

Remember To Forget

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[0 : 00] Well, tonight we are continuing our study on Paul's letter to the Philippians and we've come to the second half of chapter 3 and we can read again at verses 13 and 14.

Paul writes, brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own, but one thing I do, getting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Now, I want to start tonight with a riddle, okay? So, I'll get you all thinking straight away and see if you can work out this little riddle. What is always behind you but is constantly confronting you? What is always behind you but constantly confronting you? What do you think?

Well, I'm sure many of you have guessed that the answer is your past. Your past is always behind you. It can never be in front of you, never. And yet, everyone here will know that our past is so powerful in shaping our lives. So much of what's going to happen this week is bound up with what's happened last week. Although we rejoice that, you know, as we worship as Christians, we worship on the first day of the week, the resurrection morning, it's a fresh start in so many ways. Yet, it doesn't discount everything that's happened in the previous seven days. This week is bound up with last week. That can happen in very small ways. It can also happen in very big ways. And for so many of us, our hopes, our fears, our dreams, our struggles for the future are shaped by what's happened in the past, whether that's a few days ago or whether that's many, many years ago. So, that means that although the past is behind us, it still confronts us. It massively shapes our lives. From the big, outward stuff like our houses, our careers, our families, all the way through to the secret, inward stuff, our dreams, our insecurities, our passions, our anxieties. The past is so powerful.

The passage that we've come to tonight in the second half of Philippians 3 is one of the definitive biblical statements about how we should deal with the past.

[2 : 46] And in teaching us all about dealing with the past, Paul has one great thesis. He's telling us that when it comes to the past, there's one big thing that we need to remember.

We need to remember to forget. That's our title, and with that in mind, we're going to work our way through this passage together. In the passage that I've read, Paul is drawing a very powerful contrast between his past and his future. In the first half of the chapter, there's this fascinating section where he addresses the fact that the Philippians, like many of the other early churches, were exposed to the threat of false teachers coming in and leading them away from the true gospel.

And one of the things that false teachers frequently did is that they tried to draw on their credentials and their status, and often that was in relation to their previous lives in the Jewish community. And so people would come along, they would make out that they had all these credentials and they'd use that as a means to lead people away from the gospel. Paul responds to that by saying, if these people think they've got credentials, I have more. And you've got this wonderful summary where he says, you know, if anyone thinks that they can boast about themselves, boast in the flesh, I've got more reason. And he runs through all these qualifications in the verses before you there. And yet, in making that argument, Paul culminates everything with the astonishing statement in verse eight, where he says that actually, all of that is rubbish.

I count it all as rubbish in comparison to what he has gained in Christ. And as you may remember that his language there is quite graphic. He basically says all of that stuff is like a pile of poo compared to what I have in Christ. So instead of relying on or boasting about his past, Paul's great focus is on Jesus and everything that he now has through faith in him. And all of this is getting us to think about how powerful the past can be. And that's so true for all of us, isn't it? I can think of things that have happened in my childhood that still bother me. So I can think of, I can think of getting roused at school. I can think of being hurt by friends. And even worse, I can think of the times when I hurt other people. And all of those things send a shiver down my spine. And at the same time, I can think about things in the past that fill me with joy. I'm going to make everybody cringe when I say this, but I can remember the day that you know, and I started going out. I can remember when I first kissed her. That was a good day.

And I can remember days when things went well in school, when they went well at work. I can even remember the few occasions when I was playing football and I played quite well.

[6:10] All these things in the past, some that kind of make us squirm, others that fill us with joy. And it's the same for all of you. But as we think about all of that stuff in our past, we need to recognize that the past can grip us in a way that's unhealthy. And I think that there's at least three ways that that can happen. So you can look at your past and you can be crippled by regret.

And I've got no doubt that everybody in here knows how that feels. We can think of things that we wish we had not said or not done. Likewise, we can wish that there was things that happened to us, that hadn't happened to us, that people hadn't done stuff to us, that they'd done. There's things that we wished had turned out differently. You know, things that we planned and we really thought we're going to work out and then they didn't. And it leaves us hurt. And all of that kind of just leaves us, leaves us bound up in a sea of regret that just keeps coming wave after wave. It leaves us frustrated at ourselves because of stuff we've done. At the same time, it leaves us so conscious of the unfairness of life because we've been hurt by other people and by what's happened to us. And all of that's crippling. We're emptied of our confidence because we realize what we are capable of. And we're filled with fear because we realize what other people are capable of. The past can leave us crippled by regret. You can also, however, look at your past and be ensnared by pride.

That's the opposite problem. We can see things in our past that boosts our ego, that makes us feel better about ourselves, that makes us feel like we're a little bit better than other people.

And we can easily derive our self-worth, our security from these kind of things. And again, it can happen in loads of different ways. It can happen through our achievements.

That can run right through from childhood in school where you get better grades where you maybe get a better job, better salary, better house, even something as daft as having a better phone. All of that can make us think, you know, I've really made it. I've really done well.

[8 : 34] Well, it can also come through our heritage. We can take an unhealthy pride in our nation, our nationality, our accent, where we were born, in our community, whether you're a local or an incommor, which church we go to, all these things can shape us in this way. And we can even have a kind of unhealthy pride in our sufferings whereby, you know, something's gone wrong and we think, you know, we can look at others and we're like, you don't know what it's like.

You haven't been through what I've been through. And we can kind of pride ourselves in our victimhood. And we demand the respect and affirmation of others because of what we've experienced. And often that's not because of everything that we're happy about. It's actually because of everything that we're angry about. And we can use it as a means to judge others. So we can be crippled by regret. We can be ensnared by pride. But there's also a third way that the past can grip us.

You can look at the past and you can be paralysed by good memories. Now, good memories are a good thing, a really good thing. We've got precious moments in our lives and it's a great joy to recall them. And at one level, that's a very biblical thing to do.

If you think about it, the whole concept of thanksgiving is bound up with the idea of recognizing something in our past, whether recent or distant, that's been wonderful. And we thank God for that. We're filled with gratitude for the wonderful things that have happened. And probably the best example of that is the Lord's Supper, where we think back to something in the past that's momentous. And we thank God for what he's done for us through his Son. So I'm not saying good memories are all bad. There's a very good element to good memories. But at the same time, good memories can paralyze us. And they paralyze us because we find ourselves looking at the past and thinking everything was so much better then. And again, it can happen in loads of ways. Some people look at their school days and they're like, oh, those were the best days of my life. I have no idea how that feels. I didn't think that of school days. But some people do. For others, though, they're student years. They had a great time maybe studying and they loved it. Sometimes it might be, it might be a period at work that you really enjoyed, a time when you were fitter and faster or whatever it may be. For parents and grandparents, sometimes you know, you've got this kind of wonderful memory of babies and nappies and toys and fun. Anybody who actually has babies and nappies and toys is thinking you are crazy. But we can have these memories. And in many ways, they're wonderful. But sometimes we can always think that, you know, things were so much better back then.

And most seriously of all, is the experience of people who have lost loved ones. And they're repeatedly stung by the joy of those memories and by the emptiness that they now face.

[12 : 14] And alongside all of these, there's also a risk of being paralysed by good memories in church. We can think of days when more people came. We can think of days when the preaching just seemed to hit all the right notes. We can think of days when the generation above us seemed so wise and godly compared to us. We can think of days when church was just the way we wanted it to be.

And those memories are good. I'm not saying that those memories are bad. They are good. But what we are recognizing is that these memories can paralyze you. They can paralyze you if all the time, all you think about is how much you don't like the fact that things are different now.

Paul could have fallen into any one of these traps. He could have been crippled by regret at how much he persecuted the church, because it was awful what he did to the church, as in terms of what he described, the stuff he described at the first half of the chapter. He could have been crippled by regret because of that. He could also equally have been ensnared by pride, thinking, you know, oh, there's so much that was good about my heritage. And if you remember, he's writing this letter from prison. And so he could easily have been paralysed by good memories about times when he was free, able to travel to all sorts of new places, plant churches, and see people come to faith.

All of this is telling us that the past is very, very powerful. What lies behind us is always confronting us. What do we do? Well, Paul has a very simple instruction for what we should do with all that stuff that lies behind us. He says that we should forget it. Forgetting what lies behind, we strain forward and press on to what lies ahead. And the reason that Paul can say that, the reason that Paul can say to forget it, is because the gospel addresses all of these things that we've described. The gospel deals with our regrets.

That's one of the most amazing things about the gospel. The fact that when Jesus died and rose again, he did it to take away all of our sins. He did it to take away the sin that makes you feel most ashamed. The sin that makes you think, I just wish I hadn't done that. The sin that makes you feel so guilty. Whatever it is, Jesus died to take it away, to take it away completely.

[15 : 34] The gospel also deals with our pride because Jesus is the one who did it all. He's the one who died and rose again. He did it. We didn't contribute anything. We don't deserve anything except judgment, and yet his love is poured out on us as a gift that just melts our pride away. And the gospel even deals with the paralysis caused by our happy memories, because the gospel is pointing us forwards to a new creation. It's pointing us forwards to the amazing blessings that we have when Jesus comes again, pointing us forward to the fact that we will see again all those beloved brothers and sisters in Christ who we miss so much. But not only that, it's also pointing us forward. The gospel is also pointing us forward to the amazing opportunities that we have this week as we continue to serve Jesus, as we continue on our journey towards an eternity with him.

And all of this is teaching us an incredibly important theological point. It's teaching us that God is better at forgetting than you are.

God is better at forgetting than you are. We saw that so powerfully in the passage we read in our call to worship. I won't read through it all, but it culminates in the end where he says, I will forgive their iniquity. I will remember their sins no more. If you are a Christian or if you become a Christian, please let that sink in. Your past, your sins, your mistakes, the bruises you've suffered, the idols you've followed, the sorrows you've experienced, the stupid things that you've done, the things that make you feel like a failure, all the stuff that makes you feel guilty and ashamed and inadequate. And you kind of feel like you're coming to God tonight again with all this baggage of all this stupid stuff you've done of all the ways that you've stuffed up and God says to you, I don't remember. I am not remembering that. I've forgotten it. And he can do that because he's better at forgetting than you are. And that's one of the reasons why he's so gracious and so good. And so if God is willing to forget it, why do you keep reminding yourself about it? Why do you plague yourself with these things when God says, forget it. It's gone.

Now you might say, well, that's easier said than done. How do we do that? Well, the way we do it is that we need to be confronted by something other than the past. If we think about we've got the past behind us, yet it's constantly confronting us constantly in our face, we need to get something else in front of us. We need to get something else that we're focusing on. And that's exactly what Paul talks about. We see it in the section from 8 to 14. I won't read it all, but we'll just pick out one or two bits as we go. In these verses, Paul's great focus is on the resurrection of Jesus.

But the key point is that the resurrection doesn't mean looking back 2000 years ago thinking, oh, wow, there was an empty tomb in the garden 2000 years ago. That's not what Paul wants us to do.

[19 : 30] That's not what the resurrection is about. The resurrection doesn't mean focusing on the past and the empty tomb. The resurrection means we focus on the future. The resurrection means that we have a future because Jesus is risen. He is risen. Not that he was risen way back then, but he is risen now. He will always be risen. And the reality of his resurrection means that we have an amazing future ahead of us. And that future is still to come. We don't know it all now. We haven't obtained everything already. And this is where we must always remember that in the gospel, you have this wonderful balance between already and not yet. There's so much that's already ours in Christ.

If you're a Christian or if you become a Christian, there's so much that's already ours, but there's not yet. There is so much more to come. And Paul is telling us here that that not yet that future is something that we need to be straining forward towards.

Now, that phrase straining forward speaks of reaching out for something, stretching. It actually can also just mean trying really hard. In other words, it's a word that speaks of effort.

Paul is talking about something that takes a huge amount of effort. He says that he's pressing on, but he's straining forward as he does it. So it's not just a kind of ambling on. It's something that he's putting a huge amount of effort into. Now, there might be a few alarm bells going off in your minds, as I say all that, because we constantly preach the fact that in order to become Christians, it's got nothing to do with what we do. And that's true. It's not about what we do. We're not saved by our own efforts. We don't work our way back up to God. No matter how hard we try, we cannot make ourselves good enough for God. It doesn't matter how much effort we put in.

As Paul says in verse three, we don't put any confidence in the flesh at all. All of that is absolutely true. But Paul still says, I strain forward. I try really hard. And what we have to see is the logic of Paul's argument and the order of Paul's argument. And you see it if you look in this passage, what he says in verse 13, where he says that he forgets what lies behind, he's straining forward to what lies ahead, he's pressing on towards the goal. All that talk of effort in verse 13 is grounded in the reality of what he says in verse 12, the fact that Christ Jesus has made me his own. In other words, he doesn't press on to become Jesus his own. He strains forward because he already is Jesus's very own. Now, that emphasis on effort is extremely important. It's reminding us that focusing on the risen Jesus, having our lives shaped by the resurrection, by the reality, living by the reality of the already and not yet, that's not something that's going to happen by itself. It's something that we have to put a lot of effort into. The word press on that I've circled there in verse 14, that's actually the word that is elsewhere, frequently translated, persecute. It's the idea of chasing something, pursuing something. And Paul goes on to explain to us that there's two key ways in which making this effort should shape our lives.

[23 : 27] And we can see them one by one in the verses that follow. In verses 15 to 16, Paul talks about the way we think. Pressing on towards the goal should affect the way we think. Let those of us who are mature thinking this way and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that to you, or he let us hold to what we've attained. We've said this many times, but if you read Paul's letters, he is constantly talking about the way we think. And the key point here is that this the way we think is something that we have to put effort into. We have to make an effort with it.

As Jesus's disciples, the reality of his resurrection and of everything that he's done for us, that's something that should transform the way that we think. Now, this is the kind of thing that sounds great, but we have to ask you what exactly does it involve? Because it can seem impossible. How can we control our thoughts? Well, at one level, you can't control what pops into your head because all sorts of things can pop into your heads at any time. But at the same time, we can definitely choose what we do with those thoughts when they appear. And so, things can pop into our heads and how we respond to that can make a massive difference.

Let me give you an example related to one of my favorite subjects, food. Imagine you're in your kitchen this coming Saturday and somebody is cooking for the Thanksgiving buffet and it smells amazing. You're like, oh, that is so nice, but it's not for you. It's for the buffet. So you can't eat it. And so you could stand there and you could think, oh, but that smells so good, but I can't have it, but I want it. I can't have it though, because it's not for me. And you're kind of feeling hard done by, or you could just think, well, it's not for me. I'm going to go somewhere else and do something else and take my mind off it. Likewise, you might be in the kitchen next Sunday and someone's cooking, but this time it's for your lunch. And so it is for you and it's nearly ready.

And you can stand there and you can think about the food and the smells and you can enjoy just anticipating this wonderful meal that you're going to be able to have. In other words, whatever pops into your head, you can decide whether you are going to allow those thoughts to cultivate and grow in your minds, or you can make a deliberate effort to move on from them and not to give them a place in your mind. Now that's not easy, but of course it's not easy.

Paul is saying it's something you have to strain towards. It's about pressing on. It's something that involves a huge amount of effort. The key thing is that all too often as Christians, when negative, frustrating, discouraging thoughts come into your heads, all too often we feed them.

[26 : 51] We let them grow. We let them multiply. And when we do think of something positive, it's all too easy to be swamped by negativity. And that can apply in so many ways as individuals in relation to church, work, life, health, whatever. We're just swamped by negativity in our minds. Paul is telling us here that we should make every effort to be the other way round. So if you wake up tomorrow morning and you think to yourself, I feel exhausted. I am weak. I'm a rubbish Christian.

And I'm probably going to be useless in the week ahead as I seek to serve Jesus. If you wake up tomorrow morning feeling like that, you need to fill your mind with verse 12, where Paul says, Christ Jesus has made you his own. And let that thought fill your mind. Let that thought shape everything. You are his. And he can do amazing things through you. And as you go through this week, I want you to try and just deliberately make that effort to allow the reality of the resurrection to shape your thinking. So if you've got a difficult meeting this week or a difficult thing that you've got to do at work that you're dreading, the risen Jesus is interceding for you at every moment of that meeting. If you feel overwhelmed by all the stuff that you've got to do or all the stuff that you're failing to do, everything that's slipping through your fingers, the risen Jesus has sent his spirit to empower you. He's with you and he will sustain you and strengthen you.

If you feel isolated and you think, I just, I just, you just feel on your own. The risen Jesus has said that he is with you always, even to the end of the age. If you feel discouraged and you feel like things aren't going well in your Christian walk, the risen Jesus has promised that he's going to build his church and you are one of his builders. The reality of the resurrection can make a massive difference to your life this week, but that's not going to happen if you hardly ever think about it.

We've got to make that effort to allow all of this to fill our minds. It should transform the way we think. And then the second way in which, when which making this effort should shape our lives, is in verse 17 to 19. Paul says, brothers, join in imitating me. Keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you've set in us, you have in us. For many of whom I've often told you, and now tell you with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their God is their belly and their glory, they glory in their shame with mindset on earthly things. What's Paul talking about here? He's saying that the reality of the resurrection, the straining forward to that goal should have a massive effect on the example that we set.

Paul's talking about an example. Straining forward for that amazing future should shape the way that we live our lives in front of other people this week. And by doing that, we can be a huge help to one another because we can all learn from one another's example. But one of the key things that Paul highlights here is what you see in verses 18 and 19, the fact that that that allowing the reality of the resurrection to shape our example will make us will make us stand out in contrast, in beautiful contrast to the world around us. Many people walk as enemies of the cross, either consciously or unconsciously. And often that's characterised by a great desire to be satisfied immediately to get what we want today. Sometimes it can show itself in taking pleasure in things that are actually shameful. And sometimes it's very much manifested in just focusing on earthly things that nothing matters more than the here and now. And of course, if that's two of you, if that's all that you're living for, then you're at the mercy of how life goes for you. If you get the satisfaction you crave, then you might be happy if you don't, you're left hungry. And we see this so often. People blindly enjoying a fleeting pleasure, people desperately find something, desperately find something that will truly satisfy. And in contrast to that, the reality of the resurrection allows us to set a different example. And so it means that we don't make a God out of our belly. In other words, we don't need to get stuff here and now in order to find peace and meaning. That means that a hard day doesn't have to be a terrible day. In fact, we recognise that challenges and struggles can be such a good thing. It's part of God's plan as he builds us up, takes us closer to maturity, leads us towards his new creation. It also means that we can have a dignified distaste for things that are wrong, for things that are shameful. So instead of glorying in shame, we're put off by it. Whether it's kids in school making a joke at someone's expense, whether it's people at work who are out for themselves, people in the community who are chewing on a piece of hot gossip, we can in all those situations say, like, I don't really like that sort of thing. And I don't want to do it. And the fact that Jesus has died and risen again for my sins and my failings and my brokenness means that we can focus our minds in a far better glory than the brief glory of getting our own way at work or of slugging someone off or of reveling in someone else's brokenness. And it means that instead of setting our minds on earthly things, we recognise that when earthly things don't quite go the way we want them to, when our dreams don't come through, when our plans don't work out, it doesn't leave us empty. In fact, all of that just reminds us of the fullness of God's promises in Jesus, that in Him we have so much to look forward to. And what I hope all of this reveals is that by straining forward, by looking to Jesus, by making that effort for it to affect the way we think and the way that we live our lives, it can make such a difference to how you live your life this week. It can transform the way we think. It can transform the example we set. All of it reminds us that this week might be a rubbish week. Our weeks often are rubbish. But in the midst of a rubbish week, you can still have a brilliant mindset. You can still set a wonderful example. You can still be an incredible blessing

[34 : 34] to the people that you will share this week with. And so, all of this is reminding us that we need to remember to forget. We need to forget what lies behind and we strain forward to what lies ahead.

Paul's argument culminates in verses 21 and 22, where he reminds us that our citizenship is in heaven. That the place where Jesus now is, is the place where you truly belong. That He's our Savior, the one who deals with all of your sins washed away forever. That there's going to be a marvelous transformation of our lowly, weak, broken, sore bodies so that we'll be like His glorious body.

And ultimately, all things will be subjected to Him. He will reign forevermore and the power of sin will be broken forever. There's so much to look forward to. That's why it's no wonder that Paul says, there for my brothers whom I love and long for my joy and my crown, stand firm thus in the Lord my beloved. Amen. Let's pray.