

Onward
Launching Into a New Year
Philippians 3:10-14

1. Pinned to the past.

- *Philippians 3:13; Isaiah 25:7-9; 1 Timothy 1:15, 16; Isaiah 43:18-19; Luke 9:62*

2. Plan on predictions.

- *Proverbs 27:1; Luke 12:20; James 4:13-15*

3. Press for the prize.

- *Philippians 3:13-14; Colossians 3:1-4; Hebrews 12:1-3; 1 Corinthians 2:2*

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Michael O'Neill

Onward: Moving Forward into the New Year

We are just a week and a half into the New Year, and this time of year it's always natural for us to look back and look ahead. That's actually what the word "January" means: looking back and looking ahead at the same time; it's a two-faced month! It's named after the Roman god, Janus. Janus' job in the Roman pantheon was to preside over passages; usually he governed gates, passages, and doorways. His two faces kept him constantly between the past and the future; never moving from his position at the door.



Having two faces makes you wonder a few things about him:

- With two faces, if his eyesight is good, would it be called 20/20/20/20 vision? Or if he needs glasses, do bullies call him "8-eyes"? If he needs bifocals, would they be called quad-focals?
- If he sings, is it a duet?
- If he's hypocritical, do people call him "four-faced"?
- When he's watching a tennis match, does he have to turn his head?
- Can he watch SportsCenter and talk to his wife at the same time?
- I guess when he's driving, he doesn't need a rear-view mirror.

Which actually brings up a good point: when you and I drive, we need our rearview mirror to occasionally check where we've been and to see what's behind us. But you can't drive forward if you spend all your time looking in the rearview mirror. So while looking in two directions at the same time might work for a Roman god, it won't work for us.

Our point of reference for today's New Year message is actually one of my favorite passages of Scripture and it's in Philippians 3:10-14. I'd like to read it to you; this is what it says:

"I want to know Christ and experience the mighty power that raised him from the dead. I want to suffer with him, sharing in his death, so that one way or another I will experience the resurrection from the dead! I don't mean to say that I have already achieved these things or that I have already reached perfection. But I press on to possess that perfection for which Christ Jesus first possessed me. No, dear brothers and sisters, I have not achieved it, but I focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us." (Philippians 3:10-14, nlt)

If we are going to move forward into this new year, we'll want to look ahead, so I want to share with you a couple ways you could approach it but will want to avoid, and one you'll want to choose.

So one of the ways you could approach this new year is to remain...

1. Pinned to the past.

We can spend our time looking back if that's what we want to do, mulling over mistakes and replaying our regrets. But as long as you are looking at the past, you can't move forward.

I'm not saying we shouldn't look back at times or disregard the past; like it or not, it's the past that has helped shape you into the person you are. So you want to appreciate what it's done for you and learn from what you need to. We need to look back to get our reference points and some context for where we are going. But we should only do that for short periods of time because usually we have to stop moving forward in order to look back. It's one thing to glance back; it's another to take our eyes off where we are going and turn around and stare behind us. When we keep looking back, we are pinned to the past.

Let me try to explain it this way: I've read that in some Southeast Asian countries, elephants are trained for labor, and one of the ways they do that is by starting when it is a calf. They tie it to a strong stake that is driven deeply into the ground, like you would tie a horse to a hitching post. The calf will try to break free, but it won't have the strength to do so. Eventually, the little elephant will give up and stop trying to escape from the rope and the stake that limits its range. Once the young elephant has learned that it can't pull the stake from the ground, the human handlers can replace it with a smaller wooden one. In fact, they don't even have to drive it into the ground – they can just let it lay there. The elephant has learned in its past that it can't move, so it won't even try anymore as long as it's pinned to that post. Even though, as an adult, it has the strength to uproot a tree, it won't even attempt it because the elephant is pinned to its past experience.

Sometimes we too are pinned to the past – stuck in old pain or failures, past sins and behaviors, painful experiences and circumstances, and we're convinced that we can't break free and move ahead. What we need to do instead is what the Apostle Paul said in verse thirteen:

“I focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead...” (Philippians 3:13, nlt)

Now, I know that is easier said than done; some of us have experienced deep pain and loss in the past year. Some of us have struggled over this last year with bad attitudes, bad behavior, and even addictions. Some are still stinging from betrayals, some still pinned into the ground of grief. Some have been hurt by a son or daughter, by a parent or friend, and you can't get past that.

Now, I know it takes time to heal, and none of us has the luxury of 100% amnesia over those things. And it's not realistic to expect that we will ever be fully free from that grief or painful circumstance or those poor choices. But you *can* still move forward; you don't need to be stuck forever, pinned to that past event. Listen to what God says about himself, and listen to what he says he will do for you if you are pinned to the problems of the past, or have experienced loss or failure:

"He will remove the cloud of gloom, the shadow of death that hangs over the earth. *(think about that cloud of pain, failure, loss, or death)* He will swallow up death forever! The Sovereign Lord will wipe away all tears. *(he's taking about those who have suffered loss of some kind)* He will remove forever all insults and mockery against his land and people. *(That's for those who have been mistreated, or who have experienced failure over the last year)* The Lord has spoken! In that day the people will proclaim, "This is our God! We trusted in him, and he saved us! This is the Lord, in whom we trusted. Let us rejoice in the salvation he brings!" (Isaiah 25:7-9, nlt)

"In that day..." I tell you the truth: because of Christ, *this* is that day!

All of us have made mistakes or been hurt, but some of us have failed or been hurt because either we've sinned or we've responded to something by sinning, and now we have a hard time getting past that. But I'm here to remind you that God will forgive you instantly when you ask him to, and you *can* get past that sin and failure! When the Apostle Paul said what we read earlier – that he is "forgetting what's behind" – he didn't mean that he'd lose all memory of his sinful past – that's not possible for us (unless we've taken a beating to the head). But he did mean that the past was done and settled and that he'd leave it behind him. I'm sure it wasn't easy for him – he had plenty of regrets. In a letter to his young protégé, Timothy, Paul wrote:

"This is a trustworthy saying, and everyone should accept it: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners"—and I am the worst of them all." (1 Timothy 1:15, nlt)

Paul had done some very bad things! He was legalistic, he hunted down, arrested, and even advocated for the murder of Christians (or possibly participated in it) – before he became a Christian himself. But when he became a Christian, he accepted God's forgiveness and he knew that God had settled it, because he goes on to write in the very next verse:

"But God had mercy on me so that Christ Jesus could use me as a prime example of his great patience with even the worst sinners. Then others will realize that they, too, can believe in him and receive eternal life."
(1 Timothy 1:16, nlt)

In other words, Paul was saying, "If God can forgive me because of Jesus Christ, despite all the terrible things I've done – than he can forgive you, too. So get forgiven and get on with it!"

Paul could say that because he knew that's exactly what God had already said hundreds of years earlier through the Prophet Isaiah:

“Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland.” (Isaiah 43:18-19, niv)

Like Paul, you can deal with your past hurt, pain, failure, and sin through Jesus Christ, and you can move forward. You don't have to stay pinned to the past, stuck to an old stake. Don't try to be like Janus – two-faced. Move forward in the Lord! By the way, churches can be guilty of this, too. We get pinned to past traditions – the way things “used to be.” We get stuck on everything from rituals to musical styles to service schedules to programs to pastors and even to a church's building or furnishings. But we are not a Janus church! Thankfully we are a forward moving church. God has given us a great mission! We must be forward progress people, no turning back! This is what Jesus meant when he said,

“Anyone who puts a hand to the plow and then looks back is not fit for the Kingdom of God.” (Luke 9:62, nlt)

Don't be pinned to the past; move ahead!

If we don't do that, another option is that we could...

2. Plan on predictions.

More and more it seems like social media is filled with predictions about what is going to happen; what celebrity couples will split, what films will flop, what government official is about to be exposed or arrested, and how current policies or future policies will destroy our nation. On a lighter note, there are plenty of predictions about who will win the Super Bowl (which will be the Seahawks, by the way). Did you hear about that prediction? The other two times the Seahawks won the Super Bowl, they had 13 or more wins in that season, and the Catholic Church elected a new Pope. This year we have more than 13 wins and there is a new Pope...so...

Folks on social media are obsessed with what Nostradamus had to say, or the Mayan calendar, when Aliens will show up, where Elvis really is and where and when Jesus will return.

I can tell you that Jesus *will* return – maybe soon – but I would advise against getting your information from self-appointed prophets and self-called experts on social media.

None of us can make accurate predictions about world events or even about our own lives, for that matter. We can make educated guesses, at best, but that's about it. The Bible warns us:

“Don't brag about tomorrow, since you don't know what the day will bring.” (Proverbs 27:1, nlt)

It's futile to predict what will happen; it's wishful thinking at best. The truth is, only God knows for sure what will happen in the next 5 minutes, let alone in the coming year.

When Jesus told the story of the rich fool who built barns to store his growing acquisitions of grain, he said that the guy thought he could take it easy – eat, drink, and be merry. And:

“Then God said to him, ‘You fool! You will die this very night. Then who will get everything you worked for?’” (Luke 12:20, nlt)

The point Jesus was making was about not trusting in our possessions or ourselves or our predictions or anything else – but God. Why? Because only God knows what's in our future and what is the best course to take. That's the point the Bible makes in James 4:13-15 –

“Look here, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we are going to a certain town and will stay there a year. We will do business there and make a profit.” How do you know what your life will be like tomorrow? Your life is like the morning fog—it's here a little while, then it's gone. What you ought to say is, “If the Lord wants us to, we will live and do this or that.”” (James 4:13-15, nlt)

Try as we might, we can't predict what is ahead. We can only trust the Lord. I've read about some fabulously failed predictions from so called experts. For example, Roman Engineer Julius Sextus Frontinus said this in AD 100: “Inventions have long since reached their limit, and I see no hope for further developments.”

When Albert Einstein was 16 years old, his school teacher told Einstein's father that “It doesn't matter what he does – he will never amount to anything.”

Alex Lewyt was the president of the Lewyt Vacuum Cleaner Company, which was quite popular in the 1950s. In 1955, he was quoted in *The New York Times* as saying, “Nuclear powered vacuum cleaners will probably be a reality within ten years.” Can you imagine – vacuuming while wearing a hazmat suit? I guess that *would* clean your house – by incinerating the dirt...and your carpet...and your house.

Here's another prediction: Bob Metcalfe is an American Engineer who contributed to the development of the internet and co-invented Ethernet. In 1995 He wrote in *Infoworld* magazine, “I predict the internet...will go spectacularly supernova and in 1996 will catastrophically collapse.” When I think of the state of social media today, man I wish he would have been right about that!

But I think you get the point. Aren't you glad that your faith does not rest on human predictions, but on the Word of God? This is what the Apostle Paul was saying in that passage we read – basically, “Only God knows, so I'm going to get hold of God's future for my life.”

And by the way, that's what we're doing as a church, too – pursuing God's vision for us. We don't want to be pinned to the past or plan predictions. In our lives and in our church, like Paul, we want to...

3. Press for the prize.

Let me remind us of what Paul wrote that we read at the beginning:

“No, dear brothers and sisters, I have not achieved it, but I focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us.” (Philippians 3:13-14, nlt)

So what is that prize that Paul is referring to? Ultimately of course it's eternity – forever – with Jesus and all those who've trusted in him. Can you imagine what that will be like? Knowing Jesus in perfection, no distractions of sin and pain and this world to cloud our vision of Christ.

But the prize that Paul is referring to is about way more than just waiting until heaven someday. It's also about growing more and more deeply in your knowledge of and relationship with Jesus; gaining more and more of what heaven offers in the here and now. Including the love, joy, peace, and hope that we talked about all last month. Growing closer to Christ, becoming more like Christ, having the fruit of the Spirit in our lives (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control) – all that we need to become like and live for Christ in this world. That's the perfection Paul pressed toward every day.

And that, my friends, is what's worth pursuing this year – to press for the prize of knowing Jesus and thus becoming more like Jesus better and better. Now there will be much in store for your life this year, and for us a church, too, let me tell you. But just make it your primary ambition to pursue the One who loves you ultimately and knows you intimately and saves you fully and is ready to give you all you will ever need in this life and the next.

Jesus has forgiven you and un-staked you from the past if you've asked him to. So please don't remain pinned to the past. He knows what you need, so you don't have to spend your time planning predictions. Press for the prize! Paul wrote about this in his letter to the Colossians:

“Since you have been raised to new life with Christ, set your sights on the realities of heaven, where Christ sits in the place of honor at God's right hand. Think about the things of heaven, not the things of earth. For you died to this life, and your real life is hidden with Christ in God. And when Christ, who is your life, is revealed to the whole world, you will share in all his glory.” (Colossians 3:1-4, nlt)

That's the prize to pursue!

The book of Hebrews also talks about pressing for the prize when it says,

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith, let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up. And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us. We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, the champion who initiates and perfects our faith. Because of the joy awaiting him, he endured

the cross, disregarding its shame. Now he is seated in the place of honor beside God's throne. Think of all the hostility he endured from sinful people; then you won't become weary and give up." (Hebrews 12:1-3, nlt)

This is the priority of the Christian: to press for the prize of Christ first and foremost in all things at all times, to know him better and better, becoming more and more like him. And then everything else in your life will fall into place. If you pursue the prize of Christ, something amazing will happen: the past will take on new purpose in your present. Christ will bring healing into your past. The past will begin to shape your character in positive ways as you forgive and learn and grow from it. Then, the future will not be a source fear or concern, because you can rest in Christ's plans, and in him you'll know that your life is headed toward his preferred future for you.

If you pursue the prize of Christ in your present, daily life, your entire life – past, present, and future, falls into place.

Paul described his life this way:

"For I decided that while I was with you I would forget everything except Jesus Christ, the one who was crucified." (1 Corinthians 2:2, nlt)

"I would forget everything except Jesus Christ, the one who was crucified."

That's what Paul meant, and what the key to all this is when Paul says, "to know Christ."

That does not mean to know *about* him – it means to be in a closer and closer relationship *with* him. You can know all about Jesus but never really know him personally. You can read the Bible every day and have large parts of it memorized and still not be changed.

C.S. Lewis, the great Christian writer and thinker, understood that this difference was vital, and wrote about it in an essay titled "Meditation in a Toolshed." In this excerpt he wrote:

"I was standing today in the dark toolshed. The sun was shining outside and through the crack at the top of the door there came a sunbeam. From where I stood that beam of light, with the specks of dust floating in it, was the most striking thing in the place. Everything else was almost pitch black. I was seeing the beam, not seeing things by it.

Then I moved, so that the beam fell on my eyes. Instantly the whole previous picture vanished. I saw no toolshed, and (above all) no beam. Instead I saw, framed in the irregular cranny at the top of the door, green leaves moving on the branches of a tree outside and beyond that, 90 odd million miles away, the sun. Looking *along* the beam, and (being *in*) the beam are very different experiences."

Looking at Christ and being in Christ are very different experiences. Knowing about him and knowing him are two very different things. Press for the prize.

Prayer

Benediction

(May) Christ dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. (Ephesians 3:17-19)