

Title:            **LOOKING BACK,**  
**LOOKING FORWARD,**  
**STANDING FIRM**

Text:            Philippians 3:13-14  
Subject:        *Reflections upon God's Goodness*  
Date:            Tuesday Evening — December 30, 2008  
Tape #            Z-60b  
Readings:      *Bob Duff and Rex Bartley*  
Introduction:

We get our word for the first month of the year, January, from the mythical Roman god Janus. In Roman mythology, Janus was a two-headed god who looked backwards and forwards. Janus was the Roman god of gates and doors. We also get the word “janitor” from Janus. A janitor is a person who keeps doors and halls. As Janus had two heads, one facing forward and the other backward, January is a time when we look back over the year that was and forward to the year that is coming.

Well, January is almost here. This will be the last time most of us will see one another before the beginning of the New Year. So I want us to look back over the past and forward to the future. The title of my message is **LOOKING BACK, LOOKING FORWARD, STANDING FIRM**. You will find my text in Philippians 3:13-14.

(Philippians 3:13-14) “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, (14) I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.”

## **LOOKING BACK**

The apostle Paul once wrote of himself as “*the least of the apostles*,” one unworthy to be called an apostle, because he persecuted the church of God (1 Corinthians 15:9). He spoke of himself later as “*less than the least of all saints*” (Ephesians 3:8). And, when he was an old man, ready to leave this world, he said he was the chief of sinners (1 Timothy 1:15). Paul never forgot what he was and where he was when God sought him out and saved him by his grace. He never let himself forget that he had proudly and

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insolently blasphemed Christ, not recognizing that he is indeed the Lord from heaven (1 Timothy 1:13).

Three times in the book of Acts, the Holy Spirit recounts the conversion of Saul of Tarsus, and holds him before us as a pattern of all who believe (Acts 9, 22, 26), showing us that we all need to look back over our lives. Taking Paul as our example, you and I should never forget our pasts.

- We were once dead in trespasses and sins (Ephesians 2:1).
- Our depravity, in some cases, manifested itself in open rebellion, defiance of God and every imaginable form of unrighteousness.
- In others depravity showed itself in a more subtle deception of rebellion and defiance — self-righteousness.

I hope never to forget what I am by nature, what I was and where I was when God saved me by his grace. So tonight, I want us to look back.

(Isaiah 51:1) “Hearken to me, ye that follow after righteousness, ye that seek the LORD: look unto the rock *whence* ye are hewn, and to the hole of the pit *whence* ye are digged.”

(1 Corinthians 6:9-11) “Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, (10) Nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God. (11) And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God.”

(1 Corinthians 6:19-20) “What? know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost *which is* in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own? (20) For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God’s.”

(Ephesians 2:1-10) “And you *hath he quickened*, who were dead in trespasses and sins: (2) Wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience: (3) Among whom also we all had our conversation in times past in the

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lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others. (4) But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, (5) Even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved;) (6) And hath raised *us* up together, and made *us* sit together in heavenly *places* in Christ Jesus: (7) That in the ages to come he might show the exceeding riches of his grace in *his* kindness toward us through Christ Jesus. (8) For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: *it is* the gift of God: (9) Not of works, lest any man should boast. (10) For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.”

**Illustration:** “*This is my remembrance room.*”

On the day God brought Israel out of Egypt, Moses said to the children of Israel, “*Remember this day, in which ye came out from Egypt, out of the house of bondage; for by strength of hand the LORD brought you out from this place*” (Exodus 13:3).

In the Word of God we are constantly told to remember what we are by nature and what the Lord God has done for us by his almighty grace in Christ. The reason for this is both simple and clear. — **Everything in the kingdom of God is motivated by grace and redemption.** Therefore the Lord our God commands, — “*And thou shalt remember that thou wast a bondman in the land of Egypt, and the LORD thy God redeemed thee*” (Deuteronomy 15:15).

**JAY AND NEWTON**

In his autobiography William Jay tells of a visit he had with John Newton in his study at Olney. He noticed that Newton had Deuteronomy 15:15 written out in large letters, hanging on the wall over his desk. As that faithful servant of the Lord prepared his sermons these words were constantly before him: — “*Thou shalt remember that thou wast a bondman in the land of Egypt, and the LORD thy God redeemed thee.*” Newton lived and acted under the influence of his memory of God’s grace to him. It is reflected in his preaching, in his hymns and in the particular conversation he had with William Jay that day.

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“I am glad to see you,” Newton said to his guest. “I have a letter here from Bath. Perhaps you can assist me in answering it. Do you know anything of \_\_\_\_\_,” calling the man’s name. Mr. Jay told Newton that he knew the man well. He once faithfully attended the church Jay pastored, and heard the preaching of the gospel with delight. But he had become a man of wicked reputation, a leader of every vice. Newton responded, “Perhaps a change has come over him. He writes a very penitent letter.” Then William Jay said, “I can only say that if ever he should be converted, I should despair of no one.” To that Newton replied, “**And I have never despaired of anyone since I was converted myself.**”

Newton remembered that he had been a bondman in the land of Egypt and the Lord redeemed him out of his bondage. It appears that his friend, William Jay, had (at least for the moment) forgotten! **Newton’s remembrance of his own experience of grace made him both hopeful for and tender toward another sinner in bondage.**

**May God the Holy Spirit constantly bring to our memories his marvelous, amazing grace in delivering our souls from bondage and melt our hearts before the throne of grace.** Nothing will stir up our hearts and minds so effectually, nothing can motivate and govern our lives better than the remembrance of redemption and grace in and by the Lord Jesus Christ. — “Remember that thou wast a bondman in the land of Egypt, and the LORD thy God redeemed thee.” **He has brought you into “the glorious liberty of the sons of God” by his omnipotent grace.**

**YET FORGET**

Let us look back and remember the past. Yet, we ought to forget it too. In our text Paul speaks of “*forgetting those things which are behind.*” That is every bit as important as remembering. Paul was never governed by his past. He did not erase his past from his memory, but his past did not rule over him with gloom, and hamper his present usefulness.

Some people look over their past, and see great failures, perhaps terrible acts of sin, and are paralysed by the memory. Some preachers actually teach that such morbidity is godliness! But that is not the case. It is senseless

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morbidity, and contrary to godliness. I say it is contrary to godliness because it is directly contrary to the Word of God (Romans 6:8-12).

(Romans 6:8-12) “Now if we be dead with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him: (9) Knowing that Christ being raised from the dead dieth no more; death hath no more dominion over him. (10) For in that he died, he died unto sin once: but in that he liveth, he liveth unto God. (11) Likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord. (12) Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, that ye should obey it in the lusts thereof.”

Children of God, the past is the past! That is how God views it; and that is how God would have us view it! Don't dwell on it. Don't stew over it. And don't act as if your transgressions are greater than God's grace! Paul put his past behind him. He had blasphemed Christ, he had persecuted the church, but all that was behind him, covered by the blood of the Redeemer! Thank God it's so!

Under the blood of Jesus,  
Safe in the Shepherd's fold.  
Under the blood of Jesus,  
Safe while the ages roll.  
Safe though the worlds may crumble,  
Safe though the stars grow dim.  
Under the blood of Jesus,  
I am secure in Him.

**Just as we are to forget past transgressions and past failures, let us also forget past successes, past triumphs and past usefulness.** We must not try to live on old experiences and old labors. Paul had preached in Asia (Turkey), but he didn't sit back and say: “Somebody else can go to Achaia and Macedonia (Greece).” I know many who have no usefulness today because they fondly dream that they were very useful yesterday; and they constantly relive the past.

**LOOKING FORWARD**

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Whatever our failures and whatever our successes, let us put them behind us and press on. Paul was single-minded, governed by “*one thing*.” Being governed by just “*one thing*,” he pressed on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

(Philippians 3:13-14) “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, (14) I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.”

- “*One thing I know, that, whereas I was blind, now I see*” (John 9:25).
- “*One thing is needful*” (Luke 10:42).
- “*One thing have I desired of the LORD, that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to enquire in his temple*” (Psalm 27:4).

What was that “*one thing*” always in the forefront of Paul’s mind, the “*one thing*” kept him motivated and inspired, the “*one thing*” he just had to have? It was the perfection of resurrection glory, the consummation of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus he had just described in verses 8-12.

(Philippians 3:8-12) “Yea doubtless, and I count all things *but* loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them *but* dung, that I may win Christ, (9) And be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith: (10) That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death; (11) If by any means I might attain unto the resurrection of the dead. (12) 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.”

**THREE GREAT GOALS**

Everything I know of Christ, everything I’ve experienced of God’s saving grace, everything I know about the gospel continually compels me , by the

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power and grace of God the Holy Spirit, to seek three great goals. These three things I have set as goals for which I labor, for which (I hope) I am willing to sacrifice anything and everything.

- I am seeking **total commitment to Christ**. I want to know his will and walk in his will. I want to bring honor and glory to my God and Savior. I want to surrender everything to him. — Be gone all self-care! — Be gone all self-ambition! — Be gone all self-motivation! — Be gone all self-desire! — Be gone all self-seeking! Let me live for Christ alone.
- I am seeking **total communion with Christ**. My heart longs to know Christ's presence, fellowship and direction at all times. The very thought of pure, uninterrupted, free communion with Christ at all times fills my heart with bliss.
- And I am seeking **total conformity to Christ**. I want to be like my Redeemer in thought, in word and in deed. — Like him, full of love, kindness and tenderness. — Like him, thoughtful, generous, considerate. — Like him, without sin.

I realize that these goals are unattainable in this life. But the gospel compels me to seek them. I cannot settle for less. *“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.”* Pressing toward that mark, when my life's journey is over, I shall have, by the grace of God, that which I seek after — Total Commitment to Christ — Total Communion with Christ — and Total Conformity to Christ. — Oh, what a blessed hope we have in Christ! — *“When we see him, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is!”*

**BACKWARD AND FORWARD**

Paul looked backward and forward as he walked with God by faith. The fact is, that is exactly the way we are to view all of history. The coming of Christ was in the fulness of time (Galatians 4:4). Christ is the centre of all history. Even in the ordinances of the gospel we are taught to look backward and forward

- Believer's Baptism looks backward to our death with Christ and forward to resurrection glory with Christ (Romans 6).

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- The Lord’s Supper looks backward in remembrance of Christ, showing the Lord’s death, and looks forward “*til he come,*” anticipating our Savior’s glorious second Advent (1 Corinthians 11).

All of history is divided into two parts B.C. (‘Before Christ’) and A.D. (anno Domini — “In the year of our Lord”). That is how we ought to think of time and history, with everything focused on Christ. He is the hinge upon which everything turns (John 12:31-32).

(John 12:31-32) “Now is the judgment of this world: now shall the prince of this world be cast out. (32) And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all *men* unto me.”

We are those “*upon whom the ends of the world are come*” (1 Corinthians 10:11). We look backward to what God has done in Christ.

- Predestination and Election
- Covenant Grace and Good Providence
- Redemption and Righteousness
- Regeneration and Preservation

And we look forward to what God will do in Christ, “*looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life!*” — Preservation and Resurrection.

(Ephesians 2:7) “That in the ages to come he might show the exceeding riches of his grace in *his* kindness toward us through Christ Jesus.”

(Jude 1:24-25) “Now unto him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present *you* faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy, (25) To the only wise God our Saviour, *be* glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and for ever. Amen.”

**STANDING FIRM**

We look back and we look forward with confident faith, from a firm standing point. Turn to Romans chapter five, and I will show you our firm standing point. Because Christ was delivered for our offences and raised again for our justification, we stand in him in grace, as one with him, justified forever and free from all possibility of condemnation.



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(Romans 5:1-11) “Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ: (2) By whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God. (3) And not only *so*, but we glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience; (4) And patience, experience; and experience, hope: (5) And hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us. (6) For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. (7) For scarcely for a righteous man will one die: yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die. (8) But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. (9) Much more then, being now justified by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him. (10) For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life. (11) And not only *so*, but we also joy in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we have now received the atonement.”

John Newton said what I want to say, far better than I can say it, as he looked over his own life, and looked to where he was heading: — “**I am not what I ought to be** — ah, how imperfect and deficient! **I am not what I wish to be** — I abhor what is evil, and I would cleave to what is good! **I am not what I hope to be** — soon, soon shall I put off mortality, and with mortality all sin and imperfection. Yet, though I am not what I ought to be, nor what I wish to be, nor what I hope to be, I can truly say, **I am not what I once was**; a slave to sin and Satan; and I can heartily join with the apostle, and acknowledge, ‘*By the grace of God I am what I am.*’” Newton knew what it means to look back, to look forward, and to stand firm.

God give us grace to do the same, for the praise of the glory of his grace.

Amen.

Happy New Year!