

A DESIGN FOR LIVING

"Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect: but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus. Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus." Philippians 3:12-14.

Every normal individual is engaged in a constant search for a philosophy, a plan of action, a path of progress and a design for living that will work.

If I had the privilege of going to any one human being out of all who have ever lived and saying to him, "Sir, what is your design for living?", I would go to the Apostle Paul. Having placed his philosophy of life in the crucible of experience, Paul could give a splendid answer to that question. No doubt his answer would be very close to what he wrote to the members of the Philippian church almost two thousand years ago: "Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus." That is a design for living that will work. For this reason, we are interested in examining it.

It is always a great privilege to be permitted to look into the life processes of a great and noble spirit. We have a keen interest in biography because we want to know what makes strong men and good women click. We like to find out how men and women of the past climbed the heights and reached the peak of greatness and usefulness. Of all the biographies in the Bible, that of Paul is one of the richest of all, because he was the greatest Christian who ever lived. Even though he was weak in body, he was great in mentality, mighty in spirit, and tremendous in personality and in leadership. Our text gives us the secret of his great life, which was one of the most majestic and useful that was ever lived.

While on his way to Damascus, in the midst of his career of persecution, this proud Pharisee was stopped in his tracks by a blazing apparition on the outskirts of the city. This light was so bright and dazzling that he was so blinded that he could not see the presence of the Person Who had appeared to him. That experience changed everything for him. The things for which he had lived previously suddenly lost their meaning. In describing that experience, which was one that he never forgot, Paul said: "I was laid hold of (or grasped) by Christ Jesus." The Lord Jesus Christ seized him and saved him. The immediate results of Christ's laying hold on Paul and stopping him cold in his program of persecution 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 Paul only to save his soul from destruction. He also grasped him, saved him and transformed him in order that through him His saving and transforming gospel might be delivered to others. Christ wanted Paul to become a witness for Him and to have part in the proclamation of the glorious gospel throughout the world. Christ laid hold of Paul for a definite purpose, namely, to save his soul, to divert his great ability into right and constructive channels, and to make a great minister and a mighty missionary out of him. Paul yielded to that loving grasp and gave

himself voluntarily and whole-heartedly to Christian service. He did many wonderful works for the Christ Who saved him and had a tremendous influence on society.

In giving us his design for living, Paul stressed the importance and value of concentration. He said, "This one thing I do," or as Moffatt translates it, "This is my one thought." He did not permit anything to distract his attention as he devoted the remainder of his life to getting to know Christ better and making Him known to others. "This one thing I do."

The root cause of much of the confusion, unhappiness, mental illness and failure in these days is the factor called frustration. In our fast--moving culture we are beset on every hand by conflicting forces, pressures and demands. Pushed back and forth by every wind that blows, torn in our loyalties, our obligations and our devotions, and unsettled in the basic values which are to govern our lives, we are frustrated.

Recognizing that many of his contemporaries were frustrated, Paul taught them how to overcome this weakness. In substance, he said, "Find for yourself some one thing, some one center of thought, some one standard that you can make supreme. Direct the arrow of your soul toward that target. Much is important, but there must be one thing in life that is supremely important. Take your stand upon that foundation, and make up your mind that nothing which can come shall shake you from it."

How many of us have failed to learn that simple lesson! You can see them all around you, and so often in yourself. How many parents do you know who want to rear their children to be God-fearing, honest and useful Christian citizens of the community, and yet they themselves will not accept the responsibilities which God holds out to them? They can do one, but they cannot do both.

How many young people do you know who want to choose their career and vocation solely on the basis of their own selfish ambitions and desires, without regard to the needs of a broken and troubled world? Yet, at the same time, they want that feeling of peace and assurance which comes only from knowing that you are in the very center of the will of God. You can do one, but you cannot do both.

How many individuals do you know who want to concentrate their talents and their time upon the material things of life, striving desperately to accumulate, but having no place in the scheme of things for the riches of heaven? And yet, when times of testing and of tragedy come upon them, they want deep spiritual roots -- reservoirs of power -- that will carry them through. You can do one, but you cannot do both.

How many people do you know who want to let themselves go, morally and ethically? They want to do the things that they know, under God and conscience, are not the right things to do; yet, at the same time, they want to lie down at night, turn out the light, look up into the face of God, and know they are clean. You can do one, but you cannot do both.

Paul knew what he was talking about. If a man is to live with himself, if he is to find peace or security or happiness, he must find his "supreme" in life. And that "supreme" must be worthy of and draw forth from him the best that is in him. Paul had found his "supreme." "This one thing I do."

With these words in mind, let us think about the suggestion it gives of the need of doing one thing at a time.

One of the accusations which people are fond of leveling against Americans is that we scatter our efforts. Nationally, we are very much like the boy with a gun whom a tourist saw in the edge of the woods. Upon being asked what he was hunting, the boy replied, "I don't know; I haven't found it yet." We have set up versatility as an idol. Nationally and individually we point with pride to the many things we can do, instead of calling attention to the thing we can do well. We do not concentrate. We do not know what to leave out. Purpose, which is the faculty of doing one thing above and through all other things, is a quality of the strong man. The weakling never attains it; therefore, he remains a weakling.

Success in any calling or undertaking depends largely upon concentration of purpose and effort. Singleness of aim lies at the foundation of greatness. The secret of great accomplishments always has been and ever shall be an all-absorbing purpose. Life becomes mighty only as all its energies are concentrated upon the doing of one thing.

Not only was Paul a man with a single purpose, but it was one that was altogether worthy. Some people have purposes that are neither worthy nor elevating. Dugald Stewart told of a bright young fellow of his acquaintance who spent fifteen years trying to balance a broomstick on his chin. He, too, could have said, "This one thing I do," but what he did was not a very worthy pursuit. Three years ago, a young man in our church and a student at Murray State College said to me, "A group of us (meaning students) are going to study the beatniks on the campus and see what makes them click." What a purpose! What a pursuit!

From Paul we learn that no life can be very happy, very useful, or very great without concentration on one thing. Many failures are due to the lack of concentration rather than to inability.

Many years ago in the old McMillan School in New York City some boys were gathered about the stove one cold, wintry morning. In the group was a little fellow with poor eyes and sickly appearance. Another larger boy entered, threw his books on a chair and turning to the little fellow said, "Ted, you're a fool." Rather abashed, the little fellow timidly answered, "Why, Fred?" "Oh, I don't mean what you think I mean, Ted, but you're a fool nevertheless. Your father is rich. You don't need to go to school for your father is able to keep you; yet you're here every day -- the most regular pupil in the school, and studying until you'll ruin your eyes and your health too. For myself, my father's rich too, but I've been kicked out of three schools already and am just staying until I get kicked out of this one."

Another boy in that group was named Devolt. Years passed by. Devolt was returning from a western city to his boyhood home. As he passed through the depot in Albany a voice said, "Paper, sir!" He recognized the voice and turning sharply said, "Fred, is that you?" "Yes, it is, Devolt." The two went to eat dinner together, and as they sat down Devolt said, "Fred, do you remember?" "Yes, I remember and I know what you are going to say. You are going to ask me if I remember the day I called little Ted a fool. I do, and it is one of the saddest memories of my life for you see what I am doing now, scarcely able to make out a bare existence, but little Ted, he is the President of the United States, Theodore Roosevelt!" Handicapped in life, he yet persisted and made his mark in life and became one of the greatest Americans. That is an example of what concentration, devotion and hard work will do.

Paul reversed what is common in the lives of those who have advanced considerably in years. The tendency with them is to live more and more in the past. Instead of doing that, Paul dismissed the past from his mind, for the most part, saying: "Forgetting the things which are behind." He knew what to forget and what to remember.

Our past sins must be forgiven if we are to forget the things that are behind us. There cannot be any forgetting without forgiveness. Paul was conscious of the many failures and sins in his life. The way he had blasphemed the name of Christ and persecuted the Christians must have haunted him by day and by night. But there came the time when he acknowledged his sins and, having confessed them, entered into the experience of forgiveness and cleansing.

Paul was proud of his ancestry, his upbringing, his religious training and his service to the traditions of his calling, and he was satisfied that these were sufficient. He had achieved a notable reputation for his learning and for his zeal, a zeal which had been exercised most vigorously in the persecution of the Christians. He could not conceive of anything higher for which to live and to strive -- until he met Jesus Christ.

Paul challenged us to forget the things that will cripple us, hinder us and defeat us. Some are so well satisfied with the past that they are the victims of it. Some are so occupied in looking back upon their family trees that they never think of growing a tree. Their conversation is largely about the past. As a rule they talk a lot about their parents or their forefathers. Such a person simply advertises the fact that his family is like the potato plant -- the only part worth anything is under the ground. Defeat is written over the life of the person who lives on by-gones. Occasionally one finds a church that is living in the past. A generation ago it was a great church, but now it is interested only in history. Like the fabled bird, it flies backward, because it doesn't care where it is going, it only wants to see where it has been. This reminds me of the man with a failing memory and a fading eyesight.

Too many Christians try to live in the present by feeding on the blessings of the past. To live in the past, even a past of victory, is dangerous. Our testimony for Christ will be damaged by the practice. To live in the realm of past experience indicates that the Christian is living in an unreal world. Trying to escape the reality of present problems by drawing too heavily on past experience is unwise. Such a retreat is an indication of inability to cope with the present situation.

The moment any one of us begins to think back on our past experiences and tries to live on them, our present power in service will be hindered. Too many Christians are willing to tell what the Lord did for them thirty or forty years ago. And it usually sounds that many years dead, too. The testimony that bears fruit for Christ is one that is vital with present victory. To live in the realm of past experience indicates that we are occupied with the experience and not with Christ. Whether we walk through pleasant or unpleasant experiences, Christ, and not the experience, should be the joy of our hearts.

Simon Peter and Lazarus had unique, miraculous experiences. Peter walked on the water; and Lazarus, after being in the tomb for four days, was raised from the dead. Both had experiences that no other human being ever had. But neither of them ever spoke about their experiences! They spoke about Christ. Why talk about our experiences when we have our Lord Jesus Christ to talk

about? When we talk of experiences, people see us; when we talk of Christ, people see His beauty, His loveliness, His grace; and, thank God, some of them desire Him, receive Him and love Him.