

Looking Back and Looking Forwards

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- [0 : 00] Amen. Let's pray. Dear Lord, thank you so much for the opportunity to look at your word together this evening. Probably many of us are tired after a busy week, busy day.
- So just pray that you give us hearts so attentive to your words. I pray you give us minds that will be renewed by you. And I pray, Lord, that you give us hearts that will be refreshed by your spirit as you bring the presence of the risen Christ to bear in our lives.
- In Jesus' name. Amen. So you've managed to get through 2021. Praise God. We're into a new year. I know it's the second week, but it's just the beginning of a new year, isn't it?
- As we enter 2022. And this sermon really is a looking back and a looking forward. So as I begin, let me just take your minds back to last year.
- As you look back at last year, what was the one thing that you were yearning for more than anything else?
- [1 : 08] You look back at 2021. What would be the one thing you would say in your mind you were yearning for more than anything else? Maybe your greatest yearning in 2021 was this.
- I just can't wait for all these restrictions to end. Take these masks off and burn them outside and be able to just get back to normality. Maybe that was your biggest yearning last year.
- Maybe as you look back last year, maybe your biggest yearning was, you know what, I just wish I had better mental health. My mental health has been so difficult the last couple of years. I wish my mental health was a bit better.
- Maybe your greatest longing was to get a new job. Your old job or the job you've got at the moment you really struggle with and you just wish you could get a new job.
- Maybe it was to get married. Maybe it's to get a new car. Maybe it was just a longing to see family or to go on a good old holiday somewhere, maybe somewhere hot.
- [2 : 05] We all have longings, don't we? We all have desires. Some of them are good. Some of them are not so good. But we all have desires, don't we? We all have yearnings. Let me switch the question a little bit to the year ahead. You've looked back at last year.
- What are your yearnings you look at the year ahead? I know it's a new year. Usually we make up New Year's resolutions we keep for a couple of weeks and we bin them, don't we? But what are you yearning for this year?
- Is it different to last year? Is it the same? Let me change the question a little bit, focus to our text. If you were going to ask the Apostle Paul what his greatest yearning or his greatest longing is, what would it be?
- Well, he just told us in the verses we just read, in verses 8 to 10, let me remind you. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord.
- For his sake I've suffered the loss of all things and I count 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 that which comes through faith in Christ.

[3 : 12] The righteousness from God that depends on faith. That I may know him and the power of his resurrection and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death.

Paul's greatest yearning and greatest longing, if he was here today, if he was looking at the year ahead, would be, I want to know Jesus better. That would be his number one longing, his number one yearning.

I want to know Jesus Christ better and better. He says in verse 8, I consider everything, everything as rubbish compared to knowing him.

That's what we just sang. Verse 10, he wants to know Jesus Christ, the power of his resurrection and even share in his sufferings. If you go back in Philippians 2, chapter 1, verse 21, you have that famous verse, don't you?

To live is Christ and to die is gain. Paul was a single-minded guy. He longed to know Jesus. He longed to walk with Jesus.

[4 : 17] He yearned to know Jesus better and better. And that's what we see in verses 12 to 14 as well.

He presses on with that. He strives towards that goal. And so what I want to ask this evening, if you thought about your yearnings, your longings, Paul longed after Jesus year after year after year.

How can we have that same yearning for Jesus? How can we have that same longing? What was the secret to him being so focused on the Lord?

Well, I believe 12 to 14 gives us four quick reasons that will hopefully focus our minds as we think about the year ahead. And these are not Puritan points. They're why it's not a point with three points underneath.

Four quick points this evening. Thinking about how can we continue to yearn after Jesus this year? How can we make him our number one priority? Well, the first thing we see in verse 12 is this.

[5 : 18] Paul knows he hasn't arrived yet. Paul knows he hasn't arrived yet. See that? Not that I've already obtained this or am already perfect. He longs to know Jesus better.

He yearns after him in his death and his resurrection and his sufferings. But he knows he's not perfect in this yet. He knows there's plenty of room for growth in his spiritual life.

And here's the key to the Christian walk and to Paul's passion for Jesus is humility. Humility. The person who thinks they've made it is close to a fool.

The person who thinks they've made it stops growing. So you think about boxing, for example. I don't know if you follow the sport at all, but it's a big thing in Nidri where I am.

But what happens in boxing is that you usually get a young talent, usually late teens, early 20s. And they are hot. They're great. They're very, very talented.

[6 : 19] They've got great abilities. And what happens is they get a couple of fights under their belt. They knock two or three people out. And they suddenly think they are the bee's knees. They suddenly think they're the number one.

And so they get the next fight. And the next fight is against a more experienced fighter. About 10, 20 years older it could be than that boxer. The young boxer thinks, you know what?

I've knocked the first three guys out. This guy will be a piece of cake. He's older than me. He's not as good as me. He's not as talented as me. And so what does he do? He doesn't train as hard. He thinks he's already made it.

And he gets in the ring. The other guy trains much harder than he has. And he gets humbled. He gets knocked out. Pride and arrogance are not a sign of maturity in the Christian life.

They're a sign of immaturity. And if you're going to be like that young boxing star, thinking I've arrived already in the Christian life, you're going to stop growing. You're going to stop pursuing Christ.

[7 : 21] You're going to stop seeing your need of him. Because the people who are closest to the Lord Jesus are the people who see their sin in all of its horror and all of its depth and all of its depravity.

The people who are closest to the light see their darkness and want to stick as close as they can to the Lord Jesus Christ. That's what Paul was known about in the New Testament, isn't it?

He says, I am the chief of sinners. I'm the chief of sinners. What about you this evening? What about you?

Are you humble this evening? Are you yearning after Christ? Or do you think you've made it already? Because what can happen in the Christian life is this. Is that we go on. In the first year, we're excited.

Second year, that excitement continues. Maybe the third year. But after five, ten, twenty years, we can lose that excitement for Jesus, can't we? We can be like the person who is in bed in the morning and it's cold outside.

[8 : 27] It's nice and cozy and warm in bed and the alarm goes off. And what happens when the alarm goes off? It's cold outside and it's warm in bed. You hit the snooze button. Two, three, four, five times and you end up not getting out of bed.

And that's what comes in the Christian life. You can get nice and cozy in your bed. Think it's cold outside. I'm going to stick where I am in my little cocoon. And we don't press forward. We don't press forward in knowing Jesus.

We don't press forward in knowing his death and resurrection. We don't press forward in sharing in his sufferings because we're so comfortable. It's so easy to do in the West, isn't it? But Paul would say, I haven't arrived.

I haven't arrived. I need to keep pushing on. I'm going to keep pursuing Christ. I'm going to make him my number one priority. That's the first thing. And secondly, we see that Paul continues to yearn after Christ because he knows he belongs to Jesus.

Look at the second half of verse 12. Not that I've already attained this or I'm already perfect, but I press on to make it my own. Why? Because Jesus Christ has made me his own. Paul knows he hasn't arrived yet.

[9 : 37] He presses on to know Jesus more and more. Why? Because he knows that he is, without a shadow of a doubt, a child of God. He knows he belongs to Jesus.

He knows that he's been adopted into God's family and he is Christ's forevermore. And these are amazing words when you just take a few minutes to think about them because the language here is actually very intimate.

The language reminds us of the Song of Songs. For those of us who are unfamiliar with the Song of Songs, basically it's a big love poem of two lovers talking about how much they love each other.

It's very intimate. And that's the kind of language that is used here of Paul, of his relationship with Jesus Christ. In Song of Songs it says this, Solomon says to his bride, I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine.

I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine. So just imagine a husband or a wife holding their love, their spouse, and they're saying to them, I love you.

[10 : 42] I will always be there for you. I want nobody else. You're mine. I am yours. That's the kind of language that's used in the New Testament of Christ with his church, of Christ with individual believers.

You are mine. I am yours. Christ is yours and he is mine. Amazing, amazing words.

And that's what Paul knew more than anything else. Paul knew Christ as his friend. Paul knew Christ as his husband. Paul knew Christ as the lover of his soul.

And knowing Jesus' steadfast and intimate and gracious love helps us to keep pursuing him in our lives. Because often, aren't we, in our love of Jesus, we're often cold, aren't we?

We are often lukewarm. We're often flighty. We're often self-absorbed. We're often divided in our affections towards him. But his love for us is always hot.

[11 : 49] His love for us is always focused. His love for us is always loyal. His love for us never, ever changes. And it's as we understand his great love for us that we can grow in love for him.

That's why Paul prays to the Ephesians that they might know the depth and the height and the length and the breadth of the love of God in Christ Jesus. Because it's as we understand how much we are loved that we in turn want to love him.

Again, it's like if there's someone in your life that you struggle with. So think about the person you struggle with the most right now.

Maybe it's someone at work. Maybe it's someone in your family. Maybe it's your neighbours. Maybe it's someone in this church, even in this building tonight. Someone you really struggle with. Someone you really battle with.

They annoy you when you see them. They're very different to you maybe. Usually, because they annoy you, you ignore them.

[12 : 51] Or because they annoy you, you can't give them the time of day. You don't want to give them the time of day. But what happens if that person that annoys you the most begins to show you love?

Let's say they start to be really friendly towards you. Let's say they start to remember your birthday and buy you extravagant gifts. Let's say they start to really get alongside you and love you well.

What happens in your heart as someone loves you? Even though you don't love them. Your heart begins to warm towards them, doesn't it? You begin to soften towards that person.

You begin to even maybe love them. And count them as a friend, neighbour, brother, sister in Christ. That's the same in the relationship with Christ. Often our hearts are cold, aren't they?

But as we remember his heart for us, that we are his and that he loves us, that our hearts are warmed towards him. That our rock-hard hearts are softened.

[13 : 52] That our icy hearts are softened to him. And we want to grow in our love of him. And we want to serve him. And we want to put him as our number one priority.

Jesus, this evening, is a fountain of everlasting love. And knowing that helps us to yearn after him and run after him with all that we have.

There's an old hymn that says, Jesus, love of my soul, let me to your bosom fly. In other words, Jesus, you love me so intimately, I want to run to you each and every day.

Because I know you're trustworthy. I know you're gracious. I know that your steadfast love is better than life. Do you know that this evening? Do you know his love as you enter 2022?

Third reason. He doesn't just know the love that Christ has for him. He keeps yearning after Jesus because he forgets what lies behind. You see this in verse 13.

[14 : 51] Brothers, I do not consider that I've made it my own. But one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind. Forgetting what lies behind. One of the greatest reasons we stop striving in the Christian life is because we're focused on the past.

And that could be past achievements, things we've done for the Lord, faithfulness we've shown to him. Or maybe it could be past sins. Maybe past guilt, past shame, past things that we've done.

It stops us from yearning after him because instead of focusing forward on Jesus, we're looking backwards. And what happens if you start running and your head's turned that way?

You're going to fall over. Or as I did one day, if your head's down and you're texting and you're not looking where you're going, what happens? You bump into someone. I bump into the lamppost and bruise my eye and smash my phone into bits.

When you're looking backwards or you're not looking forwards, it means you're not growing. You're not pushing forward. You're not yearning after Christ.

[15 : 58] And looking back at the past can halt our walk and can halt us growing in Christian maturity. I mean, the Apostle Paul, think of him. At the moment, he's probably in prison.

He's planted dozens of churches. He's led many people to Christ. He suffered for Jesus. He could put his feet up, couldn't he? He could put his feet up and retire and say, do you know what? I've done my best for Jesus.

I'm retiring. That's it. I'm done. That's not what he does. Even at the end of his life, he's still straining forward. He's not looking behind. He's still focusing on the Lord Jesus Christ.

He's still wanting to grow in his knowledge of Christ. He still wants to grow in his love of Christ. He still wants to grow in maturity. He forgets what lies behind.

Again, it's like an athlete striving towards the goal of Christ Jesus, forgetting what lies behind. Apparently, there was a great race in 1954.

[17 : 02] Apparently, the great race at the time was the 100-meter sprint, which it is today. It was the one-mile dash. There were two men fighting for Commonwealth gold. One was called John Landy, and the other guy was called Roger Bannister.

There was nothing to split them in their previous races, but they had two very distinct styles of running. One guy, Landy, liked to dash ahead and set the pace for everyone else, and hopefully they would just die away at the end.

The other guy, Bannister, liked to conserve his energy, go a bit slower, and then in a blistering finish in the last 400, 200, and 100 meters. Anyway, these guys head-to-head, it's all over the newspapers, all in the news.

They are there for the one-mile dash, and it's come to the last lap. And Landy is way ahead. But Bannister is catching up, and he cuts the gap to maybe 200 meters, 150 meters.

They're going into the last 200 meters, 150 meters of the race, and Landy cannot hear Bannister's footsteps because the crowd is so raucous and loud. And so what does he do?

[18 : 10] He looks behind him to see where this guy is, and as soon as he does that, he slows down, and the other guy runs around him and wins the race.

As Christians, we cannot have one eye over our shoulder. We need to have our eyes focused on the prize, pushing forward for the Lord Jesus Christ.

You can't marvel at what you've done. It's done. Thank God for his faithfulness to you. Praise God for what he's done through you. But push on for this year, what he's going to do for you this year. If there's things in your past, shame, guilt, sin, whatever it is in the past, weighing you down, don't feel sorry for yourself, but run to Christ, lay it there, and run forward for the goal of Christ Jesus this year.

We cannot look at the past, cannot look at the mistakes, and wallow in self-pity. That's what Paul did. He had many mistakes. He had many accomplishments, but he didn't look back.

He pushed forward and strained forward. In fact, the language that's used is like at the end of a race, you know, where the athletes lean over to try and strain to win that gold medal.

[19 : 22] That's what Paul was like. He beat his body in submission. He gave everything to honor Christ. He worked out his salvation with fear and trembling, and kept pushing forwards.

What about you? Is that your cry? Can we leave last year with all the good and all the bad and say, I'm going to press forward in 2022 for Jesus? Whatever that may involve.

And finally, I've intimated this in the third point, but we'll finally end with this. Paul pressed forward because he knew the prize to come. Look at verse 14 that was focused on in the reading.

I pressed on towards the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Paul didn't look behind. Instead, he strained forward towards the finishing line and the prize.

And what was the prize? Jesus Christ himself. The goal for Paul was seeing Jesus Christ face to face in heaven. And again, that's what all good racers do, don't they?

[20 : 21] All good athletes look at the prize. That's what gets them up out of bed in the mornings. You know, when they're training for the Olympics and they have to get up at 4am or 5am, and they can't eat any fatty foods and go to takeouts, and they have to eat really healthy things, and they can't see their family sometimes, whatever it is.

They're doing it because they want to win the prize. But we have a much greater prize as Christians, and that is heaven to come. Seeing Jesus face to face, where he will say, well done, good and faithful servant.

That is the prize that we are pressing forward to. That is our vision. Do not focus on the worries. Do not focus on the struggles.

Do not focus on the battles. There are many of them. Instead, focus on Jesus Christ and the prize to come. Because when you get there, you're not going to remember the battles, the struggles, the scars and the pain.

Because you'll be in the presence of your saviour who you served and wanted to serve throughout your life. I know a guy died in the church. He was very faithful here.

[21 : 32] Isn't it amazing that this evening he's praising Jesus face to face? Isn't it amazing that he was faithful to the end, and now his saviour says, well done, good and faithful servant.

Isn't that what you want for your life? That's what I want for mine. I've been faithful to Jesus. And I've focused on heaven to come. I think we forget that sometimes, don't we?

We forget that we are just passing through. This is all going to be burnt up. It will all be gone one day, and Jesus will make everything new. Passing through, we are pilgrims.

And so we need to hold lightly the things of the world. Hold lightly the achievements of this world. Hold lightly the things that we hold so dear. And instead focus on Jesus, remembering one day we will be with him.

And all pain will be gone. There'll be no more cancer. There'll be no more depression. There'll be no more COVID-19. There'll be no more flu. There'll be no more tears. There'll be no more death. As we worship our Savior, Jesus Christ.

[22 : 38] He will be ours. And we will be his forever. Let me end with a story, and I'll pray and hand back to the bands. I'm assuming most of us have heard of Eric Liddell.

Basically, he was an athlete in the 1900s, and he was known as the Flying Scotsman. And he was known as a man who pursued Jesus Christ with all of his being.

In 1924, the Olympic Games, as it's famously been retold many times, he decided not to take part in the 100-meter, I think it was heat, because it landed on a Sunday.

And instead, he took part in a 200-meter race and a 400-meter race, which weren't his strongest events in the Olympics.

He won bronze in the 200 meters, and he actually won gold in the 400 meters. Now, he's a great athlete. He's won gold in the Olympics. What could he do? He could have just kept doing his athletics and then retired, and that would be that.

[23 : 47] But instead, he went on and did two degrees, one in science and one in theology. So this man is a great athlete. He's a very intelligent man.

He could do anything what he wants with his life. He could make lots of money and live in a great mansion, probably somewhere in Scotland, maybe even own a castle, and get on with his life. What does he decide to do? Does he settle for a normal life?

Does he put his feet up and relax? Yes. Now, in 1925, the year after he won those medals, he set sail to be a missionary in China. In 1941, with the growing threat of Japanese invasion, he sent his wife and his kids back to be safe in Canada.

And guess what he did? He stayed behind and fed and served the poor, kept running hard after Christ. In 1943, he got put in a concentration camp, where again, he served those around him.

And in 1945, he died at the age of 43, apparently a brain tumor caused by malnourishment and overwork. All that Lidl had for his grave, for his achievements, Olympic gold medalist, or Commonwealth gold medalist, or whatever it was, two degrees, serving the poor, doing amazing things, simple cross on his grave.

[25 : 05] Not his name, not epitaph underneath, just a simple cross in boot polish. A man who had the world at his feet, decided to run hard for Jesus Christ, all the way to the end, and serve his master.

What about you? What about me? Will we run after Christ this year? Will we run after Christ in our lives? And make him our number one priority?

May we yearn after him more than anything else. Love him, serve him, obey him, until the very end. Amen? Let's pray. Dear Lord, thank you so much that you are a faithful God.

Thank you that through Christ, we are yours, your precious children, loved eternally eternally, through your Son, in the power of the Holy Spirit. Forgive us, we pray, for the ways that we have maybe yearned after other things apart from Christ, that haven't been helpful.

Forgive us for the times where we were looking behind and not ahead. Forgive us for the times where we focus on this world and serve the kingdom to come. Help us this year to yearn after Jesus, to make him our number one priority, to serve him and to share the good news of the gospel with everyone we meet.

[26 : 41] Help us, we pray. In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen.