of our lives, to overshadow all the blessed and happy experiences of life. When we carry in our minds and hearts the disappointments, failures, and unhappy moments of life, we become pessimistic, critical, and cynical. Unhappy ourselves, we become the joy-killer for our friends and associates. Continually pondering over the dull and drab things of life finally poisons our entire system so that everything becomes discolored and distorted.

Paul teaches us to forget all that we should not remember, and to remember all that we should not forget. He would have us to think of the past in a way that will not hinder our work at the present and in the future.

Certainly the past is real. It is also unchangeable. Every thought, every word, every plan, and every deed lives. You made a decision years ago that cheated you out of an education. You cannot change that. You fired a gun. You cannot recall that act. You encouraged and helped someone, and as a result that one has made good. That, too, is unchangeable. The past is ours also. It is a part of you. It will live with you to chide you, to prod you, to probe you, to hearten you, to cheer you, or to bless you. Each thought, motive, experience, and deed is a link in the chain of your life.

A thorough introspection will reveal wrong inclinations, bad dispositions, injurious habits, unfulfilled dreams, unreached goals, and unattained ambitions. Maybe you will find unholy longings, unchristian schemes, selfishness, pride, and other things to hamper, to enslave, and to defeat you. For years Paul was content to be a Pharisee, a persecutor of Christians. But one day he was changed; his life was changed; his ambitions were changed; his attitudes were changed; his goal was changed. He was possessed by a new power, led by a new Master, inspired with a new motive, and blessed by a new influence. He surrendered everything to Christ.

Paul tells us that he forgets the things of the past. He is thinking mainly of his victories over temptation, the successes that have come to him, and the work that he has been able to do for Christ. These are things for which to be grateful. But, it is possible to let the mind linger on them in such a way that they prevent further progress. The good often becomes the enemy of the best. We can make a shell of our own success in which to curl up and go to sleep in self-satisfaction.

We must learn to forget our blunders, mistakes, sins, losses, sorrows, and injuries. Big souls do not cherish resentments. Great souls put them down and out, and go their way, and refuse to harbor them. We must cultivate a wise forgetfulness of the past. Many people never come to the highest and best in life because they cannot forget certain things in life that ought to be forgotten. Why keep the wrongs which you have suffered? They will never help you in the least. If somebody has done you an injury, the memory of it will embitter you, so, for your own sake, forget it.

Why does Paul urge us to forget the things that are behind? Because he knows we will never go forward as long as our eyes are turned backward. People go in the direction in which they look. It is only as we turn our eyes to the future, to the things that are before, that we will make progress. Someone may say, "But, how can I forget?" Not by simply trying to do so. The only way is by becoming absorbed in the things that are before. So, we are to forget the past by giving our heart's love to Christ and to our brethren for Christ's sake. If you cannot forget the things that are behind you will never make a very long journey in the Christian life.