

# The Duty of Forgetting

by J.R. Miller

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*J.R. Miller's sermon emphasizes the importance of forgetting past achievements, sorrows, and mistakes to focus on the hopeful future promised in Christ.*

**Scripture:** Philippians 3:13

**Topics:** "Hope", "Spiritual Growth"

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## Description

J.R. Miller emphasizes the importance of forgetting the past and focusing on the future, drawing inspiration from Paul's declaration of pressing toward the mark despite his old age and imprisonment. He contrasts the natural tendency of the young to look forward with the inclination of the old to dwell on memories, yet highlights how Paul exemplified hope and aspiration even in his twilight years. Miller encourages believers to let go of past achievements, sorrows, and mistakes, urging them to embrace a life of continual growth and spiritual hunger. He asserts that true life is forward-looking, filled with the promise of eternal blessings and the call to duty, which ultimately leads to a deeper relationship with Christ. The sermon concludes with the reminder that a life anchored in Christ allows us to forget the burdens of the past and press on toward the glorious future awaiting us.

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## Transcript

It is a great thing to learn to live in the future. Paul put the lesson in very plain words when he said, "Forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are ahead, I press toward the mark!" To get the full force of these words, it must be remembered that they were written when Paul was an old man. It is no unusual thing for the young to look forward. The world is all ahead of them. They have only stepped on the edge of life, and there lies ahead of them--an unopened, untraversed future, full of bright, beautiful visions and brilliant hopes. It draws them forward by its thousand golden possibilities of attainment, achievement, success. It is full of sweet-voiced birds of promise. Youth has no past, nothing to leave behind; all its treasures are on ahead. It is natural, therefore, for the young to look on, and press forward.

But ordinarily it is not so with the old. As the years advance, they look back more and more. The future has less and less to draw them on. The past is their treasure-house; it holds the best things of their life, their best work, their sweetest joys, their tenderest friendships. They have little more to win. In the short path before them, there are but few flowers which they can hope to pluck. There is but little room for new achievement. They can make no new friendships. It is natural for the old to look backward--to live in

memory, not in hope.

But here we see an old man--who lives wholly in the future! He was a prisoner. He was broken by much suffering and hardship. It certainly was not a bright earthly outlook--that he had from his dungeon grating. Would you not say, looking at him, that the best, the brightest, the grandest part of his career--was behind him? What could there be in the future for that weary, broken old man? What new lands could he hope to explore? What new achievements could he expect yet to make?

Yet here he stands, amid his life's evening shadows, and declares that his sublimest work lies yet ahead of him, that he has not yet attained his life's goal, that his best has not yet been reached. "I care nothing for anything in my past," he says; "it does not satisfy me. It is not worth counting. Old and broken though I am, hemmed in, too, by these oppressive limitations, these walls, these chains--yet I am not at the end of my life! An unquenchable hope lives in my heart, and the star of my life shines far onward."

So we see him there, in the thickening shadows of life's evening-time, in the mists of gathering twilight--weary, worn, wearing chains--but still full of hope, still straining every energy, still reaching forward; still forgetting the past, still drawn irresistibly on toward some great aim, some glorious goal which lies beyond, unseen by mortal eyes. At length, night falls upon the vanishing form; it passes out of our sight; we see the old man going at last to a martyr's death. But his eyes are yet fixed on something bright and glorious beyond! In the last words we catch from his lips, he speaks of a crown laid up for him. The last glimpse of him we have, with white locks tossed by the wind, with eyes fixed steadily and intently upon the Beyond, he is still pressing on!

The secret was this: he had in his eyes a distinct and definite future; a future not bounded by death's horizon--but running on into eternity! Immortality was real to him. No runner in a race ever saw goal or garland more vividly--than this glorious, eagle-eyed man saw the end of his course, the goal of his life! Nor was it any earthly vision that drew him on; had it been, hope would have been dead in his heart in the broken years of his old age. He saw life sweeping on through death and beyond it--and so he looked forward to the future, when he would reach his loftiest attainments. Nothing good, beautiful, true, or real--would end for him at the grave.

What were the things which were ahead, for that old apostle there in his prison? Nothing very bright, the man of the world would say. A few days of chains and dungeon-life, then the axe, and then a grave!

But ahead of the aged Christian man--there are far more blessed things--than the best he has left behind him.

What are some of the things that are ahead of us? The sinless purity into which our souls shall rise, when they burst away from this which we call life; the endless growth and development of all our powers in the summer of God's love; the wondrous career of sublime occupation which shall be ours when we reach our full redemption; the perfect beauty of the divine likeness which shall glow on our dull faces in the home of infinite peace; the eternal blessedness of that rest which we shall enter. The best of life is yet to be!

It is well worth our while, to study the way in which Paul sought to reach the better things which he saw ahead of him: it was by forgetting the things that were behind him. He was never satisfied with anything here on earth, as his final attainment. He found on earth no resting-place; his home ever lay onward and upward. He lingered in no place--but ever sought a heavenly country. He cared little what today's circumstances were--how hard, how bare, how painful--for tomorrow he would be gone! The blessed hope

which filled his soul, made him utterly indifferent to the discomforts of the present moment. He forgot the things which were behind him, and reached forth to the things which were ahead of him.

Of course, there is a proper use to be made of our past. We should remember the lessons we have learned from past experience, so as to profit by our mistakes, and avoid repeating them. The true science of living--is not to make no mistakes, which is impossible--but not to repeat the same mistakes a second time.

We should also remember past mercies and blessings. If we do, memory will shine down upon us like a clear sky full of stars.

Such remembering of the past, will keep the gratitude ever fresh in our hearts, and the incense of praise ever burning on the altar. Such a house of memory becomes a refuge to which we may flee in trouble. When sorrows gather thickly, when trials come on like the waves of the sea, when the sun goes down and every star is quenched, and there seems nothing left to us in all the present--then the memory of a past full of godly living, a past in which God never once failed us, becomes a holy refuge for us, a refuge gemmed and lighted by the lamps of other and brighter days. Thus there are uses of the past which bring blessing. Memory has its holy office.

But there is a sense in which we should altogether forget our past. We should forget our past attainments. If any man who ever lived might have been satisfied with his life--Paul might have been with his. No other man ever got nearer to Christ, than he did. No other ever more completely put the world under his feet. No other ever realized more of Christlikeness in character. No other ever did a greater work--or left a more blessed, fragrant influence. Yet there was no elation, no feeling even of satisfaction with himself. His attainments all bore to his own eye--marks of incompleteness. He never looked back to find comfort in good things he had done--but always nourished a sublime discontent with himself--and ever looked to what he was going to attain. His attainments in the past, were ever dwarfed and impoverished to his eye--by the splendors of the unattained future. It was this divine unrest which made Paul a growing Christian, to the day of his death.

Nothing is so fatal to all Christian progress--as the feeling of satisfaction with one's attainments. When a man sits down and says, "I am contented now; I have reached my goal. I am as good as I expect to be in this world. I never aspire to anything better than this work I have just finished," from that moment--he ceases to grow! He will strive no more, and make no new achievement.

This is true in all life. The lack of appetite, is a mark of physical disease; and hunger is a token of health. The cessation of the desire to learn--is a sign that intellectual growth has ended. So in spiritual life--hunger is a mark of health. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness." Blessed are the unsatisfied. Blessed are they who long for more and more. All through the Bible we find in true believers--a thirst for God, a deep, passionate yearning for closer, fuller, richer, more satisfying communion with God Himself. The best thing in us, never is what we are, what we have already reached--but our longing for that which is yet higher and better! The trouble with too many of us--is that we are too well satisfied with ourselves. We have attained a little measure of peace, of holiness, of faith, of joy, of knowledge of Christ--and we are not hungering for the larger possible attainments.

Nothing could be sadder, than this state no more longing, no more growth, no more hunger, no more feeding upon Christ, no more aspiration, no more reaching upward. With all the infinite possibilities of spiritual life ahead of us, we should not settle down on a patch of dusty ground at the mountain's foot, in

any restful content. Where is the immortal in us--if we can be satisfied with the little we have learned of Christ, the little we have attained of likeness to Him and communion with Him? We should pray for spiritual discontent.

We should also forget past sorrows. Too many people live perpetually in the shadows of their past griefs and losses. They feel that love for the friends who are gone, requires them to continue in sadness, and therefore they dwell year after year amid the memories of their griefs. Nothing could be more unwholesome. What would be thought of the man who should build a house for himself with black stones, paint all the walls black, hang black curtains over the dark windows, put black carpet on every floor, put only sad pictures on the walls and gloomy books on the shelves, and who would have no flowers blooming about his doors or windows--but flowers for funeral wreaths, no trees but weeping-willows? Yet there are people who really live in this way. They make a home like this for their soul. They forget all the pleasant things--the joys, the mercies, the blessings--and remember only the sad, painful things. They keep the heart-wounds of years unhealed, continually tearing them open again. They cherish and nourish all their griefs!

That is not the Christian way to deal with sorrow. If we believe that our godly dead are in immortal blessedness with God, why do we so linger at the dark grave? They are not there, these departed ones; then why not turn our gaze toward heaven, where they wait for us? We should remember the things which are ahead, and forget the things which are behind.

Do you grieve? God will never blame you for your grief--but He would have you pour it into the channels of beautiful, holy living. Let it make your heart more sympathetic, your voice gentler, your hand softer--and let it send you out to be a comforter of others, and never to cast the shadows of your grief on life's sunny paths.

An officer leading a charge in battle came to the dead body of his own boy, who had fallen in the front-line. His impulse was to stop, to halt his men, to neglect his duty in the battle, and to weep over his beloved son. But it was the very crisis of the battle. He was leading his men at one of the most important points in the field. He dare not pause for tears. He flung himself from his horse, knelt an instant beside the body of his boy, pressed a hot kiss upon the white lips, then rose quickly and led his men in the assault!

We must have our sorrows, and sometimes they are very sore. Our heart's first impulse, in such experience, is to give up our work, to lose our place in the moving column of life's march, and to linger un comforted by our griefs. But we dare not do this. Duty always presses, bidding us forward. Others suffer--if we linger. The living children need the mother's love and care, and she must not stay a minute in neglect of them--to weep beside her dead. The death of a father calls the mother from tears, and ordains her to double duty and responsibility. Bereavement is always a call to new and sacred service.

Then, God has so ordered, too, that in pressing on in duty--we shall find the sweetest, richest comfort for ourselves. Sitting down to brood over our sorrows--the darkness only deepens about us, and our little strength changes to weakness. But if we turn away from the gloom, and take up the tasks and duties to which God calls us--the light will come again, and we shall grow strong.

We should forget also past mistakes and sins. Few problems in life are more important than the question of how to deal with our sins. It is a wonderful truth, that in grace we can leave our sins behind us--and go on to new life. Were there no cross with its atoning sacrifice, we could not do this. Our sins would cling to us forever, and blot our skies with blackness that never could be washed white. But the blood of Jesus

Christ cleanses from all sins. God Himself forgets the sins He forgives, remembers them no more, forever leaves them behind; and He wants us to forget our forgiven sins, not to waste one hour in grief over them--but to pour the energy of our penitence into new life.

By the power of the divine grace, our sins and our falls may even be made to yield blessing! Many of the best things in the old man's life, are the harvest of his penitences and repentings. Through the grace of Christ, we may so deal with our sins--as to extract blessing from their shame, sweetness from their bitterness, beauty from their loathsomeness! Our very sins and falls may become growths to our souls, and we may leave them behind us, using them as stepping-stones to new and holier life.

Thus true life looks ever forward. We may never rest. Our goal is ahead of us. We must live loose to this world, never anchoring our barks for a long stay. Our best attainments must be but steps to higher attainments. Today's achievements must but inspire us for nobler achievements tomorrow. "Forward, and not back," is the true motto for a Christian life. Even sorrows must not detain us, and we must take little time for farewells and for tears, so urgent is the life of duty and obedience which calls us on, and so glorious are the blessings that await us. Even our sins must not cause us to falter--but we must hasten away from them, leaving the valleys of defeat, to climb to the holy heights of victory. The best is ever onward and forward. We are not going toward death--but toward life. What we call dying--is but trampling to fragments, the hindering walls of mortality--and pressing through into the full, unrestrained, boundless blessedness of life.

Such a life as this--is possible only in Christ. If we are not Christians, we cannot forget the things that are behind, for we have nothing ahead of us that is beautiful and worthy. We cannot press forward to the things that are ahead of us--if we have not Christ, if our sins are not forgiven, if we have no home and treasure in heaven! How can we leave sorrow behind--if no comforter comes with the blessed revealing of immortality? The realities of life--are the unseen things which are ours in Christ. Heaven is always ahead of us, and heaven holds life's best joys, attainments, and treasures.

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