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Scripture: Philippians 3:13-14

Title: *Forget to be Free*

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Remembering is a key concept in the Bible. The Hebrew people were constantly told to remember the mighty acts of Yahweh, particularly the Exodus, when he brought them out of slavery in Egypt.

They were told to remember the Shema: ***“Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.”***

They were told to recite these words daily. Recite them to their children, no matter whether they were home or away, first thing in the morning and last thing before bed. They even went so far as to write the words down, place them in little leather pouches called phylacteries, and tie them to their foreheads and wrists, and nail them to their doorposts and gates.

“Take care,” they were told, “that you do not forget the Lord, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of slavery.” (Deuteronomy 6:12)

But they did. Constantly. Oh, they remembered the Shema. Every Jew can recite the Shema from memory. Probably every Christian, even if they don’t know it’s called the Shema.

They remembered the words, but they didn’t remember the mighty deeds that were behind the words.

Or they remembered the words and the mighty deeds behind the words, but thought that remembering the words and the mighty deeds done for them made them special, forgetting that to Torah said that to love the Lord also meant to love their neighbor. They forgot that part.

Remembering is important.

They held a big feast each year to remember the Passover and the escape from Egypt, and it was at this feast the Jesus presented himself as the Passover lamb and said, *“Do this to remember me.”*

Remembering is important and forgetting is frustrating.

- You see someone you know and can’t remember their name, and it’s embarrassing.
- You walk into a room and can’t remember why you walked into the room.
- You go to the store for something and come home with a bunch of stuff but not the one thing you went to the store for.

So, it might surprise you that Paul says the key to your spiritual growth this new year is forgetting. Look at Philippians 3:13-14, which is one of those verses that I bet a lot of you know by heart. And if not by heart, you’ll remember it when you see it.

“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 upward call of God in Jesus Christ.”

Paul is using the metaphor of running a race, but it’s not a race against others, it’s a race against himself and anything that would keep him from finishing the race. I’ve run a few half-marathons, the first one I ran I had been battling tendinitis in one of my Achilles tendons that prevented me from training the way I wanted to. The pain didn’t even resolve until a week or so from the race, so my goal entering the race was just to finish.

That's what Paul wants. He's battled a lot of stuff, some internal, some external, had a lot of obstacles thrown in his way, and now he is singularly focused on the finish line. He can see it, and all he wants is to run, to run well, and to finish.

And to do that he has to forget. That's the first thing he says, and it's critical, because unless he forgets, there are things in his past that will hinder him. He needs all his energy to strain forward, but these things, if he doesn't forget them, will suck energy and strength he needs to move forward, and there won't be enough left to finish. So he needs to forget.

What does he need to forget?

Forget the Bad Things Done to You

First, he needs to forget all the bad things that have been done to him. Oh, and he's got quite a list. Over in 2 Corinthians 11 he lists a lot of them:

Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked.

2 Corinthians 11:24-27

When you read the book of Acts you see that he wasn't exaggerating. He almost died a couple of times. I think the things that wounded him the most was the betrayal of close associates. He mentions here false brothers and sisters—these are people who are supposed to be helping him, and behind his back—although sometimes to his face—they undermine him, accuse him of being weak, uncouth, unlawful, lacking wisdom, foolish. He'd start a church and think he'd left things in good hands, only to find out later that false teachers had come in and led everyone astray, encountering little resistance from any of them.

And it used to bother him. You read some of his early letters, and the frustration, the hurt—often revealing itself as anger, as deep hurts and betrayals often do—they are in clear view. John Mark was a young believer with a lot of promise, and Paul invested his energies in this young man, taking him under his wing and pouring himself into him. Paul took him on one of his missionary journeys and when things got tough, John Mark got going. He abandoned Paul, and that cut Paul to the quick.

Later on, when they were getting ready to go on another journey, Barnabas wanted to take John Mark with them, and Paul wasn't having it. So deep was the hurt, the sense of personal betrayal, that Paul just couldn't bring himself to trust him again. It led to Paul and Barnabas going their separate ways. Now, God used Paul and his new partner Silas, just as he used Barnabas and John Mark, who went on to serve alongside Peter and eventually wrote the Gospel of Mark.

But who knows what might have happened had Paul been able to get past his hurt? I'm not saying that it's easy, that you just snap your fingers and forgive and forget. Trust isn't easily regained once violated so grievously.

But think of the personal pain Paul had to live with. Think of the lost friendship he had with Barnabas. Think of Barnabas' pain. And think of the shame that John Mark had to live with as he and Barnabas traveled together without their companions, knowing that he was the source of a painful rift between friends and co-workers.

Now, you may say, "Well, doesn't seem like Paul has forgotten the bad done to him if he can still list it like he does in 2 Corinthians. But Paul isn't complaining in 2 Corinthians, he's boasting. Well, boasting to make a point, because he has come to realize that what he had endured and was still enduring was nothing compared to what Christ had endured.

And that led to another realization: that all these hardships and hurts, they were a necessary part of his spiritual growth. It's not just that what doesn't kill you makes you stronger, although there's certainly truth in that little bromide, but

reaching your fullest potential as a child of God can't happen if you are spiritually comfortable all the time. It's hardship that makes us stronger. I mean, it can kill you too, but you don't get stronger avoiding the hard stuff.

Think of the fruit of the spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. These things aren't developed to their fullness without difficulty. You will never love fully if the only people you love are the ones who are easy to love. That's one of the reasons Jesus tells us—commands us—to love our enemies. It's not just so that we'll figure out some other way than war and killing each other to settle differences, but so that love can be fully developed in us.

And so on with all the fruit of the Spirit. The way to learn patience is to hang with those people who try your patience. Better yet, marry them, right?

The way to learn self-control is to put yourself in situations where you are wont to lose control. So have kids and let them grow into teenagers.

In 1 Corinthians 13 Paul wrote, ***"Love keeps no record of wrongs."*** That's the key! As you look back on your past, you can turn horrible situations for good, because your Lord commands you to. You can say: "Whatever that person did, I'm going to love them: I'm not going to keep a record of that wrong. I'm not going to keep going over it. I'm not going to plan revenge.

And I am also not going to give them any power over me. I'm not going to be defined by my hurt. Forgiveness frees you to live the life God designed you for.

As for Paul and John Mark, there's the rest of the story that you may not be aware of. At the end of his life, Paul is in prison, and he writes to his young charge Timothy, giving him some final instructions and setting his affairs in order. In his final words to Timothy, he says,

"The time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race. I have kept the faith."

He tells Timothy,

"Do your best to come to me soon, for Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica; Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia. Only Luke is with me."

And then he adds,

"Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful in my ministry."

Forget the Bad You've Done

Some of you may be saying, "You know, it's not the stuff that was done to me that bothers me; it's the bad that I've done that weighs me down. There's some things that I've done that I'd like to forget, and I just can't seem to."

Now, I'm not talking about sin in a general sense. I mean, we all know we sin, we all know we are sinners, and most of us know we need a savior. And if you don't know that, I just told you.

But most of us also know that we aren't as bad as some of the hellfire and damnation preachers of old try to convince us we are. We aren't worms or maggots, at best we are sheep that have gone astray. If we shouldn't make light of our sin, we shouldn't make too heavy of it either.

I mean, compared to some of the quote/unquote "heroes" of the Bible, our sin is pretty boring, you know? Like King David, a man after God's own heart.

He stole a man's wife from him—while the man was off fighting in David's army! Then when she got knocked up, he tried to fake it so the man would think it was his own baby. When that didn't work, he arranged to have the guy killed in battle.

Any of you done anything like that?

Or since we've been talking about Paul, what about him? He held the cloaks of those who stoned Stephen and other early followers of Jesus, smug in his self-righteousness and the fact that the law and order crowd said it was both lawful and in order for him to do so.

Back then they called it a stoning, but we have another term for it in more recent times—it was a lynching, just without rope.

But that just makes the point all the more—Paul's guilt, the stain of sin he had to deal with, while it might have been more common in his day than in ours, and in some places in the world is still all too common than the places and the ways most of us live in, is not the kind of thing you get over quickly, not without the loss of your humanity.

And since the Damascus Road, as Paul's inhumanity was lessening and his compassion for innocents afflicted unjustly was growing, how great his sin must have seemed to him.

And how difficult to overcome. I imagine the night that Stephen was murdered, Paul slept just fine. But I wonder how many times the face of Stephen woke Paul up soon after his confrontation with Jesus on the road to Damascus. I mean, the realization that it was the Lord himself that Paul was persecuting struck him blind, left him mute, confused, and undoubtedly riddled with self-loathing.

And it was only one thing that saved him—grace, grace, God's grace, grace so amazing that it saved a wretch like him.

And when Paul finally regained his sight and found his voice, grace was all he could talk about, grace, grace, grace, grace in the morning, grace in the evening grace all day long, because it was grace that led him home and gave him a vocation.

The grace of people like Ananias, who listened to the voice of God rather than his own fears and ministered to this persecutor of the church, and who vouched for him to the other believers.

And the grace of Barnabas, who lent the weight of his reputation to convince still other believers who understandably didn't trust Paul, thought it was some kind of a trick, and Barnabas stood before them and testified to the authenticity of Paul's conversion.

And so Paul went around talking about grace.

"For it's by grace that you have been saved, through faith. It is a gift from God."

Paul called himself the chief of sinners, and perhaps he was, but that meant he was the chief lover of the one who showed him grace, for as Jesus said,

...those who have been forgiven much, show great love, but those who have been forgiven little, love little. (Luke 4:47)

Hopefully no one listening to this message has sinned in the manner of David or Paul, but let me ask you this: is there a person in your life, listening to this message and hearing that they needed to forget the bad done to them, might be thinking of something you've done to them? Some unkind word meant to cut to the core? Or perhaps worse, when they needed a helping hand, all they received from you was indifference? Or when they needed a moment of grace, received instead condemnation and dismissal?

Someone who needed your love, your attention, your approval, and instead all they received was apathy? Can you think of anyone? Well—what are you going to do about it?

We're all in need of grace, because we are all broken in one way or another. We are all lost, even the most saved among us, and it is only grace that leads us home.

Forget the Good You Have Done

There's one more thing Paul says you need to forget to grow spiritually, and it may be a little surprising: you need to forget all the good that you have done.

If we back up just a bit in Philippians 3, in the paragraphs just before what we read earlier, Paul lists all the things that make up his spiritual pedigree and set him apart from others, and what he says about them is remarkable:

"...circumcised 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; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

"Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More 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 and 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."

They are rubbish. And by rubbish he's not talking about the trash you collect and take out on garbage day, he's talking about the foul-smelling stuff you and I flush down the toilet but until recently people in cities collected in pots and tossed into a ditch at the side of the road.

Now, in the immediate context, Paul is saying that at one time he placed his spiritual confidence in these things, and they couldn't deliver, they couldn't carry the weight of what was needed, only Paul didn't realize that until he had experienced the grace of Jesus Christ through faith. So he's left all that behind.

But remember, Paul says that he forgets what lies behind in order to *strain* forward to what lies ahead, to *press on* toward the prize of the upward call of God.

These are words of exertion. Still. *Still*, he's straining, pressing.

See, Paul didn't list everything. At this point in his life his resume has filled considerably: planted numerous churches, taken the gospel throughout Asia Minor with plans to go to Spain; got Gentiles accepted into full membership of the church. written 2/3 of the New Testament, healed numerous people, raised a couple from the dead even.

I mean, if ever there was somebody who deserved to take a break, maybe ease up on the throttle a bit, stop *straining* so much, it's Paul.

There's a story that I heard recently about Tom Brady. Back in May of 2020, he was at the Medalist Golf Club in Florida to play a match game in which he and Phil Mickelson were teamed up against Peyton Manning and Tiger Woods. Remember, at this point Brady has won more Super Bowls than anyone, six total, more than Terry Bradshaw, more than Roger Staubach, more than Joe Montana, more than Eli and Peyton Manning combined.

He could stop playing right then and there and would be the consensus greatest quarterback of all time.

A few hours before tee time, NBA Hall-of-Famer Charles Barkley found him in the parking lot running wind sprints in the rain.

“What the (heck) are you doing,” Barkley asked him.

“I’m trying to win a Super Bowl,” Brady answered. Not, “I’m trying to win my 7th Super Bowl.” “I’m trying to win *a* Super Bowl. As if the first six didn’t exist.

And that is one reason why the following February, he won his 7th Super Bowl.

Paul could have eased up, could have concluded that he’d had a good run, but no, there he is, pedal to the metal, going at it full bore, straining, sweating, pushing, pressing, as if he’s done nothing at all.

Understand, Paul is not some twisted soul who seeks achievement in order to prove his worth or to exorcise his demons. He’s not under some compulsion to do this; he’s free to do this, freer than any person you know.

And you can be free too. Free yourself from the memory of what was done to you, of the bad that you have done, and of the good you have done, so you can start out afresh with a clean sheet, a new book, a new page. You mustn't be harnessed to the past. Instead, move forward in strength and courage for the future to glorify your Savior.

But you also must be focused. Half-hearted Christianity is uncomfortable and useless. It's tepid Christianity. It's salt without savor. You're not at home in the world or at peace with God. Paul is not going to have anything of it; he doesn't want tepid Christianity.

And neither do you. Press on toward the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.