

Looking Ahead

December 29, 2019

“Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 3:13-14).

Nearly one year ago, the calendar year 2019 was launched from the bosom of time. It came forth swift and fresh, and zipped along speedily. Suddenly, one quarter had passed, then another, and then another! And another! And now, here we are witnessing the departure of this year and trusting that as 2019 fades into the grave of history, that another will come forth by the power and grace of God. Indeed, how *“great is the Lord,”* *“how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out!”* (Psa. 145:3; Rom. 11:33).

We cannot recall the past but, like Paul, we can reach *“forth to those things which are before.”* But what are the things which *“are before”*? We know not what the future holds — but, beloved, we know **Who** holds the future. As last night’s sleep and yesterday’s food will not suffice for tonight and tomorrow, neither will our past study, sacrifice, and obedience suffice for today and for the future. God is not just the God of the past — He is also the God of the present and of the future. Yes, Paul had previously ceased having *“confidence in the flesh,”* and for Christ he had *“suffered the loss of all things,”* but this alone was insufficient. (Phil. 3:2,8). He had to continue pressing *“toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.”* And he, by inspiration, exhorts us to be *“thus minded,”* to *“walk by the same rule,”* and to *“mind the same things”* (Phil. 3:14-16). This is to be done in view of our heavenly citizenship (provided that we are Christians!), and because of the glorious prospects of our *“vile body being fashioned like unto His glorious body”* (Phil. 3:20-23).

Though we do not know what lies ahead, we still must look to and plan for the future. Collectively this is true with regards to this congregation. Our plans must include more than merely *“meeting and greeting,”* and continuing to do *“business as usual.”* We need to make definite plans and set concrete goals as it relates to the congregation as a whole. However, as it pertains to this article, our **primary focus has to do with the individual.** Individually, *“every one of us shall give account of himself to God”* (Rom. 14:12; cf. 2 Cor. 5:10). Hence, individually, each one of us should be looking ahead to the future and making plans with regards to becoming *“more and more like Jesus.”*

If you are **not** a Christian, you should immediately resolve to become a Christian by obeying the saving gospel of Jesus Christ (Rom. 1:16; 2 Thess. 1:6-9). If you **are** a Christian, you should resolve to *“grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ”* (2 Peter 3:18). But growth in *“grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ”* does not just happen; it does not come by accident. It

requires much effort and genuine prayer. Jesus said “*you shall **know** the truth, and the truth shall make you free*” (John 8:32). But there is no real short cut to knowing the truth! A knowledge of God’s word demands that you study, study, and keep on studying the truth (2 Tim. 2:15). This involves private study, and it involves assembling with the saints when they come together to worship God and to study His word. (Heb. 10:23-25; Acts 2:42; 20:7). The Psalmist praised God, saying, “*O how I love thy law! It is my meditation all the day*” (Ps. 119:97). If we truly “**love**” the word of God, it will be our “*meditation,*” and we **will** spend much time striving to “*grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ*” (2 Pet. 3:18). The “*blessed*” man of Psa. 1:1-2 is the one who does not walk “*in the counsel of the ungodly,*” nor stand “*in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful. But his **delight** is in the law of the Lord; and in his law doeth he meditate day and night.*” Beloved, if our “delight” really is “*in the law of the Lord,*” then we will “*meditate*” thereupon both “*day and night.*” We should not allow any day to pass without spending some time in reading, studying, and meditating upon the word of God. Will you resolve to do this in the year 2020?

When we study the Bible, the word of God, then **God** (through his word) is speaking to us. When we pray, we are speaking to God. And this two-way communication should be an important part of our lives. There is power in prayer; “*The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much*” (Jas. 5:16). But let us remember that **Jesus** is our “*advocate with the Father*” (I John 2:1), that we must therefore “*ask*” the Father in the “*name*” of Jesus Christ (John 14:14), that we must “*ask*” according to the “*will*” of God (I John 5:14), and that we must be in a praying **relationship** with God. We should ever be mindful of the words of Solomon who said “*He that turneth away his ear from hearing the law, even his **prayer** shall be an **abomination***” (Prov. 28:9)! Inasmuch as Jesus is “*high priest over the house of God*” (Heb. 10:21), and inasmuch as Jesus is the “*high priest*” through whom we approach God in prayer, then it is imperative that we be a part of God’s “*house*” or family, which is “*the church of the living God*” (I Tim. 3:15) for our prayers to be “*effectual*” (Jas. 5:16, KJV) before God. This, incidentally, is one reason why “*alien sinners*” were never commanded to pray to God for forgiveness. To the contrary, they were commanded to obey the gospel, upon which they were “*added*” to the Lord’s church (Acts 2:47), whereupon they became children of God, and could truly pray, saying, “*our Father which art in heaven.*” Indeed, as Christians, we must “*pray without ceasing*” (I Thess. 5:17)!

But, we should do more than seek to increase our knowledge of God’s word. And we must do more than pray fervently and frequently; we must also have **a passion for souls!** The apostle Paul exhorted Timothy, saying, “*the things that thou had heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also*” (2 Tim. 2:2). “The bottom line” is this: we must be “*soul winners for Jesus!*” We must be “*ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh*” us for a “*reason of the hope*” that is in us, and we must do so with “*meekness and fear*” (I Pet. 3:15). Jesus commanded the apostles to “*go into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature*” (Mark 16:15). If we are Christians, we are members of the church Jesus built (Matt. 16:18), and purchased with “*His own blood*” (Acts 20:28), and which is biblically described as “*the pillar and ground of the truth*” (I Tim. 3:15). The church’s

mission to the world is not to feed all the hungry in the world, nor to provide entertainment and recreation; to the contrary, the church's mission to the world is to preach the gospel. Both collectively as a local church, and individually as members thereof, we must be focused upon winning souls to the Lord!

Getting back to the title of this article, "**Looking Ahead**," we sincerely encourage all our members to be "looking ahead," that we reach "*forth to the things which are before*," and that each of us always "*press toward the mark of the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus*" (Phil. 3:13-14). Time is rapidly passing; eternity is approaching. Regardless of your age or the state of your health, you are slowly dying! Death and the judgment are two appointments every person will keep (Heb. 9:27). Hell is horrible! Heaven is wonderful! Eternity is forever! Hence, let each of us "*give diligence*" to make "*our calling and election sure*," mindful that by so doing "*an entrance shall be ministered unto you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ*" (2 Peter 1:10-11).

Beloved, if we do these things, then 2020 can truly be a "happy new year," and this is what I wish for you.

*** —B. Witherington