

PRESSING TOWARD THE GOAL

Paul is the greatest single credential that Christianity has ever produced. He is the most remarkable Christian of all the centuries. From the moment he fell in the dust on the Damascus road until he went to be with his Lord, he moved forward toward the goal. A bit of the secret of his majestic and useful life is set forth in these verses: "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." Phillipians 3:13-14.

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 Paul merely to save his soul from destruction. 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 become a witness for Him and to have a part in a world-girdling task. Paul's expression, "that for which I am apprehended by Christ Jesus," points both to personal growth in grace and to personal participation in the service of Christ. It was glorious that what Christ purposed for Paul 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 and whole-heartedly to Christian service. His influence spread extensively and he did many wonderful works for his Lord.

That famous mountain climber, Whymper, in his book entitled, "Scrambles Amongst The Alps," says, "When you are on the summit of Mount Blanc you look down on the rest of Europe. There is nothing to look up to; all is below; there is no point above for the eye to rest upon. The man who is there is somewhat in the position of one who has attained all that he desires; he has nothing to aspire to; his position must needs be unsatisfactory."

"Upon the summit of the Verte there is not this objection. You see valleys, villages, fields; you see mountains interminable rolling away, lakes resting in their hollows; you hear the tinkling of the sheep bells as it rises through the clear morning air, and the roar of the avalanches as they descend between buttresses which support them; with its brilliant snows, purer and yet purer the farther they are removed from this sinful world."

This is the position of Paul. He stood, as it were, upon a spiritual Verte looking away to the valleys below and to the summits above. Standing there, he says, "Brethren, I count not myself yet to have attained." I have not yet reached the summit. There are points in the Christian life higher than the one on which I am standing.

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 Christ.

All of us are interested in biography. We want to know what makes strong men and good women click. We want to find out how men and women of the past climbed the heights and reached the peaks of greatness and usefulness. The Bible is filled with brief biographies. That of Paul is one of the richest of all. He, the greatest Christian who ever lived, was weak in body but great in mentality, mighty in spirit, and tremendous in personality and in leadership. Our text gives us the secret of his great life.

I. His Dissatisfaction With His Attainments.

When his career was almost ended, and he was thinking over what he had done, Paul frankly stated that he was dissatisfied with what he had done for his Lord Who had done so much for him. Some are satisfied with what they are and what they have done. But Paul was dissatisfied with his attainments and had an eager longing for loftier heights.

A divine discontent with attainments is the secret of man's achievement in any realm. For instance, consider man's intellectual discontent. He comes into the world without knowledge. To begin the human mind is like a tablet that does not have anything written on it. But the mind of man has a receptive surface. It has in it marvelous possibilities latent powers, that are capable of amazing development, and he speedily sets himself in a spirit of wonder to solve at least some of the mysteries of the great world in which he finds himself.

III. His Desire For Greater Achievements.

In his desire for greater spiritual achievements, Paul forgot what he had already attained. After reviewing the past, and surveying the present, Paul girded himself for the future. He dismissed the past from his mind, thereby emancipating himself from its deadening influence. He was not so much interested in the things which had been, nor in the things that were, but in that which was to be. This does not mean that Paul did not respect the past, but rather that he would not be bound in slavery to it. Some are so satisfied with the past that they are victims to it. Evidently what Paul is saying to us here is, "Do not think of the past in a way that will hinder your work at the present and in the future." He challenged us to forget the things that would hinder, cripple and defeat us.

This matter of forgetting the past is a fine art. Everyone ought to learn it. What a beautiful word "forget" is, when it is used in the right place and in the right way. Forget your follies, blunders and failures. We forget our failures by remembering our successes; our slights by remembering the courtesies; the harsh words by remembering the kind ones; the injuries by remembering the favors; the wrongs by remembering the kindnesses; the pain by remembering the pleasure. Forget the cutting things others have said about you, the slights they have intended for you and the injuries they have tried to inflict upon you.

The mind is like a garden, and all the thoughts are either flowers or weeds. In that garden grows the planting of the past. What are you nourishing in the garden of your mind? Are you allowing the weeds of littleness, selfishness, unkindness, bitterness, strife, hatred and vengeance to grow and ripen in your heart? If so, pluck these things out and forget them.

Paul knew what to remember and what to forget. As glorious as was the past, as challenging as was the present, Paul's eyes were fixed upon the future. He knew that Ichabod, which means "his glory hath departed," defeat and death are written on the life of any individual who has ceased reaching out, or who lives on by-gones. Look ahead, not behind. Think of tomorrow, not yesterday. Yesterday is beyond recall, but you can make something lovely of today and tomorrow. Yesterday is as dead as a last year's bird nest. Turn away from it. Tomorrow is alive, pregnant with beauty, radiant with power and possibilities. Turn to it. The past is dead. The future is alive.

Many people are so occupied in looking back upon the family tree that they never even think of growing a tree.

One of the unsolved mysteries of nature is how a dog can tell which way game has gone when he strikes a trail. A good dog will always turn in the right direction the moment he strikes a trail. Dr. J. B. Gambrell defined common sense as "a kind of liquid of which two drops on a hound dog's nose will keep him from back-tracking a 'coon."

Nothing is more futile than a backward chase, whether it be of deer, fox, coon, rabbit or squirrel. A hunter is not interested in knowing where game came from; he wants to know where it is going. Illustration: young dog back-tracked a fox.

Some people, like some young dogs, sometimes waste time and energy back-tracking. Their conversation is only about the past. As a rule they talk a lot about their forefathers. Such a person advertises the fact that his family is like the potato plant--the only part worth anything is underground. He spends all his time back-tracking.

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 man with failing memory and fading eyesight.

Paul made it clear that if you cannot forget the things that are behind you will never make a very long journey in the Christian life. Forget the past and look forward to new days and new achievements. This is the way to grow. Burn the bridges behind you and face the years that be.

"Fix your eyes upon Jesus,
Look full in His wonderful face,
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim
In the light of His glory and grace."

Edwin Markham, the famous American poet of the last generation, put it just right. When he was eighty years of age he wrote these charming lines:

"I am done with the years that were: I am quits:
I am done with the dead and old.
They are mines worked out; I've delved in their pits;
I have saved their grain of gold.

"Now I turn to the future for wine and bread
I have bidden the past adieu
I laugh and lift hands to the years ahead:
Come on: I am ready for you."

That spirit is wonderful for a man of eighty, or of any age.

III. His Devotion To A Single Aim.

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 has been and always will be an all-absorbing passion. Life becomes mighty only as all its energies are concentrated upon the doing of one thing.

Paul said, "This one thing I do." He was not engaged in a dozen different enterprises. He was not even engaged in two. He was giving all his attention, all his time and all of his vast abilities to one single task.

Not only was Paul a man with a single aim, but that purpose was one that was altogether worthy. Dugald Stewart tells us 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.

From Paul we learn that no life can be very happy, or very useful, or very great without a single aim and a strong devotion to it. Concentration is the secret of strength in the management of human affairs. It is indispensable to success in every realm of life. Many fail in life not because of inability, but for lack of concentration.

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.

IV. His Diligence In Strenuous Activity.

As Paul wrote these verses which so clearly reveal the secret of his great life, he had the picture of a race in his mind. He knew that distractions in a race were fatal. As he was running the race of life, he had no time nor inclination to look backward. Neither did he turn aside to look at anything else. He put forth the very limit of his power and endurance in his effort to reach the goal. It was because of his exalted conception of what lay before him to be reached that what he had already gained seemed poor and unsatisfactory. He saw the unattained burning so clearly before him that all the attained seemed as nothing to him. He persisted with strenuous and unceasing activity in bearing down upon the goal. He pressed forward toward the goal in order that he might lay hold of the prize. The goal was Christ-likeness; the prize was the crown of rejoicing, the crown of righteousness and the crown of glory. In living the Christian life we must keep our eyes upon the goal. "Looking unto Jesus the Author and Finisher of our faith."