

- Looking Ahead -

Well, we have made it to the end of another year! It really wasn't that long ago when 2023 was only in science fiction movies – it was so far in the future we couldn't really ponder what it would be like. Now here we are, only hours away from putting 2023 in our rear-view mirror! All over the world today people are preparing to celebrate the New Year. Many of those celebrations will look the same across the world, but there are some different customs. I came across one very interesting custom in some villages in Scotland. You may have heard about it. Barrels of tar are set on fire and rolled through the streets, signifying the burning of the old year. This certainly gives an attention-grabbing picture of 'out with the old; in with the new.' I assume with the idea of burning the old year, you are not leaving any remnants behind to dwell on; you are focused on looking ahead.

This isn't to say that there aren't aspects of the old year to reflect upon and remember fondly; of course there are. But in looking ahead, we vow to put old regrets and old quarrels to rest. In looking ahead, we are striving to replace old behaviours with new ones. Some things might follow us from the old year and there's not anything we can do about it except deal with them. But perhaps we deal with them in a new way or with a new attitude which can be more effective. Perhaps this will be the year we finally get that monkey off our back. Perhaps this will be the year we finally accomplish that long-time goal. Either way, looking forward is a common exhortation in Scripture. This one is well known:

Proverbs 4:25-27 *"Let your eyes look straight ahead, fix your gaze directly before you. Make level paths for your feet and take only ways that are firm. Do not swerve to the right or the left; keep your foot from evil."*

Here we see a recipe for success in being able to look ahead and move forward. In looking ahead, we are not being distracted by things beside us or behind us. Looking ahead has with it a stated purpose of advancement. We are striving for reaching new plateaus. Therefore, in order to do that we need to not lose our focus. Eyes front and keep it moving! Don't look to the right or to the left, but keep your eyes on the prize. Walk in the way that is solid and sure and that way is with Christ; all other ways are dangerous and treacherous. And don't look back!

When God was about to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, the angel sent to rescue Lot, his wife and their daughters basically told them to keep it moving and don't look back. But Genesis 19:26 says that Lot's wife did look back and when she did, she became a pillar of salt. She didn't look back in curiosity, she looked back in longing and sorrow. When we are born-again by the Spirit of God, we are called to not look back with fondness on our old lifestyle of sin with a desire to go back. That was Lot's wife's problem - she not only looked back, she desired to go back; she didn't want to let go. This incident even rated a mention by Jesus many years later:

Luke 17:28-33 *"It was the same in the days of Lot. People were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building. But the day Lot left Sodom, fire and sulphur rained down from heaven and destroyed them all. "It will be just like this on the day the Son of Man is revealed. On that day no one who is on the roof of his house, with his goods inside, should go down to get them. Likewise, no one in the field should go back for anything. Remember Lot's wife! Whoever tries to keep his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life will preserve it."*

Whoever is willing to let go of living their lives for their own desires and purposes and instead embrace the new way of living for Jesus will preserve it for eternity. Therefore, moving forward involves letting go. Letting go of all the unspiritual ideals and practices in the old life that will easily mess us up in the new life.

Jesus illustrated this principle in Matthew 9:17. He said if you try to put new wine in old wineskins they will burst and both would be ruined. We are new creations with a new Spirit called to walk in newness of life. If we try to mix that newness with our old ways and lifestyle it won't work; it will come to ruin. As a new creation living a new life we're supposed to be going in a new direction. We leave the old behind and look ahead to the new. The simple truth is you can't move forward, if you are looking back. When you try, you always trip and fall. Which is why Jesus said this:

Luke 9:62 *Jesus replied, "No one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God."*

If I look back, I can't be fit for service because how can I do a good job moving forward when I'm focused on what's behind me? If I try to plough a straight furrow while looking backwards, I'm going to mess everything up. Likewise, if I try to live a new life while I'm stuck in the old one, I will not be successful. By the same token, if I try to embrace the challenges and opportunities of a new year whilst looking back at the old one, I will fail again and I won't be fit for God's service because my devotion won't be there. My heart will be with what I left behind and therefore my service won't be sincere. So, if I'm going to be effective at keeping focused on looking ahead and moving forward, I need to leave the former things behind.

The fact is, you can never change the past, but by the grace of God, you can embrace the future. So, remember those things which will help you move forward, but forget those things which will only hold you back. There's a saying that goes, '*old ways will not open new doors.*' We can't keep doing what hasn't been working and think the results will be any different. A new Spirit; new self; new purpose; new attitudes; new behaviours ... will bring new results.

Of course, sometimes looking ahead can be a little frightening. One of the reasons we might have a hard time letting go and accepting change is because of the comfort of what's behind. Perhaps we were in a place where it was predictable; we knew what to expect. But when we make a decision to look ahead and move forward, we don't really know what lies ahead. We all need to have the attitude of Paul when looking ahead seems frightening:

Acts 20:22-24 *"And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me. However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me - the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace."*

Paul looked ahead, not knowing what would happen to him, but he went anyway. He may have known that imprisonments and hardships were in his future but it didn't stop him from pressing on and moving forward. Why? Because he had a God-given mission that superseded any concerns for how his future would play out. I'm sure looking ahead was scary for Paul but he faced it with a dedication to fulfill his task and successfully finish the race. One of the reasons looking ahead can be daunting is because we cannot really predict how it will go. It's the fear of the unknown ... and with the fear of the unknown comes negative anticipation; we often fear the worst. But we don't have to be afraid.

One of the last official acts King George VI performed before his death was to go on the BBC to address the British people. In his address he said, *"I said to the man who stands at the gate of the year, 'give me light that I may tread safely into the unknown" and he replied, "step into the darkness, put your hand into the hand of God, and that will be to you better than a light and safer than a known way."*

So, looking ahead can be scary but it doesn't have to be; especially when you have the Lord to guide you. In that case, it's not scary, it's actually exciting. We learn to embrace every day as a new opportunity to serve God. Each day is filled with endless possibilities. We can look ahead to the new year as a fresh, clean slate; a pristine white canvas just waiting for splashes of colour to be added to it. We can look at 2024 with an eagerness to add each brushstroke and watch how our new portrait will develop.

Hymn-writer Frances Ridley Havergal took New Year's Day very seriously. She used it as a time of reflection and she often composed a poem to send to friends expressing her feelings about the new day and year. This is one she wrote in 1874.

*Another year is dawning, dear Father let it be;
in working or in waiting, another year with Thee
Another year of progress, another year of praise
another year of proving, Thy presence all the days.*

Looking ahead can be scary but it doesn't have to be. With the Lord by our side, it can actually be thrilling. One of the things that can make looking ahead less scary is when you know you're not alone. Yes, we need to look ahead and move forward in our individual walk but we are also called to look ahead and move forward collectively as a church. In fact, one of the motivators for us to keep it moving is to know we are part of a team, family, and we dedicate ourselves to the collective cause.

Every local church has a rich history; every fellowship has a story; there are highlights and tragedies; times of joy and sorrow; we go through changes; some were welcomed, some were unwelcomed, but we have never not been willing to face them. We are far from finished; we may be ending another year, but our journey is far from over! So, we need to press on and embrace the opportunities God gives us. In looking ahead, we need to be committed to take on new challenges and look for new opportunities to reach new heights. We should look ahead with zeal and an eager determination to see what can be accomplished with God by our side.

We need to be like the locust. In the book of Joel, it describes the coming of an army of locusts. Although this was not going to be a good thing for the land and its inhabitants, their tenacity and resilience are something we need to try to emulate.

Joel 2:7-8 *"They charge like warriors; they scale walls like soldiers. They all march in line, not swerving from their course. They do not jostle each other; each marches straight ahead. They plunge through defences without breaking ranks."*

What imagery this conjures up. The picture of unified forces; strength in numbers. These creatures were not going to be denied; they were not going to allow anything to stand in their way. Could this be accomplished by going rogue? No; it can only be accomplished by marching in line, by not swerving from their course. Notice they are working in sync. They're not jostling each other; they're not pushing and shoving, they're not jockeying for position. They are marching straight ahead. They march together so that they can plunge through defences together. They have a singular focus.

Born in 1909, Glenn Cunningham was just 8 years old when he was severely burned in a school fire in which his older brother perished. His legs were so badly burned that doctors recommended amputation. His mother refused to let that happen. The doctors said he would never walk again.

Glenn had a very strong faith from a very young age. He also had learned to look forward and he had a verse which defined his life from that time forward:

Isaiah 40:31 *“But they that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint.”*

That was a promise which Glenn held on to every day. After thousands of hours of painful therapy, he took his first steps two years later. Glenn was determined with God’s help, not just to walk, but to run and run, he did. In 1934, he set the world record for the mile run at 4:06.8. Two years later, Cunningham won a silver medal at the Olympics. His life is a testimony of perseverance in the face of incredible odds. Looking back for Glenn, would only have brought pain, disappointment and even bitterness. He learned how to look forward and move forward and the results were phenomenal.

Perhaps as an encouragement to others, the Apostle Paul declared that he had not yet reached his goal and that he was looking forward when he challenged the Philippian believers and us to press on!

Philippians 3:12-14 *“... I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers and sisters, 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, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.”*

This past year may have been difficult for you. Some people have lost their jobs. Some have lost a loved one. Some have experienced financial strain. Some have faced significant health struggles. There is a lot that can distract us and drag us back, but no successful runner ever looks back. Only Satan wants us to dwell on the past. Those past burdens, sickness, emotions and problems are very real and often painful, but focusing on them will only paralyse us.

So as the new year unfolds tomorrow, I want to challenge you to do as Paul did: Let go of the past; don’t allow anything behind you to hinder your progress forward. Press on toward the goal which God has waiting for you – your eternal destiny in Christ, through Christ and for Christ.

Then, and then only, can you be assured of a Happy New Year! God bless you.