

GOD-S GUIDE TO GLORIOUS LIVING

Dr. John Allan Lavender

Phil. 3:13-14

A teenager called a Nashville, Tennessee, record store to inquire about Elvis Presley's latest hit. She dialed the wrong number and reached a 'Good ole= boy' from Texas by mistake. When he said, 'Hello,' she asked, 'Have you got ten fingers and ten toes in Alabama?' 'No, but I have one wife and twelve children in Texas.' 'Is that a new record?' 'No, but it's above average.'

Sometime ago I read the critique of a novel, the name of which slips me, which centered upon the melancholy drama of an 'above average' man who appeared to have 'everything.' An attractive wife, two lovely children, a big home and an income which was well 'above average.' Even so, he was a man who felt 'life had become a treadmill on which to run endlessly, day after day, without ever arriving anywhere.'

He was leading a plodding, prosaic, banal existence. Dwelling, as it were, on a desert. Spiritless and dull. A man for whom 'above average' added up to nothing. For awhile he succeeded in keeping himself distracted by engaging in ceaseless rounds of feverish activity: talking, drinking, going and doing. One day life caught up with him in a harrowing moment of sickening, shattering, shame. He awakened to the realization he was merely killing time until he died!

Is that a description of you? Is it possible that, with a slight change of detail here and there, you could put yourself in that story? Is it possible you, too, are plagued by a feeling that life is passing you by without your having tasted those deeper joys you are persuaded it should give?

If so, you are not alone. There *are* people like that. Millions of them. People who are living lives without savor or satisfaction. People for whom 'above average' adds up to nothing. People who are merely killing time until they die. But, thank God, your life does not have to be lived that way. Your life *can* have meaning, luster and direction.

Tucked away in the third chapter of the book of Philippians is a sentence of such stupendous significance it might well become the lodestar by which you guide your life from this moment on. Here, in one succinct sentence, is the secret of living right in a world gone wrong. I call it *AGod's Guide to Glorious Living*.[@] Listen --

ABrethren, 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 on toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.[@]

Henry Thoreau once remarked ,

Alts alright to build castles in the air, provided we put foundations under them.[@]

It seems to me Paul's statement of less than half a hundred words sets out three stupendous foundation stones upon which you can build the castle of your dreams: an abundant and rewarding life. The first of these foundation stones is --

Concentration

AThis one thing I do . . .[@] Paul is saying successful living is a matter of focus. He is making the point that no life can be very great, or very happy, or very useful, without this element of concentration, or right focus.

Many a person has missed the mark in the Christian life, not from any lack of interest, or intent, but from being caught in the crossfire of competing loyalties. As a result, his objectives become confused. His energy dissipated. His influence lost.

But, as D. L. Moody once said,

Alts amazing what God can do with even a simple man if he has all of him.[@]

For God to have all of *you* requires that, with an unsophisticated singleness of purpose, you join the apostle Paul in saying, AThis *one* thing I do . . .[@]

It's Paul's contention that AGod's Guide to Glorious Living@ calls for a concentration of concerns. It requires that the focus of your life must be Jesus Christ. That won't be easy. In fact, it may set up conflicts within you at first, but, in the end, it will bring joy.

I said, ALet me walk in the field.@
God said, ANo, walk in the town.@
I said, AThere are no flowers there.@
He said, ANo flowers, but a crown.@

I said, ABut the sky is black,
There is nothing but noise and din.@
He wept as He sent me back,
AThere is more,@ He said, Athere is sin.@

I said, ABut the air is thick
And fogs are veiling the sun.@
He answered, ABut souls are sick,
Souls in the darkness undone.@

I said, AI will miss the light,
And my friends will miss me, they say.@
He answered, AChoose tonight,
If I am to miss you, or they.@

I pleaded for time to be given.
He said, AIs it hard to decide?
It will not seem hard in heaven
To have followed the steps of your Guide.@

I cast one look at the field,
Then set my face to the town.
He said, 'My child, do you yield?
Will you leave the flowers for a crown?'

Then into His hand went mine,
And into my heart came He.
Now I walk with a light Divine,
The path I had feared to see. (George MacDonald)

Whenever we begin to talk about this matter of focus in life, many of us find ourselves caught on the horns of dilemma. On the one hand are those things we have been taught are *Asacred*. On the other hand are those obligation we consider to be *Asecular*.

Under the heading of *Asacred* are those matters which spring from our faith. Prayer. Bible reading. Hymn singing. Church attendance. Under the heading of *Asecular* are those activities we shares with every human being. Eating. Sleeping. Working. Loving. In an attempt to walk a tightrope between these two kingdoms, we often find our self in a state of bewildered frustration.

The tragedy is that this sad dichotomy of life is nowhere taught in the New Testament. The Lord Jesus Christ, who is our example, knew no such divided life. He taught and modeled a manner of living in which Sunday on Church Street and Monday on Main Street were two sides of the same coin.

Something sad and sinister creeps into your life if you try to practice a kind of spiritual isolationism which divides what you do in your work place on Monday from what you did in your worship place on Sunday.

George MacLoud, leader of the famous Scottish Iona Group said,

“Christ was born in a stable, not a palace. He was a carpenter, not an altar boy.” Shepherds and plowmen, fishermen and merchants, debaters and judges, widows and travelers, *these* were the actors in God's drama.

“Marketplaces and lines of the unemployed, bits of money and needles, these were the scenes and stage properties in which God's plot for our salvation were portrayed.

“When Jesus died, it was outside a city wall, outside holiness, at a common garbage heap. Not in a cathedral between two candles, but on a cross between two thieves!”

Christ had no detached, isolated ministry. He was out among everyday people living everyday lives. His parish was the world. The *real* world of folks caught up in a hand-to-hand struggle with stern reality.

When St. Paul set down as the first foundation stone for successful living the necessity of concentration -- of right focus in living -- he was not suggesting you downgrade the secular side of your existence. He was urging that you upgrade it by doing *everything* to the glory of God, so *every* act is performed for *his* praise and dedicated to *his* purpose.

That doesn't mean everything you do will be of equal importance to God. Paul's making of tents was not equal to his writing of this letter to the Philippians, but *both* were acceptable to God and both were true acts of worship.

You will do yourself a king-sized favor *if* you cease thinking of *your* work as a Christian layperson as being less sacred than *my* work as your pastor. *If* you recognize that *real* Christian living is not a matter of full-time *service*, but full-time *devotion*.

Be faithful to God in that calling to which *you* have been called, whatever it is! Commit yourself to seeking God's will for you *there*. When you do, there will be both temporal and eternal significance in everything you do, and everywhere you do it. Concentration. The first big word in *A God's Guide To Glorious Living*.[@] The second foundation stone for successful living is --

Cancellation.

Paul goes on to say, A Forgetting those things which are behind.[@] Here the apostle is making a case for wise forgetfulness.

The word of God is clear that there are some things we should *not* forget. *Remember*[@] is a word which sounds like a trumpet blast throughout scripture. But this particular text reminds us that along with wise remembering, we must engage in wise forgetting, too.

Paul is not calling you to the forgetfulness of *repression*, that deadly device whereby you bury in the depths of your sub-conscious mind the unpleasantness of the past. Repression is a negative force which can destroy you. God's word would never commend that. Rather, Paul is calling you to the forgetfulness of *relinquishment*, whereby you cancel out the negative power of past sins by submitting them to the healing balm of God's forgiving grace.

There are lessons to be learned by looking back. St. Paul would not deny that. However, successful living lies in putting your backward look in about the same ratio as the rear view mirror of your automobile is to the windshield. In that way you can see where you have been, and learn the lessons you need to learn from those experiences, while at the same time the major thrust of your living is reaching for that which lies before you.

Ever since I knew I'd be preaching on this text today, I've been brooding over this phrase, *A the things which are behind*.[@] Someday I'm going to preach an entire sermon on those five words because for me, at least, there is real romance in them.

“The things which are behind.” My! How that phrase fires the imagination! What images are conjured up by those words. We haven't time to do much with it this morning, but let me list a few of “the things which are behind” which ought to be canceled out through wise forgetting.

Our False Standards of Success

One of these is our false standard of success. My favorite Texas joke, as you must know because I've told it before, is about a wealthy Texan who directed in his will that he be buried in his Cadillac convertible. The grave diggers dug a gigantic grave, and a huge derrick was brought into the cemetery. The funeral director drove the baby blue Cadillac up to the grave side, got out, and moved the deceased behind the wheel. The top was down, the man was all decked out in a flashy sports coat, slacks and a ten-gallon hat. The derrick swung around. Hooked onto the Cadillac, picked it up, and swung out over the grave. As the “Caddy” was lowered into the grave with the Texan in it, one of the mourners turned to another and said, “Man, that's living!”

It isn't, of course, and one of the tragedies of our time is that our values are all confused. As a result, the world is full of people who are making good livings, but poor lives. I suppose the shortest biography ever written is that which describes Methuselah. It consists of one sentence:

“And all the days of Methuselah were nine hundred sixty and nine years,
and he died.”

In all his nine hundred plus years he did not achieve anything worth remembering. Somewhere along the line he got out of touch with things, and left the world no better for his having been here.

Many a man with a far shorter span of life than that of Methuselah, is missing much of the potential which could be his, because, while he may have speed, he has no direction. While he is constantly going someplace, he is never getting anywhere. He is captive to a false standard of success. Desperately he needs to learn the truth enunciated by Edward Markham when he wrote,

“We are blind until we see
That in the human plan

Nothing is worth the making
If it does not make the man.®

So be done with a false standard of success. Cancel it out through wise forgetting as one of those things which are behind.®

Our Failures

Another of those things which are behind® that deserve to be forgotten, are our failures. There is an old saying to the effect that, "The best of men are but men at best.®" Everyone who knows anything about life, knows it is not one long succession of successes. Life is comprised of mountaintops and valleys. Victories *and* defeats.

If you meet life with your eyes wide open, you can learn from your blunders and failures. You can use them as bridges toward that better day of which you dream. But, once having learned the lesson they can teach, cancel out their power to build fear and doubt into your life by including them among those things which are behind.®

Our Victories

The same must be said of our victories. Somewhere I read it is always better to go to the house of mourning, than to the house of feasting. I'm inclined to agree. In the house of feasting your spirit is lifted up, and as the Bible says, "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.®"

A cute little story has helped me keep success in focus. It's about a young man who went to work for a large company as a stock boy. After a month he was made a salesman. After three months he was promoted to division manager. After six months he became vice president, and at the end of his first year, the head of the company called him in, announced he was going to retire, and had selected him to succeed him as president.

It was an amazing story of success. From stock clerk to president in one year. However, the young man seemed to be unimpressed. In exasperation the president said, "Aren't you even going to thank me?" To which the lad replied, "Oh, yes! Thanks, Dad!"

I like that story because it serves to remind me that all things come from God and if it were not for the incredible generosity of our Heavenly Father we would all be paupers. So cancel out the potential menace which lurks in your successes. Cancel out the temptation to let the past be an opiate to greater conquests in the future through wise forgetting. Include your victories, as well as your defeats, among those things which are behind.

Sins

Do the same with your sins. Folks, I hate to tell you, but there are times when, looking through the rear-view mirror of my life, I am appalled at my capacity to sin. And then, in my moment of deepest darkness, I am lifted out of my despondency by the unfathomed grace and divine forgetfulness of God! And, oh --

How many things He will forget.
Our every sin, and yet
He will remember and reward
The smallest service done for our dear Lord.
Divine forgetfulness, unfathomed grace,
And love that knows no time or space.

Heb. 8:12 declares emphatically that God is prepared to Aremember (your) sins no more.@ So do yourself a favor and forget them, too? In Christ you have no past but the past of Christ, and that's perfect. Do you get it? Please say, Ayes.@"

Others

The list goes on and on. Discouragements and despairs. Sorrows and sufferings. Mistakes and indiscretions. Littleness and lack of vision. But for now, let me say just this, whatever is holding you back -- whatever is dividing your loyalty and neutralizing your influence -- *whatever it is*, cancel out its destructive power by praying --

ATo all those things which are behind,
Deaf to the voice that memory brings
With praise or scorn for many things.
Dumb to the things my tongue might tell
Of stumbling or running well.
Blind to the things I still might see
When they come back to trouble me.

Forgetting all that lies behind,
Lord, make me dead and dumb and blind.
Like Paul, I then shall win the race
I would have lost, but for thy grace.
Let me forget what I have done,
>Tis through thee, Lord, the race is won.@"

Unknown

Continuation

And then, let me say a few words about the third foundation stone to abundant living, the stone of continuation.

AThis one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, I press on

toward the mark of the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.®

I think it's here that many of us go wrong. Our failure to experience the fullness of abundant living Jesus promised is *not* from a lack of right focus, or wise forgetfulness, but from a lack of true faithfulness. We suffer from the same malady which has beset our entire generation: a quick impatience which lacks the Aprodigious perseverance and unflagging fortitude which sees life through.®

If you would Amount up with wings as an eagle,® you must learn to also Arun and not grow weary.® To the foundation stones of Concentration or right focus, and Cancellation or wise forgetfulness, you must add Continuation or unwavering faithfulness. You must learn to say with Paul, whatever the cost or consequence, whatever the price or pain or penalty, AI press on!®

When George Mallory, the famed mountain-climber, failed to return from his fatal attempt at conquering Mt. Everest, a group of newsmen asked the other climbers in his party what had happened to him. I was greatly impressed with their reply. They said, AWhen last seen, he was still going strong toward the top.®

May God give you such a spirit of consecrated continuation that, when your days upon this earth are done, it may be said of you, AHe perished in the pursuit of his goal. He was pressing onward. His face was forward. His heart was set on conquering. And when last seen, he was still going strong toward the top!®