Title: Past, Present, and Future

Date: 11/9/25

Subject: How we as Christians live in the present in light of the past and future.

Scripture: Philippians 3:12 - 14

Charlie Brown is talking with Lucy. He says, "You're going to be proud of me Lucy... I've decided that this next year is going to be my year of decision! This is a list of things in my life that I'm going to correct... I'm going to be a better person!"

Lucy responds: "Not me...I'm going to spend this whole year regretting the past...It's the only way, Charlie Brown...I'm going to cry over spilt milk, and sigh over lost loves...It's a lot easier...It's too hard to improve...I tried it once...It drove me crazy..."Forget the future" is my motto...Regret the past! Oh, how I regret the past! Why did I do this? Why did I do that? Why? I regret it all! Oh, what regrets! What remorse! What anguish! What..."

Charlie Brown looks confused, tosses his list and lets out a sigh. The inference is he gives up and goes back to his old way of living.

We too are faced with a choice of how we're going to live.

READ Philippians 3:12 - 14

The "all this" of v. 12 is the "it" of v. 13. These terms point back to what was written in vv. 10 and 11 about knowing Christ, the power of his resurrection, the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings and attaining the resurrection of the dead. Paul assesses his current spiritual condition and concludes he hasn't obtained complete spiritual maturity or perfection. He doesn't fully know Christ…but he has the desire to grow.

It begins with how we are to approach the past.

A. The past.

"Forgetting what is behind." We have to clarify what is meant by "forgetting." In this same chapter Paul recalled some of his pre-Christian accomplishments and credentials. In our study of Acts we saw several times when Paul recalled how he came to know Christ. He remembered the dangers he encountered as a follower of Christ. He recalled people he'd met along the way. He's not advocating a total break with everything in the past and not remembering anything from it.

"Forgetting what is behind" is choosing to not let the achievements, failures and experiences of the past to be what controls and dominates our lives. We learn from the past and understand it helped shape who we are, but aren't so focused on the past that it hinders our spiritual progress, our present and future actions.

Paul could have dwelt on his pre-Christian past, all the times he voted to imprison Christians or have them killed. He could have focused on how good a person he was according to many religious standards. On the positive side, he could have constantly relived how he proclaimed Jesus to multitudes of people and boldly stood before those who wanted to kill him. He could have been a pendulum swinging from being mired in the

guilt and shame of the horrible things he did and then reminiscing his achievements of how many miles he traveled, how many people and the big names he talked to about Christ. He could accurately and vividly recall the past, but he chose to not live there anymore. Sounds like a country song: "I'm not gonna live in the past."

Us. Our pre-Christian experience. Paul tells the Corinthian Christians that some of them had been sexually immoral, adulterers, idolaters, homosexual offenders, thieves, greedy, drunkards, slanderers, swindlers...but you were sanctified and justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor 6:9-11). Our past that has been forgiven by Christ is not to be what dictates how we live. We aren't defined by who we were or what we did.

Our post-salvation experience. It might be our accomplishments of teaching, serving, using our spiritual gifts, influencing others. Alternatively, it could be that we haven't prayed the way we should, haven't witnessed the way we should, haven't been the Christian the way we should. It's true of all of us that there are areas where we could have been better.

There are several problems with living in the past. One is pride. While we celebrate the good, we aren't to look back at our trophy case of achievements: "Hey, I made it over that hurdle. I was really good back there. Everybody, congratulate me. Now I can sit back and relax."

Pride is a prickly problem. Alistair Begg (truthforlife.org/resources/sermon/three-reminders/#lower-[30]) made an admission that's true of many Christians. "Do you want to know what the hardest thing for me is in my Christian life? Thinking of myself more highly than I ought. Pride. When a man is proud, he doesn't pray. He doesn't feel he needs to. When a girl is proud and self-assured, she will not depend upon God. She believes she can depend upon herself."

He carries this reminder in this Bible: "Lord, I renounce my desire for human praise, for the approval of my peers, the need for public recognition. I deliberately put these aside today, content to hear you whisper, 'Well done, good and faithful servant.'"

A second problem with living in the past is resentment. Mourning that the present isn't like the way it was in the past.

Then there's guilt. Because of the things we've done or failed to do, we're such a bad person, the Lord can't use us. Coulda, woulda, shoulda. Coulda been more open at work about being a Christian, shoulda stopped giving in gossiping a lot sooner, shoulda been kinder to my neighbor.

The solution isn't to throw a pity party. We aren't to wallow in shame and guilt and what might have been. We can't jump into a time machine, go back to change some blunder.

Need to determine that the past no longer rules and dominates. We aren't enslaved by it. Our sins have been forgiven and don't determine what's going to happen now or in the future. Don't live in regrets.

"Forgetting what's behind" has applications in other areas of life. Forgetting our past doesn't mean losing all memory of it. Praise God for memories of good times and of people. We remember loved ones who died. We honor what is worth honoring, but don't try to relive it.

Jesus warned about putting the hand to the plow and looking back (Luke 9:62). In my case it was the Ford tractor and two row cultivator to get rid of weeds between rows of corn. I wasn't the best at it. Okay. I stunk. I kept looking back to see if the protective shields were protecting the corn plants. When I did, I turned the steering wheel enough and wound up wiping out the corn I was supposed to guard. I needed to trust that if I kept looking ahead and steering where I should, the cultivator would cultivate - dig up weeds and not corn plants. Continuing to focus on the past messes up the present.

For some, forgetting the past is as simple as turning off a light switch. It's gone. For others it's more difficult. This doesn't mean there's something wrong with them. It's just harder to move on from….

We are to learn lessons from past and move forward. Paul stated something was missing from his past experience and he still hadn't experienced it. He hadn't already obtained all God had for him. He knew the Lord had more for him.

B. The present.

We're to live in the present. It's the only time segment where it's possible to live. The present is different from the past for obvious reasons. It's a natural development because we age, the world around us changes, there are new experiences, and hopefully we've grown wiser and not just older.

The apostle said he hadn't already been made perfect. The imagery behind the word "perfect" (v. 12) isn't someone who is flawless, without error, sinless. Rather it's about being a full-grown adult compared to a child who still has lots of developmental stages to go through – adolescence, youth, young adult – leading to maturity.

No matter our spiritual stage of development, we're still in the process of moving from infancy to maturity. We're still learning, still growing, still maturing. We haven't yet arrived. We haven't obtained everything God has for us. There's more for us to know about Christ and his ways for us to become like him. There's more of our salvation to experience. There's more to comprehend of the totality of God's love. There's more.

The goal is to take hold of that for which Christ took hold of us. It refers to possessing and taking captive. My ancestors made it to Wisconsin in the 1830s and found land that reminded them of Germany. They filed a claim and were granted a deed. They possessed the land but didn't possess it. Though the land was theirs, they still needed to clear the trees to grow crops, to be able to farm. That process went on for almost 100 years. They could say they fully possessed the land and it became theirs. They had captured the land. Yet there was still more work to do as weeds, brush and trees continued to make their presence known where they shouldn't be and needed to be cleared. It's a continual process of possessing and taking captive.

We are to take possession of everything for which Christ has taken possession of us. Our goal as followers of Jesus Christ isn't to become the person who has memorized the most verses, who has the most calloused knees because have spent the most time in prayer, who leads the most people to a saving knowledge of Jesus, who becomes the devil's worst enemy. Our goal as followers of Jesus Christ to know Christ and to

become like Him in word, thought and action, be transformed more and more into the likeness of Jesus Christ.. Jesus prayed, "And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent" (John 17:3).

To accomplish this goal we're to "press on." The original language implies active, determined pursuit of a predetermined end.

Teddy Roosevelt became our 26th President when William McKinley was assassinated. Roosevelt had previously served as New York governor, Assistant Secretary of the Navy and as a Colonel during the Spanish American War leading the famous Rough Rider charge up San Juan hill in Cuba.

While governor he gave a speech to the Hamilton Club in Chicago (April 10, 1899. Hand Me Another Brick, Chuck Swindoll, p. 79). "It is not the critic who counts: not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles or where the doer of deeds could have done better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena; whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, and comes up short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; who does actually try to do the deed; who knows the great enthusiasm, the great devotion and spends himself in a worthy cause; who, at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly. Far better it is to do dare mighty things, to win glorious triumphs even though checkered by failure, than to rank with those poor spirits who neither enjoy nor suffer much because they live in the gray twilight that knows neither victory nor defeat."

Christians are in the arena - whether they realize it or not. Since we are in the arena, we're to persist in concentrated effort.

C. The future. "Straining toward what is ahead."

Paul uses lots of imagery about athletes and competition in his letters. He would have been familiar with the ancient Roman and Greek games, especially the running. The winner would receive a wreath made of leaves and sometimes there were cash prizes. The goal for the runners was to get the prize.

The paramount rule of running is to focus on what's ahead, not look back to see how the competition is doing or think about previous rough spots on the course. Nor is it good practice to look at the present circumstances like watching how the feet are hitting the pavement, if they're perfectly in line.

If we as followers of Jesus Christ focus on what's behind us, we may become distracted, lose our purpose and motivation. The spiritual life is a marathon. Some of us have just started the race while others are on the home stretch. No matter where we are, we're to continue running, though our spiritual muscles, body and brain, as well as some spectators, scream that this is a terrible way to treat ourselves, it would be so much easier to quit. We are to keep aiming toward the finish line.

We come to the second use of "press on." Repeat the description from earlier - an active, determined pursuit of a predetermined end. In this case it's "toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called us heavenward in Christ Jesus." It requires exertion, determination, stamina, discipline, dedication, persistence and tenacity so we can finish strong.

No coasting. Not like the rabbit in the story of his race against the tortoise. He jumped out to a big lead, then got distracted, took a nap and was passed by the tortoise who had kept on keeping on.

The Christian's goal is to win the prize. It's not something that will rust, mold or decay. It's much better than the ribbons I got taking vegetables, woodworking animals and livestock to the County Fair as part of 4H.

The reward comes as the fulfillment of God's promises. Death doesn't have the last word but there will be a resurrection so that our souls will be united with a new body enabling us to live in a place called heaven that Jesus Christ has been preparing since he left earth, where we will enjoy eternal life with Christ.

Paul writes in vv. 20, 21 "Our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body."

We are to live in the light of the future – where we're headed, what God has promised. Prepare for that day. Store up treasure in heaven by bringing other people to Christ as their Savior. Help them grow in their spiritual lives.

A car's rear-view mirror is a handy device. It lets you know if the policeman you just passed who was parked in the median is pulling out and turning on his lights to pull you over. Admit it. We've all looked and felt the surge of adrenaline and guilt…followed by a sigh of relief even though we weren't speeding, had our seat belt buckled, both hands on the steering wheel and all our lights were functional.

The rear-view mirror helps us see what's behind – if someone is coming up quickly, if it's okay to change lanes. We don't drive continually looking in it. We look ahead, taking occasional glances in the rear-view. Too much time looking in the mirror will probably lead to going off the road, rear ending someone or….We're to pay attention to where we are on the road and what's up ahead. And not just off the end of the end, but at the road before us.

In the Christian life, we pay attention to the present as we look ahead to the future, taking occasional quick glances to the past, understanding we're putting the good and bad of the past behind us, seeking to live for God in the present, and pressing on to the future.