

Focusing Your Life Vision

by Mark Jarvinen

⁸*What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ ⁹and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. ¹⁰I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.*

¹²*Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. ¹³Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, ¹⁴I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. (**Philippians 3:8-14**).*

In the 1938 movie classic, **Kentucky**, the character **Peter Goodwin** (Uncle Pete) played by **Walter Brennan**, who won an Oscar for this role, was a true lover of horses. Uncle Pete is given the opportunity to select a colt from a herd of two-year-olds and chooses a somewhat ordinary looking colt and names him “**Bluegrass.**” No one else saw the potential in this young horse that Uncle Pete saw. “**He will never run in the Kentucky Derby,**” his friends laughingly said. But they were wrong. As the movie plot unfolds, “**Bluegrass**” not only runs in the Kentucky Derby, but wins in a stunning upset! When Uncle Pete was asked why he chose that particular horse, he replied that it was because the colt had “**the look of eagles in his eyes.**”

The look of eagles ... perhaps that's why God chose Saul of Tarsus to become Paul the Apostle, the great missionary to the Gentiles. After all, what is the look of an eagle, but the ability to focus on and pursue a goal. An eagle flies high overhead and from its **“big picture”** vantage point, relentlessly scours the landscape below for the slightest movement of its potential prey. The eagle is not sidetracked by the breathtaking beauty of the view. Its focus is directed. It's eyes are peeled for prey. Suddenly the eagle swoops and strikes. The result is predictable. An unsuspecting creature is whisked away in the eagle's sharp talons, soon to become this hungry predator's next meal.

Like an eagle, the apostle Paul's life was clearly in focus. Formerly a persecutor of the church, Paul became a prisoner for the sake of the gospel, writing his letter to the **Philippians** from a jail cell. Overcoming incredible ministry obstacles and personal hardships, including a **“thorn in the flesh,”** Paul experienced first hand the sufficiency of Christ and relentlessly pursued **“the prize”** for which God had called him heavenward. **What gave Paul his incredible sense of focus? What was it that put “the look of eagles” in his eyes? Verses 13-14** sum up Paul's approach to life. Paul writes, ***“But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.”***

What can we learn from Paul's experience as we seek to focus our life vision?

I. PRIORITIZE THE PRESENT.

A priority, according to **Webster**, is a person or activity that takes precedence over others in the order of importance. In **v. 13**, Paul writes, ***“But one thing I do: Life is filled with things to do, but not all of them are of equal importance. Paul chose to pursue experiential knowledge of Christ and the transformation of character that comes through knowing Him, as his preeminent priority. In v. 8, Paul refers to *“the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord,”* counting all other things as rubbish (skubala - dung) in comparison. In v. 10, Paul says, *“I want to know Christ,”* clearly implying not only the understanding of a creed or a doctrine about Christ, or belonging to an organization that professes Christ, but relating to the actual **PERSON** of Christ, in the Word and through prayer, and following in His footsteps by sharing in His power and even His sufferings. To be sure, Paul was interested in going to heaven. He was in hot pursuit of *“the prize”* for which God had called him *“heavenward.” (v.14).* But his main interest in heaven was not to achieve personal satisfaction or to escape the trouble and pain of this world. Paul’s interest in heaven was in the fact that heaven is where Christ would be. Paul’s priority was Christ - to be like Him in this world and to be with Him in the next. **We must ask ourselves, *“Is Christ my supreme, preeminent priority?”* Are we willing to regard other earthly concerns as lost causes in comparison to this eternal goal?*****

Author, ***Dorothy Haskins***, tells about a noted concert violinist who was asked the secret of her mastery of the violin. The woman answered the question with two words: ***“PLANNED NEGLECT.”*** Then she explained. “There were many things that used to demand

my time. When I went to my room after breakfast, I made my bed, straightened my room, dusted, and did whatever else seemed necessary. When I finished my work, I turned to my violin practice. But I wasn't progressing the way I wanted to. So I reversed things. I began to deliberately neglect everything else until my practice period was complete. And that program of **PLANNED NEGLECT** is the secret of my success." (Dynamic Preaching, King Duncan) ***What would planned neglect look like in each of our lives when it comes to knowing Christ on a deeper level experientially?***
Prioritize the present, but also ...

II. DON'T LIVE IN THE PAST.

In **v. 13** Paul speaks of ***"Forgetting what is behind"*** I'm not sure we ever can or even should truly ***"forget"*** the past. Paul's not suggesting that we live in denial. We must learn from the past. I think Paul is saying, ***"Don't be bound by the past. Let go of any hold the past may have on you."*** Don't be overly impressed with past successes, you're apt to become **complacent**. Conversely, don't be overly discouraged by past failures, you're apt to become **disheartened**.

Paul had an impressive past as a ***"Hebrew of Hebrews."*** He says of himself in **3:4** - ***"If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more:"*** Paul was ***"faultless as to the law,"*** an exemplary Jew. But looking at his Jewish past from his Christian perspective, Paul could have lived in guilt over past wrongs. He had persecuted the bride of Christ, His church. He had condoned the killing of Christians. Either way, because of Jesus we

are set free from having to dwell on the past. There is no past defeat so devastating as to exclude us from going forward in the present; and no success so great as to exempt us from going forward to more victory. We're not to wallow in past defeat or rest on past laurels. We're to forget what lies behind.

III. ENVISION A VICTORIOUS FUTURE.

In **v. 13**, Paul not only forbids us to live in the past, but urges us by his example to ***“strain toward what is ahead.”*** The word for “straining toward,” is (**epekteino**), which means ***“to stretch or reach forward, as a competitor in a race.”*** We've all watched olympic athletes, particularly sprinters, leaning forward, legs churning, arms pumping, finally thrust themselves forward at the finish line. Often, these races are won with that final thrust. Paul is intently eager to grab hold of what God has set before him to do, and thus he is focused on what remains to be accomplished, not on what he's already done. Remember that this highly futuristic confidence is coming from a man who is writing this letter from a prison cell. The past we have no control over, but the future still awaits us. ***Can we imagine our preferred future?*** That's where the vision for our lives really begins.

American artist, **James Whistler**, who was never bashful about his talent, was once advised that a shipment of blank canvasses he had ordered had been lost in the mail. When asked if the canvasses were of any great value, Whistler remarked, ***“Not yet, not yet.”*** How's that for seeing the potential before it existed - for imagining a preferred future?

Some business people are now using the word, **“feedforward”** instead of **“feedback.”** If you’re running a business, feedback is reactions from others about what went wrong in order to correct the problem. The problem with feedback is that by the time you get it, a mistake’s already been made. Why not be proactive instead of reactive? Why not anticipate problems instead of merely reacting to them?

Minnesota is the “state of hockey” and of course some of us are a bit troubled by the fact that the Wild did not reach the post-season this year. That said, there’s a great quote from all-time hockey great, **Wayne Gretsky**, about the importance of being proactive instead of reactive. Gretsky simply said, **“A good hockey player plays where the puck is. A great hockey player plays where the puck is going to be.”**

Paul lived his life in the **feedforward** mode. He strained toward what was ahead. He envisioned His preferred future. He lived on earth with heaven in view. He invested heavily in getting to know Christ in the present, so that his future face-to-face meeting would be even sweeter. Paul pressed on toward the goal of what some translations call **“the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” (v.14).** According to Bible scholar **E.M. Blaiklock**, in using this reference to **“the upward call,”** Paul probably had in mind the chariot races of Rome. The **“upward call”** likely referred to the summons issued to the winner of the race to approach the elevated stand where the judge sat, in order to receive his prize. The world says that we’re products of our heredity and environment. Paul was a product of his

life focus to know Christ more thoroughly. That focus was the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.hocky

CONCLUSION

To conclude, Paul understood that his right standing with God was not something he could earn. His straining ahead and pressing on was not to impress God with his own righteousness. In fact, Paul says in **vv. 8-9**, “... ***that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ - the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.***” Before one can even come to Christ as Savior, one must acknowledge that he can’t save himself. It is not through works of righteousness that we have done, but by God’s mercy that we are saved as we simply trust in Jesus’ shed blood on Calvary. No person can take hold of the righteousness of Christ without first emptying his hands of his own righteousness. As the hymnist writes: “***Nothing in my hand I bring, only to the cross I cling.***” And as **Isaiah 64:6**, teaches, “... ***all our righteous acts are as filthy rags.***”

Upon receiving Christ by faith, a person is seen by God as perfect. Experientially, however, Paul understood that in this life believers are in the process of being made perfect. In **v. 12**, Paul writes, “***Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect,***” Throughout Scripture we find the tension between the “***already and the not yet.***” Luther spoke of the three tenses of salvation: “***I was saved, I am saved, and I will be saved.***” Although it’s wrong to approach the Christian life as though one has “**arrived;**” it is equally misguided to think that because one will never

be perfect in this life, we may as well lay down in the mud and not move forward. Paul was too humble to think he had arrived, spiritually speaking; but too alive to his ultimate goal, to stop running the race. That's the balanced life to which we are called. We live in the freedom and vitality of this balanced life, only when Christ Himself becomes our vision, and our focus becomes centered on knowing Him more fully in gratitude for all He's done for us. Like Paul, we'll possess "***the eye of an eagle***" with our life vision clearly in focus. **A-men.**