

## Fast-Forwarding The Tape

by David F. Maas

*Forerunner*, "Ready Answer," May 2004

*"A prudent man foresees evil and hides himself;  
the simple pass on and are punished."  
—Proverbs 27:12*

Do you like to see the ending of the movie or read the ending of a book to get a sneak preview of the conclusion? Have you ever asked a friend who has previously seen a certain movie or read a particular book how it all turns out? Some people do and have, their curiosity getting the best of them.

A few years back, when my family and I went to the movie *Cast Away*, we arrived at the tail end of the previous showing. Instinctively, I walked into the dark theater to see the final few moments of the movie—seeing the hero with a FedEx box, walking around the veranda of a rural farmhouse. Immediately, I felt a tug at my arm as Julie pulled me back into the lobby, insisting that I would spoil the movie for everybody.

Not long thereafter, my son watched a John Wayne picture that his friend Tim had previously seen. I kept asking him to tell us what would happen, only to hear Julie retort, "Don't you dare!"

I have a collection of favorite movies that I have played repeatedly: Gene Autry and Gloria Henry in *The Strawberry Roan*, Clark Gable and Joan Crawford in *Strange Cargo*, Lloyd Bridges and Marie Windsor in *The Tall Texan*, and Gregory Peck and Ingrid Bergman in *Spellbound*. The tension, anxiety, and suspense of these stories do not bother me because I already know how they end.

I have always had a curiosity about what is going to happen—or where the events in which I am involved will lead. Before our son Aaron was born, the nurse took a sonogram. She asked if we wanted to know what gender our child was. We did, and this gave us several more months to choose a name. I do not feel that fast-forwarding the tape to see what happens is necessarily a bad thing.

God's Word tells us that there are occasions when fast-forwarding the tape may be beneficial and even life-saving. We fast-forward the tape when we count the cost, when we look for dangers on the road ahead, when we are tempted to sin and need to understand the consequences, and when we need to detach ourselves from a grim trial—looking forward to a happy ending or a transcending meaning to it all. In addition, we can fast-forward the tape to provide ourselves motivation and hope. Several years ago, Herbert W. Armstrong, with a mischievous grin, said, "Brethren, I've looked ahead to the end of this story—and you know what? We win!"

### Sneak Previews

Proverbs 29:18 teaches that without vision (some translations have rendered this "prophetic vision" or "revelation") people perish. Anticipating and preparing for danger requires that we fast-forward the tape, as Proverbs 27:12 says, "A prudent man foresees evil and hides himself; the simple pass on and are punished."

At our baptism, we are encouraged to move forward in time mentally, thoughtfully counting the cost of our discipleship: "For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost, whether he has enough to finish it" (Luke 14:28). We need to be sure that we are willing and able to see our course through to the end.

Sneak previews of specific consequences of keeping God's laws are given in Leviticus 26:3-13 and Deuteronomy 28:2-14, while sneak previews of specific consequences for breaking God's laws are presented in Leviticus 26:14-39 and Deuteronomy 28:15-68. These are known as the "Blessings and Cursings" chapters.

As our forebears with foresight contemplated the prospect of being smitten with madness, blindness, and confusion of heart, groping at noonday as a blind man, oppressed and plundered continually (Deuteronomy 28:28-29), some probably had second and third thoughts about transgressing God's statutes! Looking ahead is not so bad, after all!

Recently, having not ruminated enough about the consequences of certain driving behavior, I found myself again participating in a defensive-driving class. One of the most valuable concepts taught by instructor Lee Stolley was the "What If?" game, in which we had to anticipate a host of possible, potential mishaps. He told a personal story of parking his squad car right next to an elderly, handicapped driver when there were many other available parking spots. He related that, moments before he drove into the parking place, numerous alarm bells went off in his head warning him not to park there. Ignoring his anticipatory instincts cost the city of Big Sandy, Texas, \$800 in damages.

The Bible is replete with "What if?" scenarios, warning the foolish and unwary to turn back. As wisdom personified calls the youthful, she gives a sneak preview of the consequences of ignoring her counsel:

Because I have called and you refused, I have stretched out my hand and no one regarded, because you disdained all my counsel, and would have none of my reproof, I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when your terror comes, when your terror comes like a storm, and your destruction comes like a whirlwind, when distress and anguish come upon you. (Proverbs 1:24-27)

Proverbs 7 presents a Technicolor® movie of a lurid, adulterous affair replete with temptation, allurements, and intrigue. Fortunately, as we fast-forward to the end of the story, the gory, destructive consequences of this initially pleasant encounter are revealed as a warning to us:

Immediately he went after her, as an ox goes to the slaughter, or as a fool to the correction of the stocks, till an arrow struck his liver. As a bird hastens to the snare, he did not know it would take his life. Now therefore, listen to me, my children; pay attention to the words of my mouth: Do not let your heart turn aside to her ways, do not stray into her paths; for she has cast down many wounded, and all who were slain by her were strong men. Her house is the way to hell, descending to the chambers of death. (Proverbs 7:22-27)

Another, more succinct sneak preview of the consequences of adultery appears in Proverbs 9:17-18: "'Stolen water is sweet, and bread eaten in secret is pleasant.' But he does not know that the dead are there, that her guests are in the depths of hell [the grave]." We can use these cause-and-effect

illustrations to help us avoid, not just sexual sins, but many others, including devastating spiritual sins like idolatry.

These biblical scenarios followed by the gruesome consequences remind me of a haunting *Twilight Zone* episode I saw many years ago. A young lady is pursued by a threatening apparition riding a horse. The viewer later discovers that the rider of the horse is actually herself, coming back from the future to warn her not to pursue her life's course any further lest it destroy her.

God has given us a mind with a fast-forward mechanism to look at the consequences. When we are tempted to sin in any way, we should be looking ahead to discern the results of our behaviors. Yet, all too frequently, we fall prey to cognitive distortions (twisted thinking patterns). In other words, instead of looking at things God's way and choosing to do the right thing, we allow our carnal human nature to skew our judgments and make wrong decisions.

In his book, *The Feeling Good Handbook*, Dr. David Burns provides a self-awareness test for confronting temptations. He lists the pleasant allure of the temptation in one column and the cognitive distortion beside it. Here is a brief, representative segment illustrating an alcoholic struggling with a habit:

***Temptation*** : I'll really feel good if I have a beer now. And it will taste so good.

***Cognitive Distortion*** : This is another example of "fortune telling" because Frank is predicting something very unrealistic. While it is true that an occasional beer is harmless, Frank won't stop after just one. Once he starts drinking, his inhibitions will disappear, and he will quietly devour one or two six-packs.

All of us have repertoires of poignant lessons from past sins, replete with shame, guilt, and embarrassment. As we are tempted to give an encore performance, we need to ruminate about what those unchecked behaviors and thoughts have brought us in the past. One should not stop reflecting on the sin itself, but should fast-forward the tape to the sure consequences.

## Seeing the Future

A parallel reason for fast-forwarding the tape is to maintain stability in a trial. In one four-month period, I lost my firstborn son and my job unexpectedly, throwing me into an emotional tailspin. In times like these, one has to be resourceful at locating shreds of hope. Like all individuals, my inclination was only to look regretfully back, seething in bitterness about loss and the impossibility of recovering what I had lost.

One resource I found valuable was an account of a man's experience in a concentration camp, Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*. Frankl developed some profound insights, survival skills, and techniques for building inner strength when the external world around him was going to perdition.

Frankl suggests that "a man who let himself decline because he could not see any future goal found himself with retrospective thoughts [riveted to the past]." He goes on to say, "Any attempt at fighting the camp's psychopathological influence on the prisoner by psychotherapeutic or psychohygienic methods had to aim at giving him inner strength by pointing out to him a future goal to which he could look forward. Instinctively, some of the prisoners attempted to find one on their own." Frankl explains that it is a peculiarity of man that he can live only by looking to the future. And this future-

looking capability is his salvation in the most difficult moments of his existence, although he sometimes has to force his mind to the task.

Amidst the most degrading kind of human slavery, Frankl formed in his mind's eye a picture of his future freedom—when he could reclaim his dignity. He described in vivid detail the picture that he created to help him fast-forward the tape to some distant time in the future:

I saw myself standing on the platform of a well-lit, warm and pleasant lecture room. In front of me sat an attentive audience on comfortable upholstered seats. I was giving a lecture on the psychology of the concentration camp! All that oppressed me at that moment became objective, seen and described from the remote viewpoint of science. By this method I succeeded somehow in rising above the sufferings of the moment, and I observed them as if they were already of the past.

Frankl concludes this account by affirming that the prisoner who had lost faith in the future—his future—was doomed. With his loss of belief in the future, he also lost his spiritual hold and became subject to mental and physical decay. His insights are a rediscovery of vital truth that psalmists and prophets of the Bible practiced faithfully.

In the early days of my grief, when I was preoccupied with feeling sorry for myself, I would instinctively incorporate many psalms of despondency into my prayers and meditation. In the abundant greenery of the Tyler State Park, I would recite over and over the contents of the supplicative psalms—Psalms 51, 60, 69, 88, 60, 71, 90, 143—really letting the emotions have free reign as I cried:

Save me, O God! For the waters have come up to my neck. I sink in deep mire, where there is no standing; I have come into deep waters, where the floods overflow me.  
(Psalm 69:1-2)

Do not cast me off in the time of old age; do not forsake me when my strength fails.  
(Psalm 71:9)

I have been afflicted and ready to die from my youth up; I suffer Your terrors; I am distraught. (Psalm 88:15)

These words easily rolled off my tongue as I identified with the mindset of the psalmist. Then I learned a peculiar thing about many of these supplicative psalms. The psalmist would fast-forward the tape to a time of hope and deliverance. Space does not permit me to go to all the sneak previews of happier times provided by these supplicative psalms, but consider, for instance, the one in Psalm 69:35-36:

For God will save Zion and build the cities of Judah, that they may dwell there and possess it. Also, the descendants of His servants shall inherit it, and those who love His name shall dwell in it.

In the melancholy and reflective Psalm 71, the psalmist fast-forwards to an expected future time of hope:

You, who have shown me great and severe troubles, shall revive me again, and bring me up again from the depths of the earth. You shall increase my greatness, and comfort me on every side. (verses 20-21)

A despondent Moses quickly fast-forwards in Psalm 90:13-14, crying,

Return, O Lord! How long? And have compassion on Your servants. Oh, satisfy us early with Your mercy, that we may rejoice and be glad all our days!

In Psalm 37, where David warns us not to fret because the evildoers literally get away with murder, he fast-forwards the tape in verse 34, promising,

Wait on the Lord, and keep His way, and He shall exalt you to inherit the land; when the wicked are cut off, you shall see it.

### **Coming Attractions**

Another whole section of the Bible provides fast-forwards to buoy the depressed and afflicted: the Minor Prophets. After detailed descriptions of mayhem and affliction, the prophet fast-forwards the tape to the solution. Notice, for example, Habakkuk 3:18-19:

Yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation. The Lord God is my strength; He will make my feet like deer's feet, and He will make me walk on my high hills.

In numerous other passages, the prophets assure us that the future is brighter than the past (see Joel 3:16-21; Amos 9:11-15; Zephaniah 3:8-20; Haggai 2:23; Zechariah 14:16-20; etc.)

When our Elder Brother Jesus Christ said in the Garden of Gethsemane, "Your will be done, not mine," He was fast-forwarding to the time all of His suffering would be over. This glimpse of His glorious future helped Him to endure all the pain, ignominy, and loneliness He knew He was about to experience.

Like all the other holy days, Pentecost is a preview of coming attractions. Romans 8:20-21 describes the present distress and futility that the entire creation is subject to, groaning as if with birth pangs. But Paul does not leave us suffering in this state of corruption but mercifully fast-forwards the tape to the time of redemption:

Not only they, but we also who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body. (Romans 8:23)

The day of Pentecost provides a fast-forward for the firstfruits—a sneak preview of the way the entire creation will be brought into God's Kingdom. Just knowing that our present distresses will turn out so wonderfully makes life more bearable. We have so much to look forward to!

See, knowing how it all turns out is not so bad after all, is it?

