

# Forward, and Not Back

by J.R. Miller

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*The sermon emphasizes the importance of looking forward and not back, as it allows us to seize new opportunities, build on our experiences, and grow as individuals.*

**Scripture:** Proverbs 4:25, Philippians 3:13

**Topics:** "Forward Focus", "Living in Hope"

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## Description

J.R. Miller emphasizes the importance of looking forward in life rather than dwelling on the past. He draws from Scripture, particularly Proverbs 4:25 and the Apostle Paul's words about forgetting what lies behind and pressing on toward the goal. Miller illustrates that life is a race where one must focus on the future, as the past cannot be changed or relived. He encourages believers to learn from their experiences but not to be hindered by them, urging a mindset of continual growth and hope. Ultimately, he asserts that true living is about making the most of each day and striving for a better tomorrow.

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## Transcript

It is a good thing always to face forward. Even nature shows that men's eyes were designed to always look forward--for no man has eyes in the back of his head, as all men certainly would have--if it had been intended that they should spend much time in looking backward. We like to have Bible authority for our rules in life, and there is a very plain word of Scripture which says, "Let your eyes look straight ahead, fix your gaze directly before you!" Proverbs 4:25

There is also a striking scriptural illustration in the greatest of the apostles, who crystalized the central principle of his active life in the remarkable words, "This one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are ahead, I press toward the mark." The picture is of a man running in a race. He sees only one thing--the goal yonder. He does not trouble himself to look back to see how far he has come--or how far the other runners are behind him; he does not even look to the right hand or to the left--to catch glimpses of his friends who are watching him and cheering him. His eyes look right on to the goal, while he bends every energy to the race.

That is the picture which Paul drew of himself as a man, as a Christian; he forgot his past--and lived only for his future. We must remember, too, that he was an old man when he wrote these words. Looking at him, we would say there was but little before him now to live for--but a little margin of life left to him. The young look forward naturally, because everything is before them--the long, bright future years, seem to stretch out for them almost inimitably; they live altogether in hope, and as yet have no memories to draw

their eyes and their hearts backward and to chain their lives to the past. But old people, who have spent most of their allotted years and have but a small and fast-crumbling edge of life remaining, are much prone to live almost entirely in the past. The richest treasures of their hearts are there, left behind and passed by, and so their eyes and their thoughts are drawn backward, rather than forward.

Here, however, was one old man who cared nothing for what was past, and who lived altogether in hope, pressing on with quenchless enthusiasm into the future. What was gone was nothing to him--in comparison with what was yet to come. The best things in his life were still to be won; his noblest achievements were yet to be wrought; his soul was still full of unrealized visions--which would yet be realized. His eye pierced death's veil, for to him life meant immortality, and earth's horizon was not its boundary.

The last glimpse we have of this old man--he is about going forth from his Roman, dungeon to martyrdom--but he is still reaching forth and pressing on into the Eternal Before. His keen eye is fixed on a glory which other men could not see, as with exultation he cried, "The time of my departure is at hand. . . . Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown!"

There is something very sublime in such a life, and it ought to have its inspirations for us. We ought to train ourselves to live by the same rule. There is a tremendous waste in human energy and in all life's powers--resulting from the habit of ever turning to look backward. While we stand thus, with arms folded, peering back into the mists and the shadows of the dead past--the great, resistless, never-resting tides of life are sweeping on, and we are simply left behind. And few things are sadder than this--men with their powers yet at their best, left behind in the race, and left alone--because they stop and stand and look backward--instead of keeping their eyes to the front and bravely pressing on to the things ahead!

It is every way better to look forward--than to look back. The life--follows the eye; we live--as we look. But what is there ever behind us to live for? There is no work to do; no tasks wait there for accomplishment; no opportunities for helpfulness or usefulness lie in the past. Opportunities, when once they have passed by, never linger--that tardy laggards may yet come up and seize them; passed once, they are gone forever!

We cannot impress ourselves in any way upon the past; the records which are written all over the pages of yesterday, were made when yesterday was the living present. We cannot make any change on the past; we can undo nothing there, correct nothing, erase nothing.

We may get a measure of inspiration from other men's past--as we study their biographies and their achievements and grasp the secrets of their power.

"Lives of great men all remind us

We can make our lives sublime,

And, departing, leave behind us

Footprints on the sands of time."

Then, we may get something, too, from our own past--in the lessons of experience which we have learned. He certainly lives very heedlessly, whose days yield no wisdom. Yesterday's mistakes and failures, should make the way plainer and straighter today. Past sorrows, too, should enrich our lives. All one's past is in the life of each new day--all its spirit, all its lessons, all its accumulated wisdom, all its

power--lives in each present moment. Yet this benefit that comes from the things that are behind, avails only when it becomes impulse and energy to send us forward the more resistlessly and wisdom to guide us the more safely.

Therefore we should never waste a moment in looking back at our past attainments. Yet there are people who, especially in their later years, do little else. They are accomplished egotists--yet they never have anything but very old heroisms and achievements to talk about. They are talkative enough concerning the great things they have done--but it was always a long time ago, that they did them. All the grand and noble things in their life--are little more than past traditions. Their religious experiences, also, are of old date, and they seem never to have any new ones. Their testimonies and their prayers in the conference-meeting are quite like the tunes of street-organs--the same always every time you hear them; they never get a new tune, not even a new and revised edition of the old one. With mechanical invariableness and endless repetition, they relate the same experiences year after year. They can tell a great deal about what they felt, and what they did--a long time ago--but not a word about what they felt and what they did yesterday.

The utter inadequacy and the unworthiness of such living, are apparent at a glance. No past glory avails, for this living present. The radiance of last night, will not make the stars brilliant tonight; the beauty of last summer's flowers, will not do for the flowers of this summer; the industry of early manhood, will not achieve results in mid-life or in old age; the heroism of yesterday, will win no laurels for the brow today. What does it matter--that one did great things some time in the past? The question is--What is he doing now?

Suppose a man had ecstatic religious experiences ten or twenty years ago; ought he not to have had still more ecstatic experiences every year since? Suppose a man did a noble thing twenty-five years ago; why should he still sound the praises of that one lone deed after so long a lapse of time? Ought he not to have done just as noble things all along his life--as he did that particular day a quarter-century ago?

The ideal life, is one that does its best every day--and sees ever in tomorrow, an opportunity for something better than today. It is sad when any one has to look back for his best achievements and his highest attainments. However lofty the plane reached, the face should still be turned forward--and the heart should still be reaching onward for its best.

The true life has its image in the tree which drops its ripe fruits in the autumn and forgets them, leaving them to be food for the hungry; while it straightway begins to prepare for another year's fruits. What an abnormal thing it would be, for an apple tree to bear one abundant crop--and then never again produce anything each year, but a few scattered apples hanging lonesome on the wide-spreading branches, while the tree continued to glory year after year in its superb yield of long ago!

Is such a life any more fitting for an immortal man--than for a soulless fruit tree? Immortality should never content itself, with any past. Not back--but forward, always should our eyes be bent. The years should be ladder-steps upward, each lifting us higher. Even death should not intercept the onward look, for surely the best things are never on this side--but always on beyond death's mists. Death is not a wall cutting off the path and ending all progress: it is a gate--an open gate--through which the life sweeps on through eternity! Progress, therefore, is endless, and the goal is ever unreachd!

Even the mistakes and the sins of the past--should not draw our eyes back. Sins should instantly be confessed, repented of and forsaken--and that should be the end of them! To brood over them--does no good; we can never undo them, and no tears can obliterate the fact of their commission. The way to show

true sorrow for wrong-doing, is not to sit in sackcloth and ashes weeping over the ruin wrought--but to pour all the energy of our regret, into new obedience and better service! We cannot change the past--but the future, we can yet make beautiful, if we will. It would be sad if in weeping over the sins of yesterday, we should lose today also! Not an instant, therefore, should be wasted in unavailing regret when we have failed; the only thing to do with mistakes--is not to repeat them; while, at the same time, we set about striving to get some gain or blessing from them.

Defeats in life should never detain us long, since only faith and courage are needed to change them into real victories. For, after all, it is character we are building in this world; and if we use every experience to promote our growth, to make us better; if we emerge from it stronger, braver, truer, nobler--we have lost nothing--but have been the gainer. In reverses and misfortunes, then, we have but to keep our eyes fixed on Christ, caring only that no harm comes to our soul from the loss or the trial; and thus we shall be victorious. If we stop and look back with despairing heart, at the wreck of our hopes and plans--our defeat will be real and humiliating! Like Lot's wife, we shall be buried beneath the encrusting salt! But if we resolutely turn away from the failure or the ruin--and press on to brighter things--things that cannot perish--we shall get victory and win blessedness and eternal gain!

Look forward--and not back! Live to make tomorrow beautiful, not to stain yesterday with tears of regret and grief.

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