

*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 3:12-14 NLT

It's hard to believe that a quarter of the year has passed already! If you spent time considering what your aims and goals were for the year, what's your progress toward them been like so far? The world's certainly in turmoil right now, so it's likely that the new beginnings we planned for aren't all working out as though it were smooth sailing.

As I thought about what it meant to devise new beginnings and deal with the hurts and disappointments of the past, the well-known verse from Paul's letter to the Philippians came to mind. In particular, I grappled with what it might mean to "forget the past". Are we meant to ignore what has happened and just "move on"? This would be hard, but if it would be beneficial then we would need to pray for the strength to do just that. Or is there a more nuanced meaning?

If you read the preceding part of chapter 3, Paul spends some time going over what his life was like before he encountered Jesus. It's clear, then, that he was not unaware or ignorant of his past and what it meant. The question, for him, was one of focus and there's an important lesson there for us as well.

Each of us will have things in our past that threaten to drag us down. They may be mistakes we have made – foolish business ventures, or errors in our work and judgement – or they may be things completely beyond our control – economic conditions in the country, or injustices we have suffered at the hands of others, or personal physical problems. The issue is not whether we have experienced suffering or not, it is how we react to it.

As in the case of Paul, I don't believe we need to ignore what is in our past. After all, refusing to learn from the lessons of our history is usually a good way to repeat the mistakes we may have made in the past. But I do believe that it is equally true to say that the best way to deal with, and overcome, the hurts of the past is to build the future that God has in store for us, the prize for which He has called us. I remember reading the story of a successful athlete who had overcome enormous challenges in his life, and they said of him that his motivation to succeed was defined by his past. In this context, forgetting the past means deciding firmly not to allow it to drag down our future: we put our whole focus onto pressing forward, no matter what has been before.

If there's one thing we should be aware of as Christians, it's that we are always offered new beginnings. We can live this out not only in our spiritual lives but in our workplaces as well. And, whenever we do so, I pray we remember that it's a question of focus: don't ignore the lessons of the past, but don't let that past distract you from your determination to press forward to a future that holds God's prize for you.