

Finding Your Focus for 2017
Phil. 3:8-14

Philippians 3:8-14 in NLT “Yes, everything else is worthless when compared with the priceless gain of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. I have discarded everything else, counting it all as garbage, so that I may have Christ ⁹ and become one with him. I no longer count on my own goodness or my ability to obey God's law, but I trust Christ to save me. For God's way of making us right with himself depends on faith. ¹⁰ As a result, I can really know Christ and experience the mighty power that raised him from the dead. I can learn what it means to suffer with him, sharing in his death, ¹¹ so that, somehow, I can experience the resurrection from the dead!

¹² I don't mean to say that I have already achieved these things or that I have already reached perfection! But I keep working toward that day when I will finally be all that Christ Jesus saved me for and wants me to be. ¹³ No, dear brothers and sisters, I am still not all I should be, but I am focusing all my energies on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴ I strain to reach the end of the race and receive the prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us up to heaven.”

I want to focus, this morning, on Paul's statement in vs 13, “No, dear brothers and sisters, I am still not all I should be, but I am focusing all my energies on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead.”

Today marks the beginning of a new year and the opportunity to access and possibly adjust our journey through life. Time is a gift from God. God is infinite in every way. He lives above the confines of time. Time and seasons were created for our benefit.¹ As finite beings, we are not equipped to handle timelessness. We need the journey divided into segments so that we can handle one step at a time. So we are taught by the Lord to pray, “Give us this day, our daily bread.” There is enough challenge in each day to keep us occupied (Matt.6:34).²

In Eccl. 3:1 we read, ”To everything there is a season, A time for every purpose under heaven: ² A time to be born, And a time to die; A time to plant, And a time to pluck what is planted; ³ A time to kill, And a time to heal; A time to break down, And a time to build up; ⁴ A time to weep, And a time to laugh; A time to mourn, And a time to dance; ⁵ A time to cast away stones, And a time to gather stones; A time to embrace, And a time to refrain from embracing; ⁶ A time to gain, And a time to lose; A time to keep, And a time to throw away; ⁷ A time to tear, And a time to sew; A time to keep silence, And a time to speak; ⁸ A time to love, And a time to hate; A time of war, And a time of peace.”³

It is important to discern what season you're in and manage your affairs accordingly. Life Church had a season in which we primarily focused on prayer and personal consecration. That is always important; but it is not always the prime focus. We are entering a new season—a season of outreach, a season of ministry to others, a season of fruitfulness. What do we do next? God is

¹ Genesis 1:5, 14-18.

² We are not to live in anxiety about tomorrow (Phil.4:6). This does not negate the value of prudent planning (Prov. 6:6-11; Gen. 41:34-36).

³ All Scripture quotes are from the New King James Version unless indicated otherwise.

directing us by His Spirit and by circumstances. Circumstances beyond our control took us out of Executive Conference Center. It looks like we will be moving into the facility on Mellville Road. There are a few more details to work out; but we should have it confirmed next week. Along with everything else it represents new territory and new opportunity.

Paul's words in Phil. 3:13 provide a good mindset for us to embrace as we enter into 2017. This is what I want to talk about this morning.

1st he acknowledges his current position.

When you go to the mall you will find a directory near the entry that shows you on a map where the stores are. But that's not all it shows you. It also shows you where you are. In order to make progress we need to know where we're going and where we are now. Your GPS does the same thing. Paul says in our text, "*No, dear brothers and sisters, I am still not all I should be....*"

This was written in about 60 AD. Paul has been in ministry for 20 or 30 years.⁴ He is a seasoned, consecrated believer. He is the most effective Christian, the most effective apostle, alive (2 Cor. 12:11). He had led thousands to the Lord, turned cities upside down with the gospel, cast out demons, healed the sick. Yet, God is still working on him. He is still work-n-process. Phil.3:13 "*I am still not all I should be....*" (NLT). Look at his statement in verse 12 "*I don't mean to say that I have already achieved these things or that I have already reached perfection! But I keep working toward that day when I will finally be all that Christ Jesus saved me for and wants me to be*" (NLT).

I actually find some comfort in Paul's confession, because I have certainly not reached perfection myself. Our focus for the last two years has been 2 Chron. 7:14. We have had opportunities to humble ourselves, and hopefully that's what we did when circumstances called upon us to do it. We have pressed into prayer. We have sought the face of God. And we have sincerely sought to turn from our wicked ways and walk in integrity with the Lord. We have made some progress in those areas. But we cannot say we have fully attained. We still have work to do. We still have temptations to overcome. We still must discipline ourselves in prayer. Our flesh will never desire the things of the Spirit. So we must choose daily to walk in the Spirit and not in the flesh (Gal. 5:16-17).

When I look back on 2016 I thank God for the humbling experiences He brought me through. I thank God for the times He gave me grace to humble myself. Sometimes I had to take wrong and not retaliate. Only by the grace of God, could I have done it. We have sought the Lord in 2016. Didn't do it perfect; but we did it! I am grateful that the Holy Spirit enabled us to pray and keep praying. Our nation experienced a miracle on Nov. 8th. The pollsters and the media are still baffled by it. We stood at the precipice of disaster. Our civil rights were in real danger. We got to be a part of the praying church that turned history around. That happened in 2016 and we were a part of it.

⁴ PAUL, International Standard Bible Encyclopedia (BibleSoft).

We faced some difficult challenges in 2016; but through it all God, our Great Shepherd, took care of us all the way. He sprinkled His mercy on us all through the year. Count the blessings you received in 2016 and you will be surprised what the Lord has done. Don't forget the pains and disasters He protected you from, as well as those He carried you through. Progress was made in 2016.

But we must all admit, along with Paul, I still have a ways to go. I still have some besetting sins that need to be fully conquered. I have not fully arrived. Therefore, in 2017 I will continue to humble myself under the mighty hand of God that He may exalt me in due time.⁵ In 2017 I will continue to pray and seek His face, because my strength is only found in Him. I will continue to turn away from temptation and follow Jesus.

I with Paul acknowledge my current position and my need to live in God's grace in 2017.

II. Paul acknowledges his need to direct his focus toward the future.

"No, dear brothers and sisters, I am still not all I should be, but I am focusing all my energies on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead...." (NLT).

Are you looking forward to what lies ahead?

A major weapon of Satan is depression and hopelessness. If he can, the devil will rob you of your motivation and joy by simply telling you there is nothing to look forward to. It is a lie. God has made plans for you and me. He gives us a hope and a future. Listen to Eph. 2:10 in NLT *"For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so that we can do the good things he planned for us long ago."* God has plans for you in 2017. Our job is to discover those plans by simply obeying Him step by step. If we will live in obedience to the Lord we will walk right into His plans for us. His plans for His children are always good.

Paul states his focus in two ways.

(1) Forgetting the past.

I am not going to live 2017 looking into my rear-view mirror. There are three kind of things we have to put behind us. (a) One is past accomplishments. Paul could have spent his later years boasting about his attainments up until this point. But that would have robbed him of what God had arranged for his future. We thank God for His grace in 2016 and in years prior to that. But, we don't rely on that. We press forward. When people start getting my age, there is a temptation to let up and try to coast on in. But life is more an uphill climb than a downhill coast. The gravity of the flesh and of this world is against you. If you coast, you will lose ground. Heb.2:3 asks the question, *"how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation....?"*

Every year calls us to diligence. Peter talked about the coming of the Lord and then said, *"Therefore, beloved, looking forward to these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, without spot and blameless (2 Peter 3:14).* Be diligent; NIV says *"Make every effort."*

⁵ 1 Peter 5:6

(b) Another thing we must put behind us is our own personal failures. Did you have any of those in 2016? I did. I don't like it when I don't live up to my ideals; but it does happen. If we wallow in past failure, we can't walk in future victory. We have to get up and by the grace of God try again. A key element in our victory over Satan (the Accuser) is the blood of Jesus. "*And they overcame by the blood of the Lamb and the word of their testimony*" (Rev. 12:11). The blood does cleanse from sin. Otherwise none of us could stand righteous before God. We have to learn to not only ask forgiveness, but receive the forgiveness that God gives. John wrote in his first epistle (2:1) "*My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.*" We do not to take sin lightly; we resist temptation. But if there is a failure, God has a remedy. The blood of Jesus cleanses from all sin. 1 John 1:9 "*If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*" God does not want you living 2017 in vain regrets. For the most part, the past is behind us and there is nothing we can do about it. If there is something to be done, then do it; otherwise, put it behind you and move forward. The short version of the Serenity Prayer provides a good guideline. "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, Courage to change the things I can, And wisdom to know the difference."
 "*Forgetting those things that are behind* (the good, the bad, and the ugly) live in the now.

(c.) We also need to put behind us past offenses. Did anybody do you wrong in 2016? Probably so. But don't allow that to define your future. Successful living involves being a good forgiver. Forgiveness is a choice. Hopefully you made that choice when the offense occurred. But sometimes we have to remind our emotions of the decision we made. Romans 12:19 "*Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,' says the Lord.*" The desire for vengeance is not easy to shake off in some situations. As a Christian, I find it harder to shake off the desire for vengeance than it is to resist the temptation to take vengeance. What do I mean by that? If a person slaps me on the cheek, I may turn the other cheek. I may resist the temptation to strike back. But I may still want God to get them. I won't strike them, God; but You strike them for what they did to me. God may very well do that. But there is a problem in the condition of my heart. I still have the desire for vengeance; I'm just delegating the task to God.

What God wants in me is a heart of mercy. Jesus cried on the cross, "*Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do*" (Lk 23:34). As Stephen was being stoned he prayed that God would not charge them with this sin (Acts 8:60). That is the spirit in which we are to operate. Remember Jonah's disappointment when God did not destroy Nineveh? He was disappointed that they repented and missed the judgement. He did the right thing in his preaching, but his attitude toward those people was wrong (Jonah 4:1-4). Have you been wronged? Do not retaliate. And do not desire their demise. God is not willing that any would perish, but that all would come to repentance (2 Pet. 3:9). Are there any offenses you need to lay aside as you step into 2017?

Paul found focus by “*forgetting the past.*” On the other side of that coin, he found focus by:

(2) Looking to the future.

What needs to happen in your life in 2017? What would you like to see happen? What does God want to do for you and in you this year?

Paul’s primary focus was his relationship with the Lord. There is nothing wrong with enjoying houses, vacations, cars, and other material things as long as we keep them in perspective—as long as we “*seek for the kingdom of God and His righteousness*” (Matt. 6:33). If we’re honest, we need material things to get by in this world. We need food, shelter, and a little get-away at times. It’s appropriate to put those things in your plans for 2017. If that’s all that’s in the plan, there may be a problem. What would you like to see happen in your spiritual development? What would you like to see happen in your relationships? How about ministry giftings? Is there a breakthrough in some area that you want to believe God for in 2017? In 2016 we did not see a lot of instant answers to prayer; but we had some amazing answers that came out of persistent prayer. What specific thing do you want God to do for you in 2017? I’m talking about something you want so much that you will persistently pray for it

Paul wanted to know the Lord better. He already knew Him pretty well. He had already been caught up into heaven (2 Cor. 12:1-6). But Paul had an insatiable desire for more of God. I would like my hunger and thirst for God to increase in 2017. It’s interesting that Paul does not ask for the obvious. As he was writing this epistle, he sat in a cold, filthy Roman prison.⁶ He is not asking to get out of jail. He is asking for more of God. I don’t think I have arrived at that place; but I admire it and desire it.

Paul’s focus was on the future, not the past.

III. Paul acknowledges his need to press into his future.

Verse 14 “*I strain [press, aggressively pursue] to reach the end of the race and receive the prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us up to heaven.*” (NLT).

Paul knew God had a plan for his future. But Paul did not believe in fate. He knew that God honors freewill. He knew entry into God’s plan would require some effort.⁷ It’s one thing to desire something. It’s another to choose it! I remember going into an up-scale department store and seeing a red shirt that really caught my eye. I checked the rack and they had it in my size. I tried it on and it fit perfectly. I really looked good in that shirt, and I really wanted it. Then I checked the price tag. I did not know any shirt cost \$ 90. I thought about how long it would take

⁶ *New Spirit-Filled Life Bible*, Ex. Editor, Jack W. Hayford (Thomas Nelson, 2002) p. 1658.

⁷ When Israel came out of Egypt, God had provided them a land flowing with milk and honey. It was God’s will and plan that they enter into those good things. But they chose differently and failed to enter in (Deut. 1:19-36). God had given them the land, but it was their responsibility to go in and possess the land by exercising obedient faith in Him.

me to work that out. I made a decision that day. I decided not to have the shirt. I still wanted it; but I was not willing to pay that price to have it.⁸

Paul had caught a glimpse of the prize God had set before him. He wanted it bad enough to reach for it. He was willing to strain himself in pursuit of it.

In 2017 you will invest your time and effort into something. Choose carefully what that will be. Make sure there is a good payoff. Moses wrote in Ps 90:12 “*So teach us to number our days, That we may gain a heart of wisdom.*” In 2016 like never before I became aware of the seasons of life that we go through: childhood, youth, midlife, old age, really old age. There are specific opportunities available in a season that won’t be there in the next season. My father is 91 years old. He has always been pretty active. But now it is a challenge to just go to the mail box and get the mail. I realize there are things I can do now that I won’t be able to do 10 years from now. Now is the time to do them! We have a wonderful ministry opportunity at Life Church in 2017. We have the strength and experience to lead people to the Lord and make disciples. We want to do a whole lot of that in 2017. We will need God’s wisdom. We will need His strength and grace. But a great effectual door is open to us.⁹ It will be work. But it will be worth it all.

I do not plan to drift through 2017. I plan to make the most of the opportunities that God is giving us.¹⁰ I plan to press toward the mark of the high calling in Christ Jesus. Amen?

Pray

⁸ Luke 14:25-35

⁹ 1 Cor. 16:9; Rev.3:8.

¹⁰ Eph. 5:16 (NIV).