

# Forgetting the Past Moves Us Forward

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



## Prayer of Illumination

Testify to us, O God,  
By the voice of your Spirit.  
Put your law in our hearts,  
Write your word in our minds,  
And show your will in our lives;  
Through Jesus Christ our Lord.  
Amen.

## Scripture: Philippians 3:12-16 (NRSVue)

<sup>12</sup> Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal, but I press on to lay hold of that for which Christ had laid hold of me. <sup>13</sup> Brothers and sisters, I do not consider that I have laid hold of it, but one thing I have laid hold of: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead,

<sup>14</sup> I press on toward the goal, toward the prize of the heavenly call of God in Jesus Christ. <sup>15</sup> Let those of us, then, who are mature think this way, and if you think differently about anything, this, too, God will reveal to you. <sup>16</sup> Only let us hold fast to what we have attained.

*The grass withers and the flower fades,  
but the Word of God endures forever.*

## SERMON – Forgetting the Past Moves Us Forward



My favorite movie of all time is Chariots of Fire. It won the Academy Award for best film in 1981 and remains an important movie over forty years later. Enjoy this clip where Eric Liddel “The Flying Scotsman” runs to win the race, even in the face of a seemingly impossible challenge.

Video clip: <https://youtu.be/l4e5Xfmc8zQ>

Psalm 130:6 says this:

“My soul is intent on the Lord.”

To be a practicing Christian means that our faith requires concentration and exertion. We’re all in – loving God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength. You see, to really press on to know Christ more involves intensity of desire, commitment to discipline, and personal sacrifice—even pain.

It takes real spiritual fitness and focus to be a Christ-follower because Jesus is alive and well and on the move. He’s always blazing a trail before us—and we’re always trying to play catch up with Christ. He’s our Way, our end, and our means. Jesus is our path and our prize in our upward or heavenly calling. And at the same time Christ brings a peace that passeth understanding.

We strain and struggle, but we’re focused. Purposeful and controlled. Stillness and action—all at the same time.

Kind of like one of the most famous classical Greek statues the Discobolus, also known as “The Disc Thrower.” A young male athlete is frozen in the pose of launching his disc. There’s a fascinating combination of elements at work. He’s in a physically demanding situation, but his face and body are relaxed and composed. British art historian Lord Kenneth Clark observed that the artist Myron captures two particular qualities in the disc thrower: *rhythmos* (harmony and balance) and *symmetria* (bodily proportion).

We may not ever throw a discus or have the physique of the David Statue or the Venus de Milo, but we are disciples of Christ. The root of the word disciple is, *discos*, which means “learner.” Like Eric Liddel in his race we saw earlier, the Christian faith entails getting up, catching up, and running to win the race. And we revel in the joy and the glory of it all. With Christ in us, we have a peaceful straining. We keep moving forward in the Spirit’s power because we know we haven’t arrived yet. We’re still in the thick of the race.

If you have a pulse, There’s more ahead. So we press on. Christ is not only ahead of us, he’s by our side. In fact in us, cheering us on. Christ is coursing through our blood. He’s grabbed ahold of us and won’t let go. We’re doing the same, seeking to grab ahold of Christ.

We follow the Apostle Paul’s lead. Paul kept running after Christ his whole life long, ever since his Damascus Road encounter with the risen Christ. Even prison couldn’t contain Paul. Paul wrote Philippians in prison. It’s his joy letter. So with our eyes on the prize, We look ahead to the finish line. We don’t look over our shoulder to the competition. We look ahead. We keep running, even if we’ve gotten tripped up or pushed down. We get back up and move forward.

We’re in hot pursuit. There is no resting on our laurels. No complacency. No excuses. We’re constantly striving for the goal. It’s not an aimless pursuit. We don’t get off course. We’re steady. We’re a forward thinking and forward moving people.

Last week, we talked about how looking backward moves us forward. This is the flip side of the same coin. We move forward by forgetting what’s behind and looking ahead. We need to hone the subtle spiritual art of forgetting. The forgetting that Paul is talking about here is not erasing the past or pretending it never happened. He’s not talking about manufactured amnesia. What he’s saying is that faithful forgetting involves letting go of past failures, releasing unhealthy regret over an unchangeable past. This understanding of the past paralyzes us. Learn from the past. Keep the lesson, chuck the shame and the guilt. Shake it off. Move on. Don’t look back—you are forgiven!

We worship a merciful God who says this about himself: “I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more.” God forgives you. Can you forgive yourself? Surely you forgive what God forgives—whether it be you or another person.

There’s another kind of spiritual forgetting: Forget your pride. Swallow it. Boast not in your achievements, accolades, and applause. Drop your dust covered trophies, they’re impeding you. Instead, let Christ be your confidence. Rely on the Rabbi. Remember the past, but don’t live in the past, “The good old days” of the past are hindering you from living in the present. The

forgetting that Paul is talking about is a reconceived past, a redeemed past, a past that doesn't hold us back. Our past isn't a frozen item in the freezer, forever preserved and hardened. Our past isn't a prison either. The past isn't confinement. Your history doesn't have to be your destiny. Rather the past is a springboard that catapults us into the future. We're refined by the past but we're not defined or confined by the past. So Paul is encouraging us to rip off our sources of pride. You could call them our VIP Virtue Badges. We like to flash them around others.

There are a lot of virtue badges out there:

- There's the virtue badge of self-righteousness.
- The virtue badge of religious legalism. This can be expressed in the extremes of both the left and the right.
- There's the virtue badge that signals to everyone how woke you are.
- How progressive you are.
- How conservative you are.
- How evangelical or spiritually devout you are.
- How theologically, politically, or liturgically correct you are.
- Your virtue badge can be your pedigree or college degree.

Paul tells us what to do: Rip it off like a band-aid and throw it away. Virtue badges trip us up because they make us feel smug about ourselves, that those different from us are just Neanderthals. So we get complacent, think we're all good. We don't need Christ so much, thank you very much. I have my virtue badge.

Paul gives us some guidance earlier in the chapter: count your shame, your guilt, your pride, your virtue badges as... garbage. Or more accurately to the Greek: count it all B.E. Bull Excrement. It's all a bunch of B.E. says Paul in Philippians 3:8. Bull excrement. Paul cusses in Philippians, but I won't in church. "What you once counted gain," says Paul, "now consider loss." B.E. Why? So that you can be freed up to pursue Christ and Christ alone. To know him better. Christ is everything.

Paul puts it this way: have no confidence in the flesh. Don't trust in human merit or yourself. Trust in Christ. Focus on eternal things, not earthly things. Look to the future. Believe in possibility. The impossible.

Immanuel, we've been through a difficult time with this pandemic. One of the most exhausting things in the world is deciding on COVID protocols in a community of faith. But we have to do it. It's been a tough slog. We're having to rebuild. Let me tell you this, I'm ready to go for it. To step out in faith. To "up our game." I won't throw in the towel. I refuse to give up. No resting on our laurels. We're going to grow, to move forward. We're going to persevere. We're going to go to new places we've never been. Our future is certain, even though it hasn't been realized yet. We have hope. In our loss, we gain Christ—who is everything. Subtraction is actually addition, even multiplication. So think about it. Wait on it. Give it time. Hold fast to all that you can't leave behind. Hold firm to Christ. God will make it clear to you with time.

I like what Paul is saying here: He doesn't assume that we'll see everything eye to eye, but if we have a common focus of Christ, if we develop trust and friendship with one another, things will come together in time. I'm praying the next three months, that God will make things more clear to us all, to me. I believe it.

Spiritual maturity realizes that you haven't arrived. We're all in a state of becoming. Be a learner, but don't ever become learned. Be a veteran beginner. Beware of thinking you've got it all figured out. As long as you still have a pulse, you're in the race. Christian athletes don't retire from the faith. We're not critics or mere commentators. We're in the arena, on the field, in the race. The race of faith is life-long. Maybe you've slowed down a bit. Or have a limp. Maybe you have a lot more past behind you than earthly future ahead of you. But you're nearer to the finish line, to glory. Keep moving forward. That finish line is not behind you. It's still ahead of you. Glory is ahead of you. It awaits you.

We haven't arrived yet—none of us. There's much good to do. More opportunities to know Christ better. Your life on earth is training for heaven, and even in heaven we'll keep stretching after Christ. You can never have enough of God. Never.

Life is about running the race to win and persevering—no matter what comes against you. It takes focus. Eliud Kipchoge is not only an Olympic gold medalist, he is the first human being to run a marathon (26.2 miles) in under two hours—crossing the finish line with a time of 1 hour, 59 minutes, and 40 seconds. To do this, Kipchoge had to run a sub-4 minute, 34 second mile, EVERY MILE, for 26.2 miles. Kipchoge basically sprinted the marathon, but it took an army of trainers, scientists, and engineers to accomplish this. Kipchoge ran in ideal weather on a flat course in Vienna, which was largely protected from wind by large trees. His team of more than 40 pace setters included some of the best distance runners in the world. These pace setters took turns running in a V formation in front of Kipchoge to reduce drag. Kipchoge also ran the race in special Nike shoes with carbon fiber in the soles. Kipchoge couldn't do it alone. Neither can we.

Let's put that same effort, creativity, and teamwork into our heavenward calling. Let's keep pressing on in our faith—together. Let's keep growing and learning, stepping out in faith and running in faith. Keep going, even if you've hit the wall or are having cramps. Get hydrated, rest up, see a spiritual therapist or trainer, and keep going towards that finish line.

Let's run to win. Let's keep moving forward. Let's keep our eyes on the prize.

Amen.

Sermon Art: *"Looking Ahead"* by [Tracey Ross](#)

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