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*Where Preparation and Opportunity Meet*  
Matthew 21:33-46 | Philippians 3:4b-14

...but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 3:13-14)

A West Virginian was making his way to the beautiful Virginia coastline for the first time with a destination of Virginia Beach. Wanting to avoid the rabid traffic of interstate highways, he chose to drive the back roads. Finally after hours and hours of driving, he pulled in to a fast food restaurant and approached the counter. When the voice over the counter asked, "Can I take your order?" he said, "I don't need anything to eat." "I'm heading to the coast and I have no idea where I am."

The clerk said, "Oh, you're not far from it; the Chesapeake Bay is due east."

The man responded, "No, I mean where I am now?"

The clerk said, "You are about half way between Cooks Corner and Christchurch."

Still looking confused, the man lamented, "For half the day, I've gone through Chilhowie, Clinchport, Chincoteague and a host of places I can't even pronounce. I mean where am I *right now* and say it real slow."

The girl behind the counter, seeming a bit confused herself, looked at the man, looked at the sign behind her, took a deep breath, and said slowly, "Burger-king."

Nothing is much more important to the winners of life than staying focused. The environment and culture around us can be distracting. If we aren't careful, we will find ourselves obsessing over problems rather than looking for solutions, bemoaning our difficulties rather than seeing opportunities, and living as victims of circumstances rather than as people in charge of their lives. The end result is that we will miss some of the best opportunities of life. We fail to live life

to its fullest. Jesus, himself, once said, “My purpose is to help you see the world as it really is and to live life to the fullest.” (John 10:10)

One of the secrets of life is to understand that the world is bigger than it seems. Our preoccupation with minutia can cause us to miss the real party of life. The Apostle Paul said, “Here is how I have learned to do it—forget what is behind you; envision the healthy opportunities before you. Then press on toward the goal God is setting before you!” Paul’s wisdom provides a formula for successful, healthy living.

**What kinds of things are we to forget** in order to move forward? We must put behind us our mistakes. We put behind us our failures, so that we can fully engage in new opportunities with a successful spirit. Sure, we are to learn from our past. Evaluation is always important. “What part did I play in this problem?” “What did I do wrong?” “How can I do it differently next time?” These are questions of a responsible person. But, if you get stuck at the “If only...” stage and never move on to the “Next time...” stage, you will miss out on much of life.

The whole idea behind “confessing one’s sins” is to deal honestly with oneself, right the wrong if possible, then move forward with your life. Our prayers of confession are to provide a helpful way of thinking and relating to God, so that we practice being honest with ourselves, which is the pathway to healthiness. Through honest reflection and confession we are able to experience the “newness of life.” The Psalmist understood it: “As far as east is from west (infinity), so far does God remove our sins from us.” (Psalm 103)

We also must forget—put in the past—our experiences of being offended. Living with hurt feelings only causes a person to live with a “chip on his shoulder.” The person who cannot “forgive and forget” is doomed to repeat a bad relational pattern over and over. Those events are over. They are dead. To fail to “bury the dead” in that respect is a sure prescription to live in that graveyard the rest of your life.

A third useful forgetfulness is sometimes your successes, as well. To live in the past of your successes is to restrict your vision of what lies before you. Repeating your successes will eventually stunt your growth and ultimately close the door of opportunity.

I made a motivational mistake with my daughter when she was a teenager. She was co-captain of the cheerleaders her junior year at Plant High in Tampa. Try-outs for her last came. In the anxious days before, I reminded her of how well she had done in her past two years. "Relax and enjoy the process. You've won twice before and will again." I should have followed the wisdom of the Apostle and told her, "Go out there and do your very best. Pretend you've never been selected before and let your hunger to be on this year's team drive you to do your best." Her relaxed demeanor took the edge off her driving ability and she initially missed the cut. Putting that failure behind, Kelly was determined during her freshman year in college with stiffer competition to succeed...and she did.

Using the Greeks culture of track competition for an analogy, he said, "I forget every race I have won and run the race before me as though I have never won before pressing toward the goal." We need to put our failures, our hurts, and our successes behind us in order to experience ongoing fulfillment in life.

Paul then discloses the second phase of his successful approach to life: *I strain forward to what lies ahead*. How does one do that? You live with an attitude that reflects a wiser, broader understanding of life than it appears today. The troubles you are struggling with today will not always be hounding you. So, live a more confident life, looking toward tomorrow.

You are familiar with the oft-quoted phrase: "This, too, shall pass." It comes from folklore associated with the Jewish King Solomon. As the story goes, Solomon searched for a cure against depression. Relying on some of his wise men, he assembled them together. They meditated for a long time before providing this advice: "Make yourself a ring and on the ring have the words inscribed, 'This too shall pass.'"<sup>1</sup> That story may be tied to Persian folklore with a similar tale. The point of the story is that circumstances usually aren't as bad as they seem at the time, and that the world is bigger than our immediate problems. Abraham Lincoln made popular this ring story when he used it in a speech.<sup>2</sup>

Remembering that the worst of times and the best of times are not forever, causes us to be more conscious of the hour in which we live, resolving to

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<sup>1</sup> Wikipedia, "This too shall pass," October 3, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

sometimes survive the moment or year and at other times to hasten a new beginning.

“Straining forward to what lies ahead” motivates us to dream dreams and live out our possibilities. It causes us to be creative and positive about the future, as well as appreciative about the past...and it helps us to trust God regardless of the next turn in the road. That is what faith is all about—to trust beyond our sense of sight and to live beyond our imagination.

The last word in this trio of wisdom is to *press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus*. In other words, live this life God has given you to the very fullest. Don't settle for mediocrity. Don't let the world around you pull you down. Don't conform to the uninspired lifestyles around you. Don't sell yourself short. Don't settle for just any relationship, any career, any future. Live your life with mental and spiritual inspiration, and when such mental and spiritual preparation intersects with opportunity, “abundant living” occurs!

## **Prayer**

### **Philippians 3:4b-14**

4bIf anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more:  
5circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; 6as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

7Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. 8More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ 9and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. 10I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, 11if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

12Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. 13Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, 14I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

### **Matthew 21:33-46**

33"Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. 34When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. 35But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. 36Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. 37Finally he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' 38But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.' 39So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. 40Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?' 41They said to him, 'He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.'

42Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the scriptures: 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes'? 43Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. 44The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls."

45When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. 46They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.