Philippians - Commentaries by Ebenezer John Thomas

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Philippians 3:13, 14

“One thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.”

We lose the fine sense and force of this by applying it to our failures. But in that noble passage, the third chapter of Philippians, Paul was not recounting failures. Far from that! He states how he had renounced everything that belonged to him in the flesh: “what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ.” This was one of the things behind him: it was at the beginning of his course. But had he failed about this? And was it failure that he referred to, when he spoke of “forgetting those things that are behind”? Had he lapsed from the high standard with which he started? No! It was still his mind. Not only had he counted all things loss for Christ, in the fervor of first love; he still did so. “Yea, and I count (present tense) all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord.” Was his mind a bit less strong now? Nay; it was stronger. Had he sobered by time? No, he was more enthusiastic; for while in the past he had counted all things but loss for Christ, now he counts them but filth (dung, ver. 8). This is not failure; it is success. His soul has grown in the strength of its sentiments, and he cannot find figures too strong or words too forcible to convey his sense of the superiority of Christ, and the inferiority of all things else. The simple fact is that they are beyond comparison. This was the vantage-ground from which the apostle spoke of “forgetting”; he would forget the past and go forth to fresh achievements.

Now, however uncommon it may be, this is normal Christian experience. Christian experience is not a perpetual series of restorations after failures. It is rather making good one step, and not resting there, but pressing on towards the goal. It is here that the forgetting things that are behind finds its place. But how often it is said, after some sad breakdown, “Let us forget those things which are behind, and reach forth unto those things which are before,” etc. Is it not a debasement of this passage to apply it to our miserable failures? Indeed it is doubtful whether we ought to lightly forget our failures. On the contrary, are they not often a wholesome recollection that helps us to humility? While the forgiveness on confession of our sins is full, we sometimes miss the moral lesson that they should teach us. Was it not so with Peter and his triple denial of the Lord? On the sea-shore after the resurrection, the Lord thrice asks Peter if he loved Him. He doubtless saw that though Peter was now ready to thrice avow his love, and indeed was grieved at his love being questioned, yet that he needed to be reminded that he had three times denied the Lord. Jesus took this delicate and gentle method to remind Peter of his fall, without even mentioning it, How like that is to the truth and faithfulness, as well as the grace of the. Lord! Was He not doing thus, what He had done before—washing a disciple’s feet? We may take our failures too lightly, and if we do, the Lord may have to remind us of them, as He did Peter. But when He does so, it is for our good, for our blessing, and for promotion in His honorable service. Thus it is in this episode, so trying to Peter’s soul, that Jesus confers upon him the high commission to feed His lambs, to shepherd His sheep, and grants that even his old age should be crowned by martyrdom for His name’s sake (John 21:15-19; 2 Peter 1:14).

Failures then were not what Paul referred to as things to be forgotten. The Christian may have a true, not an exaggerated, sense of some service done for the Master; THAT is the thing to forget. Forget the things behind; they are set down in the Master’s record, safe in His memory; forget them yourself, and go forth to fresh exploits, pressing towards the mark for the prize of the calling on high of God in Christ Jesus. Some Christians are quite non-progressive, resting comfortably on the past; they recount their conversion and things done in years gone by. They are living on the past, instead of forgetting it and pressing forward. This is the true intention of Phil. 3. It may be wholesome to remember failure, though not so as to discourage ourselves; but it is wholesome to forget any service we may have done, and, filled with thoughts of the future, press forward towards the mark for the prize.

Now what are we to remember? It is comparatively easy to think of what the Lord has done for us, of the blessings which He has made ours. But there is one thing which we are too apt to forget; that is, what it cost Him to gain all this for us. Now that we may be continually reminded of this, the Lord instituted His Supper; the bread symbolizing the body, the wine the separated blood. This is the first and principal in the list of what the Christian is to remember. Sweet and precious privilege to surround the Lord’s Table, and eat bread and drink wine in remembrance of Him. This remembrance stands on a pedestal by itself; it is sui generis.

But there are some other weighty remembrances enjoined upon us, and which seem to have a special application to our day and generation. “REMEMBER YOUR LEADERS, who have spoken to you the word of God; and considering the issue of their conduct, imitate their faith” (Heb. 13:7, New Transl.).

The renascence of divine truth given to the church in recent years is a great and remarkable fact. Luther’s work, and that of Mr. Darby, seem analogous, as revivals granted by God to His children; but in the latter case Christians were privileged to learn what Christians had not known since the days of the apostles. Neither the primitive fathers nor the Christians of the Reformation had the truth as we have it to-day. But Mr. Darby, Mr. Kelly, and all the bright band of laborers who were divine instruments in the great work, are now gone. Are they to be forgotten? The word of God tells us to remember them. Not, however, in that spirit of idolatry which is ever a tendency of the natural heart; not by sounding their praises and “building the tombs of the prophets.” They are to be remembered and honored by attention to what they taught us from the word of God. The One Body of Christ, as the ground of gathering, was amongst the cardinal truths recovered. The leaders, however, are scarcely in their graves before prominent men arise and say that we can no longer hold to that, and weakly propose to surrender it. That we are gathered on the ground of the unity of the church was one of the great positions which in their day the leaders battled for. Are we still to hold that truth, or to dissolve into voluntary companies of Christians, associated according to their own will, under terms and conditions of their own devising?

In the epistles to the seven churches, there are two eminent calls to “remember.” To Ephesus the solemn exhortation is, “Remember whence thou art fallen” (Rev. 2:5); that is, the church is rallied to consider what had been her primary status and position. Say not, “This is the message to a past church”; nay, “He that hath an ear” is to “hear what the Spirit says” to all the churches. In the recovery of truth in recent times, the nature of the church was a prominent clement, and the coming out of Brethren from the denominations was not a claim that Christians were entitled to meet in little companies with liberty of ministry and according to their own will or fancy, but it was a claim to be gathered together by the Spirit unto the name of the Lord Jesus, and on the ground of the One Body of Christ. The church! Is there anything so dear to the heart of Christ as His own body, the church? Are we to give up the ground of the church, or to hold it fast?

The second “remember” is addressed to Sardis. Here there had been a great deliverance. The evils of Thyatira were no longer in her midst. But Sardis had gone to sleep, she had a name to live, but was dead. And when there has been conflict, and Christians have got out into the light of truth, there is danger of their thinking that they may now take a rest, and go to sleep. They have the form of truth, and think that that is enough. This is the danger when the Spirit works a revival or recovery in the church. But then comes the call to “remember” —remember what? “How thou hast received and heard, and” —give up?—no, “hold fast, and repent.” And how, let us ask, have WE received and heard? Think of the abundance of truth that has been given to us; the wealth of scriptural instruction which we have received; the warm-hearted response which the truth met with when first brought out or recovered. Let US REMEMBER ALL THIS, and “hold fast” (Rev. 2:3). “I come quickly; hold that fast which thou hast” (Rev. 3:11). There are “old prophets” who would seduce us to give up, and to seek an easier path. THE LORD EXHORTS US TO “HOLD FAST.”

Bringing now together the scriptures which we have been looking at, the course of the church in Rev. 2 and 3 appears as the very antithesis of that bright and upward path to which Paul exhorts in Phil. 3. In a word, Paul as a leader has not been remembered, either in the individual course he mapped out for us in Philippians, or in the church-truth of Ephesians.

May the Lord grant us to remember our leaders, who have spoken to us the word of God; to remember the bright position from which the church has fallen; and above all, bearing in mind God’s grace in reviving a remnant in the midst of the failure, to REMEMBER HOW WE HAVE RECEIVED AND HEARD, and HOLD FAST AND REPENT.

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