Baggage:
The Best is Yet To Come
Phil. 3:13-14
Englewood Baptist Church
Sunday night, April 10, 2011

Last Sunday night, we looked at the life of Naomi, as recorded in the Old Testament book of Ruth. Naomi was a woman who was acquainted with grief. Years ago, they moved away from their home and laid down roots in the land of Moab. In that time, her husband died. Her two sons married Moabite women, and then they both died. Bitter circumstances had marked her life and she carried deep emotional scars.

So much so, that this woman, whose name means “pleasant” was returning to her home land with a new name, Mara, which means “bitter.” Like so many people she struggled to get past her past and to look ahead to the future.

Tonight, I want to take a New Testament passage that helps us think again on this issue of baggage. How do we learn from the past, look ahead to the future, but live powerfully in the present? That’s what this passage is about.

In Philippians 3, the Apostle Paul is giving words of wisdom to the church that dwelled there. The idea is this: the best days are yet to come for Christians. The best days are yet to come.

We don’t always believe that, do we? I know people who still live in the “glory days.” How sad that is! I had a high school teacher once, who was trying to encourage me as I was in the process of making a decision of where I would go to college. She meant well when she said this: “Oh, young man. Your college years are the best years of your life.” I liked the way that sounded, but it bothered me a little bit. I wanted to say, “So the rest of your life has been a disappointment? Your wedding was just OK? The birth of your children…average?” I felt sorry for her because she truly believed that the glory days had already come and gone. What an awful way to live.

Some people just daydream about the past and they don’t see the beauty of today’s sunrise and rainbows.

On the other side of that, some people still live in the sorrow of yesterday—not the glory of yesterday, but the sorry. Grief is like a cloud that overshadows everything. I’m certainly not suggesting that it’s wrong to grieve or that there is a certain amount of time that is right to live in a pit of sadness. I am also not saying that grief works the same for each person, but 1 Samuel 12 says that David prayed, mourned and grieved over tragedy of this child’s death, but then he got up, he washed, he put on good smelling lotions, he changed his clothes, and he worshipped the Lord. He realized that, as difficult as it was, he could not make his home in the pit of despair. He had to move forward. He had to trust the Lord that better days were yet to come.
Now, look with me, at what the Apostle Paul says about you, your past baggage, and your future glory.

Read Phil. 3:13-14.

Do you have any goals for the future? Financial or family or personal? Sure you do. We all have goals, even if we never write them down on paper. We have places we hope to one day be in life. That’s called dreams, and the minute you stop dreaming, you start dying.

Paul had a dream of what God would do in the days ahead. And he tells us three ways to press on toward God’s dream for our lives.

Pressing On Toward God’s Dream

1. Properly forget the past.

Paul says that he remembers no longer the things in the rear view mirror. Well, this can’t be taken literally, of course. Paul didn’t want us to forget everything. History is important! Paul remembered his knowledge of Scripture, he remembered his conversion experience, he remembered the call that God had placed on his life. He did not forget God’s grace and what Christ had done for him and in him and through him. There were lots of things on the forefront of his mind that involved his history.

So what does he mean when he says that he is forgetting the past? He means that he will not let the past overshadow the present. He will not let “where he has been” dictate “where he will one day be.” He’s keeping his eyes on the road and he would not be distracted.

All of us who drive cars can understand this illustration. Which of us, has not been distracted by a child in the back seat, or a police car in our rear view mirror? Suddenly, we don’t see that the brake lights of the SUV before us. When we focus on what is behind, we get distracted from what is ahead. And I don’t have to tell you, what is right in front of you is far more important than what’s 100 yards behind you. That’s true in driving, and it’s true in life! The secret to our happiness is learning to look ahead at what God is going to do next.

And let me just say a word to those of us in the room who are getting “older,” whose skin is starting to wrinkle—those of you who now qualify for good parking and 10% discounts. You know who you are! Let me say something to you. We live in a culture that fights the process of aging at all costs. It is considered a disgrace in our country when a woman loses her shape or a man loses his ability to play full court basketball. We don’t want to admit that we are getting older, but I want you to know how refreshing it is when an older person says, “I love my life. I love this season of life. It’s good and it’s blessed. And I wouldn’t go back. I lived high school once and now, I’m living this
season with joy.” That kind of person who lives in contentment—that person is a breath of fresh air, an inspiration.

We should not spend our moments wishing we could hop in a time machine. We should thank God for days we have right now, and the days we have coming in heaven. This is the day that the Lord has made, I WILL rejoice and be glad in it.

You remember, in the Old Testament, when God led the people of Israel out of Egypt toward the Promised Land, he provided everything that they needed for their journey. They had shade by day and light by night. They had water to drink and manna to eat. The time came, however, when the people took their eyes off the future and the land that God was giving them and they focused on their old life in Egypt. They said,

“We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost—also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic. But now we have lost our appetite; we never see anything but this manna!” (Num. 11:5–6).

The people of Israel began to look back and failed to trust God for their present and future blessings.

Should we be thankful for previous blessings? Absolutely! An attitude of gratitude is essential, but if your Christian testimony is entirely taken up with what God did for you thirty or forty years ago, or if you are constantly talking about the good old days when God’s blessing on your life seemed great, then you are living in the past.

You are living a leeks-and-garlic type of Christianity, and Paul warns against it. There can be no progress without this proper forgetting.

What is there in your life, that God says, “You gotta let that go!” What are those things that are holding you back from the life that he NOW wants you to lead?

The second thing Paul claims to have done…

2. Reach forward.

Look again at v.13…

Someone once asked a famous missionary, David Livingstone, when he came off the field in Africa, “Well, Dr. Livingstone, where are you ready to go now?” Livingstone answered, “I am ready to go anywhere, provided it be forward.”

That is what Paul would have said. Paul’s sense of the Lord’s leading was always linked to his awareness of open doors. Paul expected the Lord to open doors, and when he did, Paul went through them instantly. Paul was constantly striving toward those things that were ahead.
Now, many people misunderstand this verse. When Paul says that “I’m striving toward what is ahead, he has called me heavenward,” many people take that to mean a far off distant point in the future. So, to live life successfully today, I should just sit around and think about heaven all day long. I should look at this world with total disgust, reject everything I see, and focus all my energy on the rewards that will come with the new heaven and the new earth.

This is NOT what Paul means. Far too many people get wrapped up in endtimes discussions that paralyze them for the present. The only reason Jesus gave us information about the end was because it would motivate us for the NOW! Don’t live your life way back in the past, and don’t live your life 50 years in the future, press on in the present.

Now, there are two textual clues that help us understand this idea. First, verse 14 speaks of the “heavenward” calling of God in Christ Jesus. This throws the emphasis of the verse upon the ascent, the climb, the journey. We are on are way, but we are not there yet! We’ve got to keep striving with all our might. This word “heavenward” helps us understand this better.

Second, Paul mentions God’s “call” in v. 14. He has “called me” heavenward. In the New Testament when this word is used of a Christian, it almost always refers to God’s calling to be conformed day by day to the image of Jesus Christ. That, too, is a reference to the present.

What Paul is saying is: Run this race! Today is a new day, with new lessons to be learned, new victories to be won, new memories to create for the treasure box. And at the end of every day, lay your head down on your pillow and pray, “Lord, I have done my best with this day, and I thank you for the blessings it held. Give me rest now, and let me put these experiences behind me, that I might serve you better tomorrow!

Do you know what I hate about preaching? I’m only as good as my last sermon! Sometimes a person will pay me a kind compliment about Sunday’s sermon, and they say it on Thursday. I can hardly remember what I preached on four days ago, but thank you! This Sunday is what I got going right here! That’s what I hate about preaching. Let me tell you what I love about preaching, “Every Sunday is a chance to redeem myself!” If last Sunday’s sermon fell flat, and sometimes they do, I strive to work harder in study for the next one. The past is over. Let’s move on.

And that’s true for all of us. God’s mercies are new every morning and there are new things to run after. He is leading you on an upward journey. You are going heavenward if you follow Jesus day by day.

Look back at v.12…What does this say? I’m not there yet, but I’m on my way!!!

There is a third point to Paul’s statement in these verses. You catch it in v.15…
3. Concentrate.

All of us should think this way…

Paul says, “Train your mind to be mature.” This new mind involves perseverance, discipline, and concentration. Do you concentrate on the Christian life, or is your mind free to run and roam? Do you fix your mind on the things God has for you, or do you let your mind run just anywhere it pleases? You need to control what you think about.

How do you do that? One of the ways we do this is by maintaining a devotional life. Letting Jesus speak into your daily situations.

This year, my wife has been reading this devotional called Jesus Calling. And she turned me on to this tool and I gotta tell you that this book is amazing. Sarah Young, a missionary, wrote this devotional and she wrote in 1st person, like Jesus is speaking these very words to you. In the last few weeks, this has helped me so much.

I want to read to you April 1st, which was actually the 4th anniversary of my becoming the pastor at EBC. On that particular day, my mind was undisciplined and I was having a tough day. I wasn’t enjoying God like I should and I was letting circumstances rob me of my joy. And Lynley and I read this together one night, after the kids had gone to bed, and this is what it said:

*I am calling you to a life of constant communion with Me. Basic training includes learning to live above your circumstances, even while interacting on that cluttered plane of life. You yearn for a simplified lifestyle, so that your communication with Me can be uninterrupted. But I challenge you to relinquish the fantasy of an uncluttered world. Accept each day just as it comes, and find Me in the midst of it all.*

*Talk with Me about every aspect of your day, including your feelings. Remember that your ultimate goal is not to control or fix everything around you; it is to keep communing with Me. A successful day is one in which you have stayed in touch with Me, even if many things remain undone at the end of the day. Do not let your to-do list (written or mental) become an idol directing your life. Instead, ask My Spirit to guide you moment by moment. He will keep you close to Me.*

--Sarah Young, in Jesus Calling, April 1 entry

Let me just speak personally and tell you why that spoke to me so powerfully that day.

I want to say two things:

- **I often yearn for a simplified lifestyle.** Don’t we all? Those Southwest airlines commercials, “Wanna get away?” My spirit always says, “Yes!”
Sometimes, I can slip into this mindset of escapism. Life is hard and I just want to drop everything and go lay on the beach for two weeks. Sometimes it’s good to do that, but God didn’t put me on the earth to get a good tan. I’m hear to bear fruit for Him, not to pamper myself or pout about my assignment. I love what she says, “But I challenge you to relinquish the fantasy of an uncluttered world. Accept each day, just as it comes, and find Me in the midst of it all.” That takes discipline. That’s an unusual way to think, to find God in the chaos of the present. But isn’t that what Paul is saying in Phil. 3, “All of us who are mature should think this way.” Concentrate on the task at hand. Don’t sit around and whine about the fact that life is busy and unpredictable.

- **I often feel successful only when I’ve got all my work done.** And guess what, if your job is like mine, then the work is never done and you never feel satisfied. But Jesus calls us to think differently about life. “A successful day is one in which you have stayed in touch with Me, even if many things remain undone at the end of the day. Do not let your to-do list (written or mental) become an idol directing your life.” Those aren’t words straight from Scripture, but they are certainly consistent with Christ who said, “Abide in me and I will abide in you.”


I’ve got to discipline my mind to make the most of this moment, because life is the sum total of all these moments.

I’d like to end tonight with a past, present, future prayer time:

- What events in my past are overpowering the present? What baggage do I need to let go?
- What is God doing in my present that I need to press on with? (children, marriage, work, a ministry?)
- What do I want to see God do in my future? What dreams am I asking for?