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Looking Ahead to Jesus

September 10, 2017

Sermon Text: Hebrews 12:1-2 and others

Scripture Reading: Genesis 12:1-9

I want to encourage all of us to read Church history, and to suggest to you that one of the very best ways to do this is by reading well-done biographies of Christians who have gone before us.

For the past several months in the Wednesday mid-week study we have been reading through Arnold Dallimore's excellent biography (2 vols) of George Whitefield. Everyone who has been coming will attest to the value of this study and how encouraging it is to see how the Lord has powerfully worked through just a handful of people – only one in some cases – to effect a revival of the

Christian faith virtually even worldwide. And in days that were every bit as dark as ours spiritually.

- 2 Vol C.H. Spurgeon autobiography
- Iain Murray's *A Scottish Christian Heritage*
- The two volume set on the life and ministry of Martyn Lloyd-Jones
- The biography of Jonathan Edwards

And many, many others. I have learned more from books like these than I ever learned in seminary.

Let me give you an example. This is from Murray's *A Scottish Christian Heritage*, the second chapter which is on the life of the Scottish preacher Robert Bruce (1550's).

“There is a particular reason why the churches today need to recall Robert Bruce. The period through which he lived was very similar to our own. We tend to think that we live in

discouraging and confusing days. We see much false religion and few faithful pulpits. We have a government and a population which shows scant reverence for God and his Word. We face indifference on the one hand and compromise on the other.

With features such as these, and worse, Bruce was entirely familiar. After the hopeful beginnings of the Reformed Church of Scotland in the days of John Knox, the promise faded and much of Bruce's life was to be spent in a period which his friend James Melville described as one of 'doleful decay.' How did Bruce live and act through such days? What kept him from losing heart? The answer to these questions is a reason why his life and ministry remain of particular relevance. *We are not the first generation called upon to stand fast in an evil day.*"

See it? Here is one of those times when Robert Bruce had to stand against an evil tyrant, in his case, King James VI –

"King James possessed no love of the truth. The necessity for obedience to the Word of God, the certainty of God's wrath upon sin, the blood of Christ as man's only remedy – all these were disturbing subjects that had no place in his pedantic knowledge. The preacher's words had evidently

got to the royal conscience and he could not shake them off.

At times, seated in the royal gallery of the Great Kirk, the King disguised the unease he felt by indulging in conversation with his courtiers in tones that could be heard even in the pulpit. On one such occasion, it is said, the preacher deliberately paused until the King was quiet. But when Bruce resumed speaking so did the King, at which there was silence again in the pulpit. When this happened for the third time, Bruce addressed these words to the talkers:

'It is said to have been an expression of the wisest of kings, "When the lion roars, all the beasts of the field are at ease [ie, quite]': The Lion of the tribe of Judah is now roaring in the voice of His Gospel, and it becomes all the petty kings of the earth to be silent."

There is tremendous value for us in knowing of these people and these times past. That is the value and importance of studying living Church history.

Alright then, this morning I want to speak to you on this familiar text:

Hebrews 12:1-2 Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of

witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, (2) looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

Looking to Jesus, running the same race in His tracks, through the suffering He endured, set to finish at the throne of God. Heaven, if you will.

Let me give you an illustration to help explain what this means, this *looking to Jesus*. At least one aspect of it.

Let's consider 3 people:

- A 10 year old
- A middle-aged person
- A senior citizen, say 80 years old

Now, put yourself first in the place of the 10 year old. When he thinks about his life, as even 10 year olds do sometimes, what direction is his focus? He has 10 years *behind* him, but most likely he has 70 or more years *ahead of him*. Where is the focus of his thinking in regard to his life? *Forward*. At least as far forward as the next couple of decades concern him. People

ask him questions like:

- What are you going to be when you grow up?
- Where will you live?
- What are some things you would like to have someday?

Forward oriented thinking and questions.

Now, let's consider the second fellow. The middle-aged guy or gal. He has perhaps half of his life *behind* him and the other half *ahead*. When people ask him about his life or when he thinks about it, the questions and thoughts are not the same, for the most part, as they were when he was a kid. Now he might be thinking about:

- Some fun times he had in the past
- His wife and children, should he marry
- And some forward thinking about perhaps when he will retire, how he can get free of debt, and so on.

This fellow's focus then is bi-directional. Backward and forward, but still pretty much limited to practical considerations regarding his present earthly life.

But now turn to the 80 year old. I am almost 67 and I have started to identify with senior citizens. Let me describe our thinking focus for you. It is largely *backward – looking back*. I am just speaking in human, natural terms.

- Our thinking as we grow older and *the majority of the years of our lives now lie behind us*, is one of remembering. We look back
- For example, on my iphone I have a collection of pictures including pictures from the past. Way back when I was a little kid. Pictures of my parents and lots of other people who have been dead now for years. There are pictures of our kids when they were little and of Verla and I when we were in our early married years.
- And what I can tell you is that while it is good to have great memories, it is also *paralyzing*. Why?

Because those times and places and people are gone. They were a vapor in time, over in the blink of an eye. And there is no bringing them back.

I have seen older people in rest homes doing down this memory lane path and very often while it may begin cheerfully, the fond memories can quickly turn to despair *because they*

are memories, and memories belong to a past that cannot be brought back.

Now, as a Christian, we are called upon by the Lord *to stop looking back and instead, look ahead. To make a definite directional change in our thinking from that of looking backward to one that looks forward.*

And that requires the faith that every real Christian has. We look to Jesus by faith.

Let me show you another passage from Hebrews that clearly shows us the focus of our thinking no matter if we are a child or middle aged or a senior. But what I am particularly saying is that in our older years, we especially must come to terms with this forward vision carried out by the eyes of faith.

Hebrews 11:13-16 These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. (14) For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. (15) If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. (16) But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be

called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.

And again:

Hebrews 11:39-40 And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, (40) since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.

Let me suggest to you that Abraham (and the other examples of faith mentioned here) set the eyes of their faith *forward*. How? They set their eyes on *the real life that lays ahead of when Christ comes for His people and brings us in to that "place" He said He was going to prepare for us.*

Do you begin to see how absolutely vital this is? I remember seeing a man in a rest home once who looked quite downcast and miserable. On the dresser in his room was a picture of him and his wife, obviously taken some time ago, with a hand-written caption under it that said "when we were happy."

Now, we can certainly identify with such thoughts. Grieving the loss of a loved one is painful and certainly not wrong. *But it is wrong and unnecessary for a Christian to come*

into the latter years of their life (or to even live ANY of the years of their life) looking backward and grieving over loss and making that backward look the focus of their life.

What must we do? By faith in the promises of Christ to us, we must turn our eyes from what lies behind to what lies ahead.

Colossians 3:1-4 If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. (2) **Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.** (3) For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. (4) When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

Philippians 3:20-21 **But our citizenship is in heaven,** and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, (21) who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.

Paul emphasizes this repeatedly-

Philippians 3:12-14 Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made

me his own. (13) Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: **forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead,** (14) I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Listen to Hebrews again and notice how all these people did exactly what Paul is talking about – *forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead* –

Hebrews 11:32-40 And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets— (33) who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, (34) quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. (35) Women received back their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. (36) Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. (37) They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated— (38) of whom the world

was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth. (39) And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, (40) since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.

So have you done this? Have you resolved to increasingly stop looking back, being paralyzed by the loss of what is gone, and more and more “strained forward to what lies ahead”? Do you see it?

- The New creation, a new earth
- The resurrection
- Christ coming for us
- A land that is yours, custom made by Christ for you
- No death
- No crying
- No war, no sin, no pain

Like to explore? The new creation will be so vast and your ability to travel will be so immediate that your experience will make that of the starship Enterprise look like child’s play.

And Christ will be there, face to face with us. There are no words for what that will be like.

Your body will be REAL. Your friends will be real, and you can go spend time you really won't ever be "spending time" because there is no time there.

It will be eternal "day" with no night, no darkness – Christ will illuminate the whole universe with His glory. And in that eternal Day there will never be any kind of "loss." Somehow we will never have to look "behind" again and mourn the passing of those days. "Those were the days, my friend, we thought they'd never end...." – and this time, they won't.

Have you ever had some really, really good days in your life? Most all of us have probably had lots of good days, but what I mean is those particularly memorable days that are enjoyable to think back on and remember.

- A hunting trip with dad
- A day in the snow when our kids were little
- Your wedding day
- A day with a best friend when the fish were really biting and you hauled them in

But the catch to these exceptional days in this life is – they end. They end rather quickly. How often do we look forward for a long time to a certain day when....something really wonderful is

planned.

And then that day comes.

And it is wonderful.

And then it is over. Just like that. Present wrapping all over the floor, time to clean it up and take down the tree.

What I am trying to explain is that as I understand what the Bible tells us about this –

“forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead,”

is that those "days" *WILL never end!* It will be one timeless, eternal, GREAT day!

And so the Lord would have every single one of His people very intentionally, regularly, by faith, TURN. Stop looking behind and look ahead. In fact, STRAIN forward to look ahead and to reach out and grasp what is going to turn out to be your REAL life. The Christian's life need not be one of regret, but of anxious anticipation. "These are the days, my friend, we know they'll never end, we'll sing and dance and" never fear the day's end.

