

Letting Go Of The Past

'One thing I do (or aspire to); forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal to the heavenly prize which is the high calling of God, in Jesus, Who is calling us upward' (Philippians 3:13 & 14).

What Paul (once known as Saul) was talking about was the situation he found himself in before he was born-again. Out of ignorance, Paul severely persecuted hundreds of Christians. That played on his mind for years, until he was able to let go, put it behind himself and move forward. 'Then they dragged Stephen out of the city and stoned him, and the witnesses placed their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul' (Acts 7:58). 'Meanwhile, Saul still breathing threats and murderous desire against the disciples of the Lord ... requested letters (of authorisation) to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any people belonging to Jesus, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem' (Acts 9:1 & 2). 'Lord, they themselves well know that throughout all the synagogues I cast into prison and flogged those who believed on You, and when the blood of Stephen was shed, I was personally standing by and guarded the garments of those who slew him' (Acts 22:19 & 20). 'Though I once blasphemed and persecuted and was shameful, outrageous and aggressively indolent to the Lord, nevertheless, I obtained mercy because I had acted out of ignorance and unbelief ... The saying is sure, that Jesus the Messiah came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the worst, but I obtained mercy ...' (1 Timothy 1:13 & 15).

Living with a past like Paul's would be hard for anyone. Most of us could never imagine what it would be like to be guilty of destroying families and lives like Saul/Paul did. There are in this time of history, people who have committed the most heinous crimes; armed robbery, murder, rape, drug dealing and other unimaginable things that have destroyed the lives of their victims. It would be incredibly hard to have something like that on their conscience, because they can never undo the damage they have caused. They can never give back to grieving families a loved one who has died because of a crime committed against them. However, once those criminals find the Lord's mercy, have come to the saving knowledge of Jesus our Saviour and are born-again, they have to come to terms with their past, put it behind them, and move on into newness of life, just like Paul did. Once Paul realised that what he was doing was offensive to the Lord, He repented and became a committed believer and well-travelled evangelist. Paul never made excuses for his behaviour, but he did let go of his past, and move on in God. Another thing former offenders need to do, is forgive themselves. Sometimes it is easier to accept God's forgiveness, than it is to accept that we need to forgive ourselves for things done in ignorance and let the past go. What's done is done and cannot be changed, but our heart can be changed if we accept Jesus as our Saviour and press on to the eternal prize that lies ahead.

Letting go of deceased loved ones can seem impossible. The scriptures give us about a month for grief then we are to get on with our life. The children of Israel mourned for Aaron and Moses for one month (Numbers 20:29; Deuteronomy 34:8), then the Lord said, 'Moses My servant is dead. So now arise and go ... (Joshua 1:2). There are some situations that are so difficult or heartbreaking, it takes a long time to recover, and initially, letting go seems impossible. The loss of a spouse, a child or a

parent, can bring such grief and sorrow, the sufferer can forget what life was like before the tragedy, and the sadness can become entrenched and seem almost normal. Jacob mourned the loss of Joseph for about 20 years (Genesis 44:20 to 34). That is far too long for normal grief to last. King David was the other extreme. He mourned for his baby before the child died, but ceased his grieving as soon as he knew his baby had died (2 Samuel 12:15 to 23). When Aaron's two sons died suddenly, he seemed to go into shock and became silent (Leviticus 10:3). Abraham wept for Sarah when she died (Genesis 23:2).

Grieving and mourning are normal human responses to losing a loved one, however we are told that the Lord comforts those who mourn. 'Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted' (Matthew 5:4). When we face tragedy, we need to hand our pain over to the Lord, allow Him to comfort us, and we need to move on with life, no matter how painful our loss. We must be very careful not to allow ourselves to feel self-pity. "Why did MY child die?" "Why did my fiancé/spouse die?" "Why did I have to grow up without my mother/father?" It is very true that nobody can take the place of the person who has died, but we have to keep going. What we need to accept is this: death is part of life in this fallen world. Death happens to everybody at some time. If there is a conception then there will be a death at some point. Asking why and trying to make sense of it may bring comfort but the truth is, we are all going to die one day and so we need to have our hearts right with God before that happens. If we continue serving the Lord and focussing on Him, the pain of loss will ease more quickly. We cannot allow anything to hinder our work, because there are millions of unsaved souls out there who need to hear the Gospel. It is more important to power ahead, reaching souls and pulling them out of hell, than to hold on to our individual loss. We can never bring the deceased person back, so holding on to them is pointless. God knows the day of every person's death. Our whole lives from conception to death is written down in the Lord's Book of Life (Psalm 139:16). The length of our lives are in His hands. All we can do is let our loved ones go and honour God with our lives. Once that person is gone, they are from that time forward, part of our past and we must let the past go and press on to what lies ahead.

We have to let 'things' go. Jesus said, "No one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back to the things behind him, is fit for the Kingdom of God" (Luke 9:62). 'Lot's wife looked back from behind him (Lot) and she became a pillar of salt' (Genesis 19:26). 'Let him who is in the field not turn back. Remember Lot's wife!' (Luke 17:31 & 32). Sometimes the Lord requires us to give up and let go of things we enjoy in life. Smoking and alcohol are the most common, but there are times when the Lord wants us to leave things we love that are not in the least sinful, and that can cause real distress. Do we disobey and stay and miss out on what God wants us to do? Or do we obey and go, leaving loved ones behind and maybe never see them again? That decision can be agonising. That is what God said to Abraham. 'Go away from your country, away from your family and your father's household to the land that I will show you' (Genesis 12:1). Just by simple faith and trust in God, Abraham did not trouble his mind about where he was to go. He left a comfortable civilisation to live a nomadic life in tents (Hebrews 11:8 & 9). Sometimes we are called to leave our well-paid job, or sell our homes that we have struggled to buy, or leave our aging grandparents knowing full well we will never see them again if we go, or leave our adult children and move thousands of kilometres away so we are unable to see and enjoy grandchildren, or even leave a spouse behind to go and serve the Lord.

Sometimes the Lord does return to us people or things we left, but sometimes we never get back what we gave up, or see certain loved ones again. We are called to a holy calling; 'He Who saved us and called us with a holy calling' (2 Timothy 1:9); 'So then holy brothers (and sisters), set apart for God, who share in the heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the Apostle and High Priest Whom we confessed' (Hebrews 3:1).

That calling, if we are serious about serving the Lord, can require us give up everything for the Lord. Remember that Jesus disregarded his biological family (Matthew 12:46 to 50), He gave up any chance for marriage and a family of His own, to die for us. He gave up His whole life to the point of death, for us. Because we are called to a holy calling, we need to put the Lord first in our lives and go – even if 'going' is painful. We need to let go the things we love, and learn to love God more than anybody or anything in our lives. Jesus said, 'If anyone comes to Me and does not disregard (love them less than God), his own father and mother, his wife and children and brothers and sisters and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple. Whoever will not carry his own cross and follow Me, cannot be My disciple' (Luke 14:26 & 27).

We will look at some scriptures to show us that some people were called to leave family, jobs and houses for the Lord's sake. Peter was married with a son, yet he left them, his house and his job to follow Jesus (Matthew 4:19 & 20). We know Peter was married because he had a mother-in-law (Mark 1:30; Luke 4:38). Mark was his son (1 Peter 5:13). Mark also followed Jesus and was a young man when Jesus was crucified (Mark 14:51 & 52). Peter said he left everything to follow Jesus (Matthew 19:27; Luke 18:28). Paul gave up all thought of marriage to serve the Lord (1 Corinthians 7:7 & 8). Peter, Andrew, James and John gave up their jobs (Matthew 4:20 & 22). Matthew left his very lucrative job to be with Jesus (Mark 2:14). Peter and his brother Andrew, shared a house with Peter's mother-in-law (Mark 1:29), but they left it to follow Jesus.

We can see that putting the Lord first in our lives can cost us dearly, financially, emotionally and physically. It can be very painful. If we are called to leave everything, one of the hardest things is to let it all go; everybody and everything. Leaving family, friends, church, familiar surroundings etc, would be hard, but we would also leave our home, cars, furniture, heirlooms, wedding gifts and other items that would mean a lot to us. We may never see our parents or grandparents again. We may have a 'long-distance' marriage for some years like Peter did. We may never see our grandchildren. We may never have a permanent home again, especially if the Lord has called us to move from place to place. Jesus had nowhere to live (Matthew 8:20; Luke 9:58). If we are called to be missionaries in other nations, we would not only give up country, home, jobs and family, we may face death. Missionaries have been murdered while working overseas. We may never work in steady, paid employment again, but be forced to live solely by faith. The Lord may require us to remain unmarried and child free all our lives, like Jesus and Paul did, because children may hinder our ability to fulfil our calling. We may have to give up the desire for marriage and companionship to live a difficult and at times, a very lonely life. Some women 'grieve' for children they have never had. We can certainly keep in contact with loved ones, but we may never see them again or feel their hug again. Whatever we are called to give up, we must not only physically give it up, but let it go completely; physically and emotionally. We cannot serve the Lord effectively if we are always

desiring what we cannot have, or always wanting what we have previously given up. Once it has gone, it is all past and gone into history. Paul said he lost everything he had to follow the Lord. 'For His sake I have lost everything and consider it all to be mere rubbish in order that I might gain Jesus' (Philippians 3:8).

For those who do not like to think that God would call people to endure such difficulties, hardships and distresses, we only need to read the New Testament to see what was written there. 'Through many sorrows (hardships, afflictions, tribulations) we must enter the Kingdom of God (Acts 14:22). 'As servants of God, through great endurance, in afflictions, in hardships, in distresses, tribulations and suffering, in privations, in sore straits and calamities, in beatings, imprisonment, riots, sleepless nights, hunger and hard labours ...' (2 Corinthians 6:4). 'I know how to be humbled and I know how to enjoy plenty. I have learned the secret of facing every situation; whether to be filled or to be hungry – to abound or be in need' (Philippians 4:12). Being a Christian can be very tough. We need to have our spiritual eyes firmly fixed on the Lord and our eternal rewards, and not look back to what we 'treasured', or what 'treasures' we would have liked to have had, but we need to press on to the eternal prize, and that is our salvation and later, treasures in heaven.

Letting go of the guilt of past sins, letting go of loved ones who have passed away, letting go of loved ones when we are called away, letting go of treasured items and enduring the distress that the giving up of material things can cause, all bring with them eternal rewards. 'If you want to be perfect, go and sell what you have and give to the poor and you will have riches in heaven; then come and follow Me' (Matthew 19:21). 'You lack one thing; go and sell all you have and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven and come, follow Me, taking up the cross' (Mark 10:21). 'He who hoards treasures for himself, is not rich in God ... for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also' (Luke 12:21 & 34). The 'treasure' could be whatever we are holding on to. If we keep these things in our hearts, or continue yearning for them long after we should have let them go, then we are lacking in our relationship with the Lord. Jesus said to rid ourselves of these 'treasures' and follow Him, literally, whatever the cost.

Amen and God bless you.

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