

## **DWELLING PLACES – Part Two**

### **The Book of Philippians #34**

We spoke last week about dwelling places and how this term describes both our heavenly and earthly places of residence. But we also spoke of the dwelling place to which our minds go – the memories that propel us back through space and time to places which are both pleasant and unpleasant.

As we said last week, memories are like windmills that are constantly turning once powered by the winds of thought. Choose something to think about and the memories of time will start revolving, the escalator of past events will start moving, and the engine of emotion will gather steam bringing you to the doorstep of whatever you choose to dwell on.

Pleasant memories are not the problem. The problem comes when we have a store house full of bad memories that we keep locked behind closed doors never seeing the light of day, reeking of rot and decay. It's these unpleasant reminders of the past that turn our memories into enemies rather than friends.

We addressed these emotional dwelling places last week and finished by asking the Lord to help us do what Paul did – to forget what lies behind by fully releasing the pain and shame of past evil deeds – both those we committed and those that were perpetrated upon us.

We traveled this journey by looking at the life of Paul and the advice he gives for overcoming the past and moving on toward the upward call of God in Christ. Last week we looked at the three things which Paul has revealed to us so far, things he did that enabled him to move from the past and fully embrace the future which God was calling Him to.

These were the three things we discovered: He makes a habit of forgetting what lies behind him and presses on to what lies ahead. He rejoices in the Lord always for his cleansing from the past and his hope for the future. He does not experience anxiety because he lets God know of his needs through prayer and supplication. These three things bring the peace of God to the forefront even in the midst of great difficulties. And the peace he experiences guards his heart and mind in the Lord.

There are a few more things which Paul wants to share with us about his journey from the false to the true faith and what he has learned about staying the course and running the race with perseverance (Hebrews 12:1). These are what we are going to start taking a look at today.

The transformation that Paul experienced of the road to Damascus was instantaneous but the journey of righteous living was just beginning. His heart had changed but his mind needed to be renewed (Romans 12:2). The previous dwelling places of his mind had to be swept clean and new places created to hold thoughts of purity and truth. Everything he had learned before, every thought he had placed in his mind, every goal he had set his heart on was now worthless to him (Philippians 3:5-8). And so he tossed it aside as so much rubbish for the sake of knowing Christ more fully.

Perhaps the biggest clue of all as to how Paul was able to do this lies in verse 8 of Philippians chapter 4.

*“Finally, brother, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things.”*

“Finally”, he says. As if to wrap everything he has previously stated in a nice bundle he says, *“Finally brother, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things.”*

To dwell on something is to think about it or to ponder it. Like Mary who wondered at the things which the shepherds told her and pondered them in her heart (Luke 2:18-19), we are to think about and ponder on the things which Paul has described to us.

Paul has already revealed what he did not dwell on or think about - his past and the things which caused him anxiety. Now he reveals to us what he makes a habit of dwelling on - things that are true, honorable, right, pure, lovely, of good repute or commendable, excellent, and praiseworthy. He is telling us that what we think about, what we dwell on, the destinations we let our minds and emotions travel to, the dwelling place we choose to park our thoughts in and on, these must be places of goodness and purity; places where righteousness dwells and not evil; places that hold memories of honor and not shame. For where our minds are allowed to dwell our will and emotions will soon follow suit.

But how can this be done, especially for those who, like Paul, have sordid pasts? It is not easy to forget or to stop thinking about the evil that we have perpetrated or that others perpetrated on us. It is one thing to be granted forgiveness but quite another to live it out. How can we dwell on positive things when so many negative things fill our hearts and minds?

I do believe it is a process but I do not believe it is impossible, no matter how much or how long sin was committed. Paul has already told us his secret – forget the past, press on toward the future, rejoice, be thankful, and pray so that you will experience God’s peace. Now he tells us to think on things that are true, honorable, right, pure, lovely, of good repute, excellent and worthy of praise. The dwelling place for the people of God to reside is in the place where the past has no influence on the present, where the grace of God is constantly being applied to our weakness, and where the thoughts of our hearts revolve around the future God has planned for us.

Let me say that again. The dwelling place for the people of God to reside is in the place where:

- The past has no influence on the present
- The grace of God is constantly being applied to our weakness
- The thoughts of our hearts revolve around the future God has planned for us

Paul could not have successfully embraced the future which God set before him if he could not have released the past. Unlike most of us everyone knew who he was and what he had done. There was no covering up the persecution which he had committed. There was no hoping that a first century journalist would fail to uncover the truth of his sordid past while he was on the campaign trail to spread the gospel. He was too well known. Even the tale of his conversion was tied to what he had previously done. He could not hide from his past. And so he did not. He tells others of what he has done and calls himself the foremost or chief of sinners.

#### 1 TIMOTHY 1:12-16

*“I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because He considered me faithful, putting me into service, even though I was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor. Yet I*

*was shown mercy because I acted ignorantly in unbelief; and the grace of our Lord was more than abundant, with the faith and love which are found in Christ Jesus...*

*“It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all. Yet for this reason I found mercy, so that in me as the foremost, Jesus Christ might demonstrate His perfect patience as an example for those who would believe in Him for eternal life.”*

Paul understood that what Christ had done for him was inconceivable to the human mind. He knew the grace he was shown was totally undeserved. He understood the ramifications and the severity of what he had done, which is why he considered himself the worse sinner of all. But he also understood that the forgiveness granted to him was not dependent on his understanding of grace but on grace itself. It was dependent on God's patience and mercy, something which no amount of shame or regret could negate or overrule.

Grace is not a mathematical equation which can be understood or rejected on its merits alone. One plus one does not equal grace. Grace is an act of God outside human comprehension. It does not have to be understood to be received and it cannot be earned before it can be given. It is a free gift, totally unwarranted by behavior and totally undeserved by merit. This may seem inconceivable to some but that does not make it unavailable to all.

The reason Paul could forget the sinful past that lay behind him was because he fully received the inconceivable. He did not reason it away, he simply accepted what God offered – total and complete forgiveness with no strings attached and no way to repay. He understood the cost was too high for anyone other than God Himself to pay. And God had already paid the ultimate price. One can refuse a gift but refusal does not negate the value of the gift.

#### JOHN 3:16-17

*“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through Him.”*

It is the incomprehensible love of God that grants forgiveness and cleanses us of shame. There is only one condition that God places on His ability and willingness to cleanse us from all unrighteousness and that is our willingness to repent. If we confess He promises to not only forgive but also to cleanse. And not just surface cleansing, but cleansing of body, mind, and soul.

I believe that besides acknowledging our sin and our belief that Jesus is the One who can grant the forgiveness we seek, there are two basic Scriptures which must be believed and received if one is to forget the past and move forward. If these are not believed and not put into practice the past will always be revisited and allowed to re-ensnare us in its cycle of despair.

#### 1 JOHN 1:9

*“If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”*

If we do not believe we are forgiven we will continue to be repeat offenders. If we do not believe our confession leads to cleansing from all our unrighteousness then we will continue to wallow in the

mud of our sin. After all, if we there is no possibility of being clean then there is no need to pretend we are. Staying dirty is our only option because we believe we can never be clean. This is not a true statement but when it feels true to us, it becomes the truth upon which we act.

Most believers don't have a problem with confessing. Confession is not the issue. It is the belief in complete cleansing from all unrighteousness that presents the difficulty. This selective belief is rooted in works rather than faith. Faith believes what God has said is true and receives the cleansing that is promised. Works says that what we have done is too terrible to be cleansed. There is something further we must do for God could not possibly love us enough to simply wipe away what we have done.

This thought of unattainable cleansing is pure speculation stemming from human reasoning, raised up against the true wisdom, knowledge, and power of God (2 Corinthians 10:5). We can choose to believe this lie or we can choose to believe the truth. When we believe the lie we remain chained to our sin and unable to move beyond it. But when we believe that which God has said is true, we put ourselves in a position to walk in that knowledge and receive the cleansing that God has promised; and no amount of opposition will persuade or dissuade us from this path of truth.

Belief is not simply being able to find or recite a verse. Belief is receiving the word of God as truth and acting on it. Why it is so easy for some to accept forgiveness and so hard to receive cleansing is a mystery but is the experience of all a lot of believers. They confess but they still feel dirty. They take step one by faith but stop short of taking step two for their cleansing.

When we buy something online from people we do not know we trust that when we make our payment and give our information to the seller, we will find the product we are paying for at our doorstep in a matter of days. Yet when we come to the Living God with whom we have a personal relationship we put in our order for forgiveness but do not expect to receive cleansing to land at our doorstep. Why we trust a retailer of goods and not the Retailer of Life is hard to understand. Yet there it is. Our Visa card is more trustworthy than our grace card.

Paul understood credit. He knew he had used his Sinner's Discover card to charge so much sin to his account that no amount of good deeds could pay off the debt. But when he switched from his Sinner's Discover Card to His Saved by Grace Express Card he found that all his previous debt from his Sinner's card had been transferred over to His Grace card and paid in full. There was no need to be concerned about his past debt because that was paid in full.

This is an example of receiving forgiveness and cleansing. The knowledge that a new account has been set up is receiving forgiveness. The understanding that the debt has been paid in full – that there are no more payments and no more debt collectors - that is what it means to receive cleansing.

Because Paul not only received forgiveness but also cleansing from his unrighteousness he did not let his mind dwell on the past. There was nothing to dwell on. The consequences of his past were wiped clean. So he left the past behind and pressed on toward the goal of attaining the kingdom of Christ. He paid it no more mind than we would a credit card that we had paid off and cut up, never to use again.

Paul believed that if he confessed his sin, God was faithful and righteous to forgive him his sin and to cleanse him from all unrighteousness. This is not to say that his past never occurred but rather to say the sting of his past was gone and the debt for his sin was paid in full. And he put this belief into practice every day. If we believe this to be true (and it is) and put this into practice (as we should) then

there is no reason for us to be dwelling in the past or allowing our minds to think on things which they should not. As God has freely given Himself to us we are to freely give ourselves to Him. We are to let God transform our minds so that we can release the past to Him, trust the future to His care, and allow the indwelling Spirit to keep our minds focused on those things which are true and lovely.

#### ROMANS 12:2

*“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.”*

The natural mind of man does not automatically think about true and lovely things without it turning quickly to sinful thoughts. That is why we must be led by the Spirit of God and not by our flesh. Even so, our enemy is constantly tempting us to think wrong thoughts and continually feeding us misinformation in order to twist the truth (*“Our battle is not against flesh and blood”* – Ephesians 6:12). Jesus said the devil has been a liar since the beginning. The same devil that tempted Jesus with his lies is the same devil that tempts us with lies. But Jesus said we would know the truth and the truth would set us free. So it is significant that the first thing Paul tells us to think about is whatever is true.

We are then told to think on things that are pure and lovely, to set our minds on the things which are above rather than the things which we see here on earth. There is a reason for this, a reason why this is not an unreasonable request. We have been crucified with Christ, buried with him, and raised to life with Him. We are no longer citizens of earth but rather citizens of heaven (Hebrews 11:13-16). We are no longer children of the earth but children of the living God (1 John 3:1). Which brings us to the second Scripture that must be believed and received if one is to forget the past and move forward.

#### ROMANS 6:4-7

*“We have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin; for he who has died is free from sin.”*

Those of us who dwell on the past are like those who have been raised from the dead but choose to continue to wear our grave clothes. Either from unbelief or from lack of understanding, we continue to keep our minds centered on the grave in which we were trapped rather than on the freedom which we gained when Christ commanded the stone to be rolled away and the grave clothes to be laid aside. For some reason we cannot believe that we have been raised up to a new life. We still believe we are in the grave of our sins. Even the light of day and the help of friends cannot dissuade us from our false beliefs.

When Lazarus was raised from the grave he came out wearing the strips of burial cloth that encased him. The Scriptures say he was *“bound hand and foot with wrappings, and his face was wrapped around with a cloth”*. Jesus knew that Lazarus, though he was no longer dead, could not move about in freedom as long as he continued to wear the clothes of death. So he commanded those around to *“Unbind him, and let him go”* (John 11:43-44).

Sometimes we need the help of those around us to loosen the grave clothes of death that restrict our freedom of movement. But our freedom starts first with hearing the word of God and obeying it. Lazarus heard the voice of the Lord calling out to him from the grave. Because the word of God contained such authority his body and his will responded and he hobbled out of the grave still bound by



his past.

So the first step in leaving the past behind is to hear the word of God and obey it. All who have accepted Christ as their Savior and repented of their sins have taken this initial step. We have left our life of death and hobbled into the light because the power of God's word convicted and compelled us to change. But that is only the first step. The second step is applying the truth of the Word of God to everyday life.

The influence of the Word of God does not stop at salvation. It continues to penetrate every aspect of our life as we grow in the grace and knowledge of God (Hebrews 4:12). It is able to penetrate through our past so that we might be free of the things that hold us in restriction. We must allow the Spirit to unwrap the grave clothes of our past and take away the blinders from our eyes so that we might walk in the newness of life that has been freely granted to us.

Though the gospel has the power of God behind it to break the chains of our past (Romans 1:16), it has no effect on those who choose not to believe it (Hebrews 3:19). Though all are called to newness of life, only those who believe actually receive it. Moses reminds us that both life and death, the blessing and the curse are set before us. And he tells us to make a choice.

DEUTERONOMY 30:19b-20a

*“So choose life in order that you may live, you and your descendants, by loving the Lord your God, by obeying His voice, and by holding fast to Him.”*

The children of Israel saw God perform many miracles in front of their eyes yet they refused to believe He cared for them. Throughout their journey they continued to long for the Egypt of their past. It's amazing how a little distance from slavery can cause you to forget the horrible conditions you once experienced. Even with God leading the way, the pull of Egypt was strong. And so they constantly looked back to what they had, reimagining what they used to call slavery as a life of blessing and longing to return to it.

Their unbelief blinded their eyes to the true blessing. Their refusal to submit to God's truth caused their human eyes to see mistrust where there was only provision. Not willing to submit they rebelled. Having rebelled they missed the blessing. Having missed the blessing they forfeited their lives, exchanging the grave of Egypt for the grave of the desert.

We too can choose to live in the land of the past, to continue to dwell in places where we have been and allow them to continue to hold us captive; or we can choose life, to not only leave the grave but to be unwrapped from it as well. It is a choice of the will and it is a choice of the mind. But it is primarily a choice of belief.

Because he allowed Christ to completely unwrap his grave clothes Paul was able to rejoice in tribulation, pray without ceasing, leave His anxiety in the hands of the Lord and experience the peace which only comes from complete trust. His mind was not stuck on reruns. He was creating new stories of life and peace. He turned his thoughts from the lies of the past to the truth of the present. His thoughts were tuned to whatever was true, whatever was honorable, whatever was right, whatever was pure, whatever was lovely, and whatever was of good repute. If there was anything of excellence and anything worthy of praise he set his mind to dwell on these things.

Paul's secret to a successful life in Christ is plain to see. He did not dwell on the past, he left the past behind. He did not dwell on the trials of life but rejoiced in all things. He did not give in to anxiety but prayed with supplication and thanksgiving, giving his anxiety to God. And in his thought life he dwelt on things that were true and honorable, right and pure, lovely and of good repute and on anything that was excellent or worthy of praise. As a result he experienced the peace of God which did not make sense given the circumstances in which He found himself; for the peace he found was not a result of the events of his life but rather the result of obedience and trust in the One who promised never to leave or forsake him.

Some of you may be wondering if God promises peace, as Paul claims he does, why does He seem so distant at times? Why when I pray do I still feel anxious? Why is this promised peace so elusive? There is more to say on this subject and next week we will look at how Paul puts all these together as he reveals his final secret to experiencing the peace of God in the midst of life's troubles. Over the course of the next several weeks we will also look at the how the by-products of this peace work out in our attitudes and actions.

But for now let us remember this: the place where we choose to let our minds dwell will determine the pattern and the direction of our lives. God has placed before us life and death, blessing and curse and we can choose to dwell on any of them. But the dwelling place where the children of God should reside is in the place where the past has no influence on the present, where the grace of God is constantly being applied to our weakness, and where the thoughts of our hearts revolve around the future God has planned for us.

And this is the journey to that dwelling place: Forget what lies behind, press on toward the upward call of God in Christ, rejoice in all things, let your requests be made known to God through prayer so that you are not anxious about anything, and set your mind on things that are pure, true and right.

#### PHILIPPIANS 4:8

*“Finally, brother, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things.”*