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Acts 7:59–8:3, English Standard Version

As they were stoning Stephen, he called out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”⁶⁰ And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

8 *And Saul approved of his execution.*

And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.² Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him.³ But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.

Philippians 3:8–14, English Standard Version

⁸*Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—¹⁰ that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death,¹¹ that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.*

¹²*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.*

Forgetting what lies behind.

There is one thing that I have noticed over the years, while working as a chaplain.

People are, in many ways, very similar. No matter what our backgrounds are, no

matter how dissimilar we may seem to each other, we have the same feelings inside. One of them is regret. Not everyone has deep misgivings about their past, but with age, many, many people have regrets about what they have done or not done. Recently, I was out on a walk and coming toward me was a man about my age. He seemed familiar, and I thought maybe he was a neighbor. Just as I was about to acknowledge him and say hi, he said, "Professor King!" I said yes, and then added that I was sorry, but I didn't remember his name. He smiled and said that was okay, that as an older student he had taken a class from me several years ago. I then remembered him. We'll call him Bobby. He had taken my 3D modeling and animation class. He hadn't been the most artistic person, but he had taken on a big project and spent an enormous amount of time on it. He had also been very helpful to several of the younger students in the class, helping them with basic software problems. I never knew anything about his background or what he did for a living, but he was clearly a skilled software person. We stood on the path talking for a few minutes, saying the usual meaningless things, like hey it's a nice day, and it's great to live here, and boy, we sure haven't gotten much moisture this year. Then he asked me if I was still working part time at the university or if I had finally retired. I told him that I was no longer teaching, that I was working as a pastor and a chaplain. Then his casual, friendly expression

suddenly turned odd, and for a brief paranoid moment I wondered if he could be some sort of anti-Christian guy. Then he asked me if I was a Christian pastor, and I said yes, I am ordained in the United Methodist Church. Then he asked me if I had a few minutes to talk, that he was just walking in a loop and could easily walk in my direction. I said sure. As we started walking, he said that his problem was that he was very sick and that he had some huge regrets about his life.

Consider Acts, which details the spread of the faith after Jesus has left the Earth, first to Jews in and near Jerusalem and then further out into many nations, including what is now Turkey, Greece, and Italy. Paul was originally called Saul, perhaps after the Israelite King Saul. Paul is the Latin version of his name. Both names mean “asked for” or “to ask for”. We tend to think that Paul changed his name from Saul when Jesus appeared to him on the road to Damascus after Jesus was killed. But even after he converted, Jesus still referred to him as Saul. In truth, dual Hebrew/Roman names were common at this time in this part of the world. We don’t explicitly know why he changed his name; it might simply have been to make it easier to preach to non-Jews who might feel more comfortable with the Latin name Paul. Our quote comes from early in Acts before Paul has goes blind and finds himself talking to the risen Lord. This quote refers to Stephen, who became one of the disciples after Jesus ascended into Heaven. He

helps spread the faith, and this gets him into trouble. He is arrested and charged with blasphemy. Instead of defending himself, he uses the opportunity to evangelize. He is dragged outside and stoned to death. In our quote, we read this (and I have condensed it): *As they were stoning Stephen, he called out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." And when he had said this, he fell asleep. 8 And Saul approved of his execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. 3 Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.* Saul was committed to destroying the early church and didn't care if he had innocent people killed – something we would find horrific today.

Our second quote is from one of Paul's letters. It is strongly believed that Paul did indeed personally write this letter. In the 1960's, it became very common for scholars to think that this letter is actually two or three letters that were clumsily blended together into one document. For one thing, Polycarp, a second century bishop, mentions multiple letters written by Paul to Philippi. But others have argued that the changes of tone in the letter and the appearance of what appears closing remarks in the middle of the letter can be excused in other ways, and that there is no strong evidence that it was not always a single unified

letter. Philippi is located in northeastern Greece, in an area that is still called by its ancient name, Macedonia. In 365 BC Philip of Macedon took control of an existing city called Krenides, renamed it after himself, and made it his base of operations. He used the gold and silver mined there to fund the expansion of his empire. Macedonia later became a Roman province. Philippi eventually became an important crossroads for communication and commerce. Paul founded the church there about ten years before writing the letter that we have today. It was common practice of his to write support and counseling letters to churches he had founded. The purpose of the letter was to help people develop a truly Christian way of thinking. The Greek verb *phroneo*, meaning “to think” appears many, many times in the letter, revealing that he truly was trying to mold people’s mindset. What did Paul believe was a distinctly Christian mindset? A strong focus of his is on the future. People should shift from being preoccupied with what he called “earthly things” to focusing on their citizenship in Heaven.

Consider our second quote, which again, I have abbreviated. Paul was well-educated and highly respected in his society before he converted, stopped acting as an enforcer of his culture’s laws, and became a wandering homeless man, begging for food and lodging, and serving only to spread the faith. Here is the quote: *For Christ’s sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as*

rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, ¹⁰ that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death. ¹² 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. 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. The meaning of this is fairly obvious. He was quite happy to walk away from all he had done in his past life in order to follow the path that Jesus laid before him. He now finds righteousness with Jesus, not in the laws of humanity. He is willing to share in Christ's sufferings. He makes a point of saying that he certainly has not attained perfection, and many analysts have suggested that he is addressing people at Philippi who have become high and mighty, thinking that because they are Christians, they are somehow perfect now. Finally, he says that he forgets what lies behind and looks forward to what lies ahead. The prize of the call of God in Christ Jesus is in his future, not in his past. It's not that he's dismissing what he did when he was known as Saul. It's that he knows that God wants him to look forward, not backward. Regrets won't serve the people of God.

The past often serves as a destructive distraction. I'd like to get back to Bobby, the former older student who discovered me on a path and wanted to talk about his regrets. He began telling me everything that haunted him. He had never married, never had children, never built a private life. I asked him what he *had* done. He said that was another problem. He had gone to college, a good one, and had gone to graduate school, but had only gotten a Masters in Engineering. He should have gotten a Ph.D., he said. He had taken a job with IBM right out of grad school and had built software for them for over thirty years. He had never been promoted into management, and all he could say for himself is that his software was running in tens of thousands of computers around the world. I said that he must have earned a very good living. He said yes, that he had had well-paying, consistent employment, and had been able to save and invest. He had bought a home in Boulder back when prices were low. But he had no one to leave his money to, he said. He also said that he hadn't built anything in his life, that he had simply worked as a programmer, doing one project after another, and that it hadn't led anywhere. I said that most people would consider someone with a Masters in Engineering who had worked for thirty-something years as a programmer with IBM to be quite successful. But then, the bottom line came out: he said that he had never done anything for anyone else.

There is a subtlety to our quote from Philippians that many of us might miss. Consider this passage again: ¹² *I press on 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.* Paul is doing something here that he does in other places in his writings: he is making an analogy with a footrace. Notably, he also does this in first Corinthians. He's saying that if you keep looking over your shoulder, you'll just slow yourself down. You can't look at who or what is behind you. Notice that he doesn't say that his goal is to be the single winner, the only exalted person at the end of the race. The prize is the call of God in Christ Jesus. The word Christ means the "anointed one" or "messiah". The prize of this race is the call from the Messiah. It's open to everyone. Every single runner in the race can claim the same prize. The reason that looking behind is a problem isn't because you're trying to beat the other guy to the finish line. It's because there is no other meaningful purpose than what lies ahead: that call from the Messiah.

After Bobby and I had been talking for a while, I reminded him that when he first found me on the path, he said that he was very sick. I asked him what he was sick with. He said it was kidney failure, that he was getting dialysis, and that

since he had just had dialysis the day before, he was feeling pretty good today. But he would be exhausted tonight when he got home. He'd be sound asleep within an hour - and it was only mid-afternoon. I asked him if he could get a kidney transplant. He said yes, but that he would be very difficult to match, and so he might well never get a transplant. He said that he didn't know how much longer he would live. Bobby repeated that he just had too many regrets, that there were so many things he could have done. One of them was being a true Christian. During all those years while working as a programmer, he had forgotten all about his faith. Then we talked about Paul, that man who had hunted down Christians and then ended up refusing to look at what was behind him. I pointed out that Paul certainly had a hell of a lot more regrets than him. I also noted that Paul might have lived no more than a year or so after he wrote his letter to the faithful in Philippi. Still, Paul was looking forward. Bobby told me that he would think about this, but that it was time to go home. We hugged and I have not seen him since then. Please pray with me.

God, please free us from regret. Let us embrace one of the greatest gifts of having faith – knowing that all you want us to do is look forward, that the past is forgiven, and the future, no matter how long or short, is magnificent if we keep our eyes on you. Amen.