

Looking Forward

Eyes on the Prize

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You have probably heard the quotation from American novelist and humorist Mark Twain on the subject of prediction, “Prophecy is difficult, especially with respect to the future.”

Well, this might be funny by the way that it is put, we laugh because we realize that it is profoundly true. He not only had a way with words, he was in some respects a very wise man—he brought out this fact that trying to predict the future is almost impossible. Even with minor predictions, it is virtually impossible to do this, because there are nearly infinite variables that have to be accounted for. You cannot just say that such-and-such thing is going to occur, because there are all kinds of things that might happen between now and then to make it not happen. And when you are thinking about predictions in terms of the world, you are talking about accounting for all the things that go on in the world, as well as the fact that there are almost 7 billion people on this planet, and growing all the time. Each one of those persons is a variable. You could even come to the conclusion that the action or the non-action of just one person could change the course of human history. One person in a certain area of power, say a president whose finger is on the nuclear button could change things overnight.

So, if you were predicting something down the road 500 years, and you said that the earth would be laid waste, and there would be only a few hundred people living as nomads around the world because of the nuclear destruction, you would be wrong. We believe that the Bible says that hopefully during that time, even though the world may have come to the brink of that, it is actually going to be the wonderful world tomorrow, as Mr. Herbert W. Armstrong put it.

That variable is God. You always have to account for Him.

Now, this is not a sermon on prophecy. Sorry to all of you who were thinking or hoping that it was. Although, from what we have already seen, it is clear that God’s ability to prophesy accurately is a miracle as great as any that could be found within the pages of your Bible.

We can be thankful that we can trust that the Bible’s hundreds or thousands of prophecies—has anyone ever tried counting them all?—that we can trust God’s ability in that these many prophecies will come to pass. And, we can be *sure* that they will come

Looking Forward by Richard T. Ritenbaugh (<http://www.cgg.org>)

to pass. We know this because God, as we saw in one of my previous sermons, says that He will not let His words return to Him empty (Isaiah 55:10-11).

We also know that we can trust God to fulfill the prophecies that He has made because the Bible and history shows that so many of those prophecies have already come to pass, they have already been fulfilled, and it was exactly as He gave them. Not one detail was superfluous. Every one of those details were enacted in the life of Jesus Christ, or in some other person who was prophesied to do something.

So God is a forecaster extraordinaire! He can look ahead to the exact nth degree to foresee something happening.

Now a prediction by definition is, "Gazing forward into the future, and endeavoring to determine an event in advance." That is not a formal definition, but a natural, common definition.

Some predictions are actually fairly easy to make, because they are what we call general repetitions of experience—things that we know occur all the time because we have experienced that fact. For instance, I could make a prediction that someone will get up and leave this room during the sermon. I could even go so far as to say that not only will someone get up and leave this room during the sermon, but that it will happen twelve weeks in a row without fail. I could even say that it will happen every week for one year.

Now, this sort of prediction is worthless. I am not "Hugo the Great Seer," or anything like that. We know that someone always gets up during a sermon. It does not matter why that occurs, whether restroom needs, or baby's needs, or some other thing. There are many reasons why someone might get up to leave the room. Maybe they get offended by something I say, and need to leave the room. The reason does not matter. The fact is, someone will get up and leave the room. This is not a hard prediction to make.

Now, for telling the future, looking forward into that time ahead of us, becomes more difficult as we become more specific, or as we add variables, or as we leave the comfort of our experiences and try to predict something that we really do not know anything about and have no experience with. For instance, if I were to specify that a woman will leave this room, well I have shortened the odds of that coming to pass, because we have something exact that we would look for. This makes it a bit harder. Maybe it will not come to pass now twelve weeks in a row. It might only be the men getting up. Or just children.

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I could make this even worse for myself and my prediction if I say, “a woman in a blue dress,” and add this detail to it. It gets harder to come to pass. It will likely fail, especially if I came up with a strange or uncommon color, like orange, puce, or other odd color.

A variable can come into play that we have not considered. For instance, there is an unseen complication in my prediction about twelve weeks in a row in which we lose our electricity one week, and have to meet someplace else for services that day. That blows my prediction because I specifically said that someone would get up and leave this room, and so if we met in some other room, then my prediction would be wrong.

And then, of course, there is the other difficulty of leaving the comfort of experience. Let us say that I did not make the prediction, but an Eskimo did, but he had never been to a church service. He had never seen a bunch of people get together and listen to a sermon, and he was not aware that people get up and leave the room while the service is in progress. It would be difficult for him because it is outside of his experience to make such a prediction. He would not know where to start. He would not even know what to say.

This is what I mean by leaving your realm of experience. That is what happens when people try to make predictions about such things as space travel, or interplanetary warfare, or other things beyond the experience of the person (beyond television or movies). They are trying to project themselves into a future that they know little or nothing about. It might never happen at all, or ends up being totally different from what they have assumed it to be.

Prediction is a strange thing; trying to look forward into the future is very difficult.

Now you have to give it to those brave souls who call themselves futurists, or modern seers. It is extremely difficult. Even with all sorts of statistics and trends at their disposal, and they try to look through and say, “Well, humanity is moving this way, and the number of resources we have are showing this, that, and the other, and so it could be that in five years or so, we are going to be in this situation.”

Just ask Paul Erlich how hard it can be. He predicted that by the 1970s we would have famines around the world, and people would be dying because the earth could not support that large a number of people. And here it is, 2011, we have pretty much doubled the population in that time. So, he was way off, even though he was (supposedly) looking at the most recent statistics on the ability to grow food, population studies, and so forth. He made a fool of himself in the eyes of many people because he had it all wrong.

It is extremely difficult if not impossible to foretell with any certainty what is going to happen in the near future, let alone the next few years, or decades, or centuries in advance. I am sure that somebody back in the 1500s just having come out of the medieval times and the Renaissance, looking forward would never have predicted 500 years into the future how we would be living. He could not imagine a time when billions of people live across the land better than most wealthy of his own day. He could not imagine people having houses like we do today; or air conditioning.

It would have been impossible to understand the progress of mankind just technologically. A man in the 1500s was still thinking in terms of sailing ships, donkey carts, horseback travel, and walking to where one needed to go. He could not imagine bullet trains, buses, sports cars, motorcycles, or many other things we have such as jet planes, and helicopters, and the space shuttle—you name it. A man from the 1500s could not have begun to imagine how we live today.

H. G. Wells, on the other hand seemed to be pretty good at it. He had a knack for being able to see technological trends. He had a good imagination too. I am sure that most of it was because of that. He predicted in one of his books space travel by rocket ship to the moon; genetic engineering; lasers and microwaves; biological warfare; and even automatic doors which appeared in his novels about 50 years before they came into being. Of course, the idea presented in the book may have been the inspiration for someone to invent it too. Even so, he seemed to be good at looking forward, and seeing where man's mind could take him.

On the other hand, he was spectacularly wrong. He predicted time travel; ability to journey to the center of the earth; and personal invisibility. Although some may think that it came true with stealth technology, it is only invisible to certain radars.

Now, other people should perhaps have known better than to predict things before they really understood what was going on. But, they have put themselves into the history books as foolish. For instance, of all people, Charlie Chaplin said in 1916, "The cinema is little more than a fad." But then, he took advantage of it too. The eminent Albert Einstein in 1932 opined, "There is not the slightest indication that nuclear energy will ever be obtainable. It would mean that the atom could be shattered at will." Well, we do that all the time, now.

The editors at the "venerable" New York Times wrote in 1936, "A rocket will never be able to leave the earth's atmosphere." And finally, in 1880 a man named Henry Morton, president of the Steven's Institute of Technology, while speaking of Edison's light bulb decided, "Everyone acquainted with the subject will recognize it as a conspicuous

failure.” Boy was he in the dark!

These examples that I have given you seem to caution us against looking too far into the future. But, really on the other hand, God wants us to have our minds firmly fixed on the future! Our hope lies in the future. He expects us to be studying it, and meditating on what it will be like, and yearning for it. He wants us to have a realistic vision of the world tomorrow based not on human predictions, because it is easy to see that they are consistently wrong, but based on His Word to excite us, to motivate us, and to prepare us for when it arrives. And, that could be almost any time.

Today, we are going to pursue the idea of looking ahead, not necessarily in terms of prediction, but in terms of the mindset that we are gazing into the future, expectantly waiting for God while waiting for the return of Christ.

Now, let us start with why we should not look back. Why not look at history rather than the future? There are two well known examples—one in the Old Testament, and one in the New Testament—that we are going to turn to where we are admonished very stringently not to look back! It is interesting that my dad mentioned Sodom and Gomorrah in his commentary. The Old Testament example is from this context.

The admonition to not look back is not to say that we are not to study history and learn from it, because those who fail to study history are doomed to repeat it; but rather the act of looking back or the practice or habit of looking back is an indication of the desire or the nostalgia for prior activities and lifestyles. This is what we have been called out of. It is not something that we should be gazing at longingly.

So let us look at this Old Testament example of looking back.

Genesis 19:12-13 Then the men said to Lot, "Have you anyone else here? Son-in-law, your sons, your daughters, and whomever you have in the city—take them out of this place! For we will destroy this place, because the outcry against them has grown great before the face of the LORD, and the LORD has sent us to destroy it."

Notice that the angels in warning them that they are going to destroy it, and to get their people and family out of it, says specifically that it is God's will that this happen. "The Lord has sent us to destroy this place." The reason was that the outcry against them had grown great. Its offense of all those sins had come before God, and He determined that it was enough. It had to be destroyed. So, notice as we start, here, that the

Looking Forward by Richard T. Ritenbaugh (<http://www.cgg.org>)

destruction was going to be an act of God. It was His will that it be destroyed.

Genesis 19:14-15 So Lot went out and spoke to his sons-in-law, who had married his daughters, and said, "Get up, get out of this place; for the LORD will destroy this city!" But to his sons-in-law he seemed to be joking. When the morning dawned, the angels urged Lot to hurry, saying, "Arise, take your wife and your two daughters who are here, lest you be consumed in the punishment of the city."

So now, as we go verse by verse it keeps being reiterated that this is a destruction from God. It is a punishment.

Genesis 19:16 And while he lingered, the men took hold of his hand, his wife's hand, and the hands of his two daughters, the LORD being merciful to him, and they brought him out and set him outside the city.

We are seeing here already that there is a hesitation—they are lingering—there is something in the city that they enjoy; they liked living there. And so, they dally, they delay. The angels have to take them by the hand and lead them out of the city.

Genesis 19:17 So it came to pass, when they had brought them outside, that he said, "Escape for your life! Do not look behind you nor stay anywhere in the plain. Escape to the mountains, lest you be destroyed."

Genesis 19:23 The sun had risen upon the earth when Lot entered Zoar.

Lot had asked to be able to go to Zoar, and the angels allowed it.

Genesis 19:24-25 Then the LORD rained brimstone and fire on Sodom and Gomorrah, from the LORD out of the heavens. So He overthrew those cities, all the plain, all the inhabitants of the cities, and what grew on the ground.

Is it not interesting how many times it is mentioned that this destruction is from the Lord? This is total destruction.

Genesis 19:26 But his wife looked back behind him, and she became a pillar of salt.

We see that the angel specifically instructs Lot and his family not to look back (verse 17). Looking back, he says, will destroy you. And then we saw that the destruction was greater than just the city. It was that city, the other cities of the plain, all the inhabitants of those cities, plus all that grew there in that area. So it was widespread destruction. It was more than just those cities specifically. It was the entire area of what we know as the southwest coast of the Dead Sea. So the whole place went up. Fire and brimstone everywhere.

And we also saw that it was repeated time and again, that God Himself was taking a personal hand in destroying the sinners, their lifestyles, and what they had built. Everything was to be razed to the ground.

So their destruction was divine judgment of sin, and He did not want Lot and his family pining for it, thinking about those good times that they might have had, or all the people that they had grown to know and even love that they had left behind. Because, to God (when you think about it) those good ol' days that they were thinking about, and longing for were an offense to Him. These things were part of the reasons why He was judging those cities of the plain. Lot and his family may not have been involved in all those sins, but it was that general milieu that they had lived in that needed to be destroyed. And God did not want them looking back at it with any good feelings whatsoever.

In Genesis 15:16 God had promised Abraham that the iniquity of the Amorites was not yet complete and so He said that in 400 years your descendants will come back to this place, and they would inherit the land of Israel.

What we see in the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and all the cities of the plain is God taking an action in order to preserve the remainder of that civilization for a few more hundred years. If God had let Sodom and Gomorrah go, and all those cities of the plain, that land would have laid waste, or some other nation would have come and taken the land. So God was nipping this iniquity in the bud taking out the worst of the sinners in order to delay the judgment that would come later with the return of all Israel to the land. God was working to make sure that His plan would come to pass as He wanted it to. He was making sure that the promise to Abraham would be fulfilled exactly. And here, Lot and his family, had been caught up in all this, and He had to remove them from it.

Looking Forward by Richard T. Ritenbaugh (<http://www.cgg.org>)

His judgment of Sodom, then, was a way to delay the effects of the sins of the Amorites until Israel was ready to take possession of the Promised Land. So, in judging the sins of Sodom, God was working out events to bring His promise to pass.

In this light, if we think of Lot's wife's looking back—she might have even turned back—there are some people who think that she did not just gaze back over her shoulder, but that she actually turned around going back in the other direction. Who knows why? Maybe because of her family she left behind—but whether physically or mentally she began to return.

Her actions may have become more a repudiation of God's will, as if she could turn back God's will by her own power. I do not know what she could have gained, because she was essentially committing suicide—either God would kill her, or she would kill herself in the destruction. What she was saying was that she loved that society rather than the will of God, which for her was to accompany Lot and her two daughters to a new place. So her turning back was actually a willful rejection of God's instruction. She had turned aside, and left the way and so it was rebellion, pure and simple. In that sense, she deserved what she got. The instructions were clear. She disobeyed.

That is pretty grim, but it is an object lesson of what happens when we turn aside from the will of God. Do not look back. It will only destroy you.

The other example is found in Luke 9. This is obviously in the midst of Jesus' ministry, and these verses appear in a rather long passage on proper discipleship. As a matter of fact, the last portion of this chapter beginning about verse 46 is different commands or examples of how to be a proper disciple of Christ.

This begins where the disciples were arguing over who was greatest. So Jesus tells them to be like a little child. His instruction to them was, "If you want to be a good disciple, then avoid self-exaltation and be like a child." He then goes on, and John comes up to Him, and says, "We found this fellow casting out demons in Your name and Jesus said not to forbid him for he who is not against us is for us."

So we have instruction, here, that we should avoid factions, and exclusivity. It is not good, and creates division—and "us" versus "them" mentality, and Jesus does not want us to be like that at all. He wants us to be open and helpful just like He was. Even the worst sinners could come up to Him and ask Him things, and He usually followed through in some manner. Generally He was open to them all. He got criticized for being with sinners so much. Christ did not have an us versus them mentality. He was open to them, far more than the Pharisees were. So, He gave them the example, "Be like Me."

Then they go to the Samaritan village where they were not received and James and John in their zeal wanted to call fire down from heaven upon them. But Jesus said, "What kind of spirit are you in? You want to destroy these people? They don't know what's going on. They really don't know who I am." His teaching is to avoid vengeance and retaliation, because unconverted people just do not realize what is going on.

Then we get to this passage from verse 57 onward where He is talking about the cost of discipleship—but in reality, all of them have to do with various distractions and excuses people make for not being a disciple. He is teaching His actual disciples that they need to avoid these certain things. We will look at this last one, here.

Luke 9:61-62 And another also said, "Lord, I will follow You, but let me first go and bid them farewell who are at my house." But Jesus said to him, "No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God."

That is pretty scary! All this guy wanted to do was go back and say good-bye to his family, or maybe kiss his wife, and hug his kids, off he would go. He would then be His disciple. But perhaps there is a bit of his need to clear up his affairs, settling everything up so that he would be free to follow Him. But Jesus says, "Hey! Once you make the commitment, you have to keep going. And if you don't, then you won't be fit for the Kingdom of God."

His specific comment concerns commitment. The man's excuse is indicative of a person who would repeatedly and continually use his family as an excuse for not being fully committed. Jesus saw in him, not just someone who is going to run back, say goodbye, and then return and be with Him forever, but from the way that this potential disciple said it, Jesus knew that this was not going to be the last time this man would say something like this.

So, it was the habitual attitude of using an excuse to get out of some responsibility or commitment. We need to see what Christ said here, "No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God." This must be tied to Luke 14:26.

Luke 14:26 "If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple."

Looking Forward by Richard T. Ritenbaugh (<http://www.cgg.org>)

This is a verse the churches of God use in their baptismal counseling for true discipleship. What He is telling them is that He has to come first in their lives in the priority of love and devotion. When we make our list of those we love, and are devoted to, and are going to do all we can for, God the Father and Christ must be on the first tier. They have to come first. No one ever jumps over them. They are always first.

It is not oneself, which we have the tendency to do. We always put ourselves first, do we not? We might say something like, "I always put my wife first." But we always, actually, put ourselves first. We must learn how to put God first in everything, and then other people, before ourselves.

So, the level of our commitment, then, can be seen against our choices regarding our involvement with our physical family versus spiritual family. If we keep God and Christ first in our lives, then our level of commitment is very high. But if we are always running to our family and making excuses for not giving God our best, then our level of commitment to God can be seen as rather low, or certainly lower than what it should be. Christ is giving us the ideal, here. We are to put Him first at all times. That is hard to do, but it is the ideal. Our submission to God, our devotion to God, our love for God has to come first.

Marriage and family are very important, and oftentimes they are the way in which we are trained for what we will do in the Kingdom of God, because there are various situations that occur in marriage and family that teach us very valuable things. But, even so, in the great scheme of things they take a distant second place to our spiritual responsibilities. We do not look at it as distant, but we have to have that commitment in our minds that if there is ever a time that comes where our commitment to God and any other thing or person comes into conflict, that we invariably choose God first. That will show our level of commitment.

This passage is talking about a time of woe, a time of bad things, and so he gives some advice:

Micah 7:5-7 Do not trust in a friend; do not put your confidence in a companion; guard the doors of your mouth from her who lies in your bosom. For son dishonors father, daughter rises against her mother, daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; a man's enemies are the men of his own household. Therefore I will look to the LOORD; I will wait for the God of my salvation; My God will hear me.

Looking Forward by Richard T. Ritenbaugh (<http://www.cgg.org>)

We can always trust in God to have our back. We just need to be committed to Him as fully as He expects us to be. Hard to do, but it is what He requires of us.

Returning to Luke 9:61-62, in the metaphor that Christ uses as He replies to this man, about the putting of his hand to the plow, He is obviously referring to farming, particularly plowing a field with an ox, or team of oxen. In order to make a straight furrow the farmer had to point the animal(s) in the correct direction so that the furrow would be straight and parallel to the ones he had already made. So he had to keep a steady firm handle on the plow, looking forward, keeping the animals moving toward the goal while the plow did all the work underneath. But he had to make sure that he was pointing the animals in the right direction.

Now, if he looked back for any length of time, the animals would likely pull him off course, or his lack of steady hand would cause him to veer away from the established course. That is what He is getting at here. He does not want us looking back and therefore skewing our direction off to one side or the other. It does not matter which side, it is off the mark, off from the goal—we will not be straight, or upright.

This was a common proverb across the Middle East. Most likely it was known everywhere. The early (800 BC) Greek poet Hesiod in his poem, *Works and Days*, wrote, “He who would plow straight furrows must not look about him.” This was something that everyone knew and Jesus used it as a good illustration for what He was teaching His disciples. “If you turn away while plowing, you can’t plow a straight furrow.”

The whole idea is that *looking* back (with the implication of constantly or frequently) will eventually lead to *drawing* back. This will cause you to veer off course, and make you fail to complete the task that God has given all of us to do.

Looking back leads to drawing back. Drawing back causes you to veer off course. Veering off course leads to failure. This is not good.

The construction of the Greek, here, suggests that this is making a decision, but not living up to it due to distractions. If you put your hand to the plow, that is making the commitment. But, if we do not live up to it, we turn, we look back, it is because we are distracted. That is the sense of this. That is why the whole passage is about distractions and avoiding them, becoming totally committed to God, keeping our eyes on the goal, looking forward toward the Kingdom of God.

One more thing before leaving this is that Christ ends His saying with the remark that they are not fit for the Kingdom of God. If we are not focused on the task at hand, what

Looking Forward by Richard T. Ritenbaugh (<http://www.cgg.org>)

God has given us to do, plowing that straight furrow, then we will not be fit for the Kingdom of God. This implies that the task that we have been given prepares us for the Kingdom of God.

The word, “fit,” is *euthetos* in Greek, and it means, depending on the context, well-placed. So to put that back into the phrase, to look back we will not be well-placed for the Kingdom of God, or that we will not be suited for the Kingdom of God, or we will not be adapted to the Kingdom of God. We need to adapt to God’s way from the way that we had been living beforehand. You can also say, we are not adjusted for the Kingdom of God. Or, we are not usable for the Kingdom of God.

It is the work that we are doing in plowing that straight furrow that makes us adapted to what God wants us to do, adapted to His way. And when we get to the goal, the Kingdom of God, we will be useful to Him.

But if we do not do the work, and are constantly plowing designs in the soil of our own making, then if we get to the Kingdom of God at all, we would be useless. I would say that it is more likely that if we fail to prepare by plowing a straight furrow, because we are too busy looking back, then God will not *allow* us to enter the Kingdom of God at all.

Plowing a straight furrow is very important. You do that by not only having a good hold on that plow, but also looking forward and directing your life in that direction. You have to be looking ahead. Do not look behind. Be looking ahead toward the goal of the Kingdom of God.

In our next passage the apostle Paul gives us his example of zeal and concentration of what God had called him to do. And he puts it in very memorable language. This may be the best known, and fairly long, passage on looking ahead toward the goal.

Philippians 3:1-2 Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord. For me to write the same things to you is not tedious, but for you it is safe. Beware of dogs, beware of evil workers, beware of the mutilation!

He is warning them of things and people who would distract them from plowing the straight furrow.

Philippians 3:3-4 For we are the circumcision, who worship God in the Spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh, though I also might have confidence in the flesh. If anyone else thinks he may have

Looking Forward by Richard T. Ritenbaugh (<http://www.cgg.org>)

confidence in the flesh, I more so.

Paul is talking a bit about his past. Remember, this is the part we are really not supposed to look back to, or give regard to any more.

Philippians 3:5-8 [I was] circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless. But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ.

Do you see how he in looking back does not look back with longing? He does not look back with any pride. He claims all that behind him as refuse, rubbish, and trash. He treated all that which seemed good in the world with contempt.

Philippians 3:9-15 And be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith; that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Therefore let us, as many as are mature, have this mind; and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal even this to you.

So, here is Paul's example of zeal, and concentration on what God had called him to do. As he says, it easily applies to all of us, because Paul is speaking of the same salvation. We should not get all out of sorts because Paul was such a great worker for God. God called Paul to do a great work among the Gentiles, and he fulfilled it marvelously. He did the job. He was a worker. That was his name, Paul—he was a worker. He worked for

God and did the job that he had been given to do.

But on the other hand, he was also called to prepare for His Kingdom, just as He has called us to do the same. We are not given the same work to do, but we are all called to the same salvation. We are all called to the preparation of the Kingdom of God. And from what he says here, Paul did not look back at all. It did not interest him anymore. It certainly had prepared him for what he had been given to do by God, certainly all that instruction in the Hebrew Scriptures, and argumentation, and logic, as well as the other rigors he went through had made him the perfect person for taking the gospel to the Gentiles. But, that was about all it was worth to him, because his life had started over while on the Damascus road when Christ called him.

Once that had happened, once God changed his heart, Paul was *all in*. He was totally committed, and his former life of sin that had been left in the waters of baptism was trash. It was a dead body. It was a life of sin and death and he wanted nothing to do with it. There was no looking back anymore. And I believe Ananias and some of those others who came to know him, and later on James and Peter, and John and others, knew all that. That is why they were willing to extend to him the right hand of fellowship to him, because they saw that the man had changed, and what he was, was no longer relevant. He was a brother in Christ, and had been given a commission on the level of their own to go to the Gentiles, as one called out of due time he said (I Corinthians 15:8).

So, Paul is a wonderful example of one of us who was totally changed by his conversion, and never looked back once. He always looked forward to the work that he was doing, and to the great goal that God had set before him.

Now, he says here in this passage that the only important thing now was to gain Christ. That is how Paul put it. It was like a profit and loss sort of thing. He counted his whole life before him as loss, but he had this wonderful investment called Christ, and it was going to give him so much profit! He was like a rich man already! And, that is what he had committed his life to. His life's mission from that point on, no matter what might try to hinder him, or distract him, was to know Christ. He then talks of the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus his Lord. You can translate that as, "The excellence of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord."

To *know* Christ was to get to know Him *better*. His whole life was focused on improving the relationship with Christ. He thought of it not as drudgery, not as toil, not as something as sweaty and dirty as plowing a field, he considered it as a quest of excellence—a noble endeavor. It was the highest calling any one could have—to know

Christ.

So, he put it a very positive framework. He did not think of it as work. He thought of it as a wonderful adventure—a quest for excellence.

This meant, as he goes on, that he would always be involved in putting on the righteousness, which is from God by faith. That was his life's work. That was coming to know Christ—the only kind of righteousness that was worth anything toward eternal life through the resurrection of the dead, and that is what he would pursue.

So, he was totally committed to walking with Christ for the rest of his life, and he would learn and grow from the experiences that God would put him through in preparation for the Kingdom of God. He had come to the conclusion that is how he, and we, come to know Christ. It is that daily walk side by side with God. And, God was steering him. He may be looking forward to that goal, and trying to stay on line, but it was the One who was walking beside him that was really steering him toward the Kingdom of God, and putting him through the paces, as it were, in order to prepare him for whatever God wanted him to do in the Kingdom. So, he would do his best to follow side by side with Christ, to do his best to imitate Christ, and to grow into that righteousness that pleases the Father. That was his life's work.

If he kept his eye on the goal of the resurrection from the dead, he felt sure that with Christ's help through the Holy Spirit, he would plow a straight furrow directly to the Kingdom of God. Nothing could stop him. He was totally in. He would pursue this quest of excellence to the very end, even if it were a bitter end, which it was. He was martyred. It was the end of a glorious adventure with Christ.

Now, that is being positive about things! As it says here, he was even willing to know Him in the fellowship of His sufferings. “Hey! If my Lord and Savior died in agony on a cross, well then, if that's what it takes, then, okay!” This was Paul's attitude. “If that's going to help me know Him better, because getting to know Christ is everything, well, then, that's just fine.” That is the kind of faith that saw these men through horrible martyrdoms. They were all in. They were committed.

In the letter to Titus, we will again see Paul on this subject. Paul taught Titus this same thing. Titus was one of his protégés, and he had been given the pastorate on Crete. This epistle was to build him up, and help him along, and give him some instructions on pastoring that church.

Titus 2:11-15 For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all

Looking Forward by Richard T. Ritenbaugh (<http://www.cgg.org>)

men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works. Speak these things, exhort, and rebuke with all authority. Let no one despise you.

So, here he is instructing his protégé in this same mindset of being totally committed, looking forward to the Kingdom of God, and doing what it takes to be prepared for it. Then in verse 15 he encourages Titus to teach this to the brethren that they should also be of this same mind.

Now that we have been granted God's grace toward salvation, then we must take the same approach as Paul, Titus, and all the first century Christians did.

His instruction is analogous to Christ's metaphor of not looking back, keeping our eyes forward on the task at hand that He has given us to do. He says, "looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our Great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for us." And then, "denying ungodliness and worldly lusts [those things that should be behind us] we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age." That is looking forward and doing what God has instructed us to do in preparation for the Kingdom.

Now, notice one thing in verse 14 where it said Christ "gave Himself for us that He might redeem us from every lawless deed, and purify for Himself His own special people zealous for good works." What he implies here is that even though we have a work to do, which is found in verses 12 and 13, Christ is also involved in that work—He is in it with us. This has been shown in the other places we have gone to today, but here it is brought forward a little more clearly.

His work here on earth was to redeem us through His sacrificial life and death. That is done and finished. It is a completed work and we should take advantage of it. But, He is also alive sitting at the right hand of the Power on High. And, He is not just sitting there, but He is doing something too. He is, in Paul's words here in Titus 2:14, purifying for Himself His own special people.

So, just because His work on earth has been completed, does not mean that His work is completed fully, because as God He is continuing that work. His work is to go side-by-side with us, and purify us, to prepare us for the Kingdom, to get us ready for the job

that He has in store for us to do.

So, in looking forward and putting our all into preparation for the Kingdom of God, we are not alone. Not only do we have others in the churches of God that are doing the same thing, not only do we have that great cloud of witnesses who have gone on before us for our examples, but we also have the awesome power of God, the greatest power in the universe, right there alongside us, and in us! So, we have stupendous help—divine help—to keep our eyes focused and to be marching toward the Kingdom of God.

In turning to Hebrews 11, where we have the roll of the faithful, I want you to see how this great cloud of witnesses got to be where they ended up, waiting in death for the Kingdom, and their examples recorded in God's Word for us to follow. You will find that this is, indeed, what they did. Notice:

Hebrews 11:1 Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.

That goal is up there. We really cannot see it with our eyes, but with our mind's eye spiritually. It is our faith that God has given us—the faith of Jesus Christ—that allows us to be committed to something that we cannot see. It is there. We know it is there. We are walking toward it. But we do all this in faith because if we could see it—if it were something we could touch—if it were right here now, there would be no need of faith. So, that is part of that commitment.

Hebrews 11:2 For by it the elders obtained a good testimony.

What we are told immediately as we open up this chapter is that what I have described in today's sermon is the same way that God's people in the Old Testament made it—they convinced God, as it were, that they were ready. It was because of their faith—their looking to the goal, and marching toward it with conviction and commitment.

Hebrews 11:7 By faith Noah, being divinely warned of things not yet seen, moved with godly fear, prepared an ark for the saving of his household, by which he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness which is according to faith.

Looking Forward by Richard T. Ritenbaugh (<http://www.cgg.org>)

You see, in his life that is what he did. God gave him the word, and command, and he followed it in faith. He could not see it. All he had was the Word of God to rely on and trust. And so, he did it, and look what happened: He became the heir of righteousness which is according to faith. It was that act, that work of faith and commitment that made him inherit the Kingdom of God. That was part and parcel in preparing him for the Kingdom of God.

Hebrews 11:8 By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going.

Once again, this man was following God's word by faith.

Hebrews 11:9-10 By faith he dwelt in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise; for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God.

Hebrews 11:13-14 These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland.

They are pilgrims. They are moving toward something off in the distance.

Hebrews 11:15-16 And truly if they had called to mind that country from which they had come out [like Lot's wife], they would have had opportunity to return. But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly country. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them.

Now, it is this same attitude and commitment, focused and striving to do God's will because of what God has promised to give us in the future that motivated the elders, the patriarchs—like Moses in verses 24-26—and the other heroes of faith throughout the Old Testament. That is what made them heroes of faith. They looked for that goal, and they worked toward that goal, only on the strength of God's Word. And they believed it,

Looking Forward by Richard T. Ritenbaugh (<http://www.cgg.org>)

and knew it would come to pass, and so they did.

What Paul, then, is telling us here is that this living by faith, this looking forward to the goal, and being committed to it, is a tried and true method for enduring to the end, and being prepared for what God has in store for us.

Notice, here in verse 16 that God is not just looking down on us as we struggle, waiting patiently for us to grow. Rather, He is actively involved in preparing a city for us—new Jerusalem. And in time, we will fit into that city. We will be prepared. We will be adjusted. We will be ready to take on the role that He has prepared for us for who knows how long—at least throughout our whole lives.

Then, at that time when we finally inherit it, we will be able to look back, and this time the looking back is good, at our lives during our sanctification, and see the process that God put us through, the steps that He made us take to adjust us and adapt us to the place that He has prepared for us.

Remember in John 14 during the Last Supper, Christ said that He was going to “prepare a place for you.” He could have just as easily added, “And I am preparing you for that place.”

Peter exhorts us that time is getting short, and therefore we need to be diligent, moving forward, looking forward to what God has in store for us.

II Peter 3:10-11 But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up. Therefore, since all these things will be dissolved, what manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness

Those are the things that will not burn up.

II Peter 3:12-14 looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be dissolved, being on fire, and the elements will melt with fervent heat? Nevertheless we, according to His promise, look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. Therefore, beloved, looking forward to these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, without spot and blameless.

Looking Forward by Richard T. Ritenbaugh (<http://www.cgg.org>)

II Peter 3:18 But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory both now and forever. Amen.

Peter's suggestion, here is that we are not only to be looking forward to the coming of Christ, with the new heavens and new earth, but we should also be hastening it—speeding it on—by growing in holy conduct and godliness.

Our job is to be diligent in growing in righteousness, and holiness, and in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ. And maybe, just *maybe* the saints will be ready, and the end will come sooner than we think.