



**"A FUTURE IN  
YOUR PAST"**

A Sermon by

Dr. John Paul Carter

**Broadway Baptist Church  
Fort Worth, Texas**

---

Vol. XIV

November 17, 1974

No. 3

---

Scripture Reference: Philippians 3:4a-14

Kris Kristofferson said somewhere, "I have a great future in my past." What he meant, of course, was that the sources of his songs and ballads are the experiences which he has lived, remembered, reflected on and set to words and music. But there is an even deeper truth for us here. For in a deeper more profound sense, there is a future in our past.

If the 20th Century has taught us anything about man — it is the influence of a person's past, especially the early years of life, on his present. Psychology and the other behavioral sciences have clarified what we already had experienced and suspected: that, as Carlyle Marney puts it, "There is a cellar set of drives from behind us. The unconscious is relevant, some days dominant, and most days determinative." Much of the time we live out of loyalty and/or rebellion toward the leaders of that little battalion of the family in which we grew up.

Robert Frost has an insightful poem called "A Brook in the City," in which he talks about a one-time country stream that has been long since covered up by the building of a metropolis. He muses:

. . . . But I wonder  
If from its being kept forever under  
The thoughts may not have risen that so keep  
This new-built city from both work and sleep.

I did not understand fully what he was talking about until I moved to our present house. We bought the house in the middle of one of those hot Texas summer drouths. The hillside seemed as solid as a rock. But the first time it rained for a week the water stood and seeped into the house, the yard was boggy for days, and water ran mysteriously but constantly from a neighbor's yard across their driveway and into the street. When we asked about it a neighbor told us the truth about that seemingly high, dry hillside. Long before the city came and covered it over there was a spring-fed creek there. Now, everytime it rains heavily the springs come to life again. They have been covered up by houses, concrete and asphalt, but they are still active and influential! How like our lives that is! We cover up the past with progress and forget it is there, only to be rudely awakened when storms and crises threaten our lives. Sounds like a parable Jesus once told about the two men who built their houses on different foundations!

How great is the influence of the unremembered, unexplained past on our present and future lives and relationships! As Newman and Berkowitz remind us "Each of us creates a kind of working hypothesis which says, 'This is what life is about.' We do that when we are very young and these theories are often very ingenious and really help us to survive. The trouble is that too often we do not revise them as we grow older and gain more experience. We keep fitting new experiences into the old slots . . . .Often when we think we are responding to actual people and events, we are merely assigning them parts in the inner novel we have been writing all our lives." Another way of saying this is that we carry our mother and father and other significant authority figures around inside of us long after we have left home and become adults. We continue to react to life as though we were still small children at home. Sometimes as adults we embrace without question what our parents said, or what we

thought they said about life and its values. Dictums like, "Follow in your father's footsteps," or "Children ought to be seen and not heard" or "a parent's goal in life ought to be to leave his children something." The only problem is that we are not our parents and the circumstances of our lives may be quite different. Sometimes the messages are confusing. A parent says one thing with words and another with their actions. Like, "Get a good education" but "if you ever appear to know more than me, I'll reject or hit you." Or, "Find a good mate and get married" but "Don't get too close to anyone because you can't trust people." Thus adult life becomes confused and vacillating.

Other people spend all of their lives rebelling against their parents long after they are physically free from their control. They rebel and are irrationally angry at any authority figure: society, boss, spouse, teacher, church or government. They do this even when to co-operate would bring them those goals they are seeking to achieve. My parents took great delight in me and my achievements as a child. I thank God for the affirmation that I felt. But I also felt some frustration and anger because sometimes my mother wanted too much, too fast. Long after I was grown I refused to push where aggressiveness and legitimate self-interest were called for and appropriate. I would claim nothing for myself, not out of humility, but out of unknowing rebellion toward a situation that had long since passed. And when I did seek something for myself, it was indirect and passive rather than straight and open. My wife, Kay, could make a suggestion or ask a question and I would snap back in anger for no apparent reason. I was, without realizing it, still responding to my mother, not to my wife. Our past is often potent in the present.

Our unexamined, unacknowledged past also makes us unable to see ourselves and each other in the proper perspective. We tend to forget that we all start at different places in life no matter how similar our surroundings may have been. Unless we are aware of the rocks from whence we are hewn we may be in danger of much frustration, the result of unreal expectations. What may be an unacceptable show of temper to you may be the culmination of another's struggle to control his anger. You started at different places. What may be easily achievable by another because of his

gifts and background may be impossible for you to achieve. But it does not mean you are inadequate or dumb, only that you were given different gifts. What happens in one family may have a totally different meaning in another one. As a result you may read rejection from another's act that was taken by him to be only standard operating procedure or even a sign of love. When we do not understand where we started, we may overlook or underestimate very real and difficult progress made by others or ourselves. How we need to know where we have been – for ourselves, our friendships, our work and our marriages!

Many times parts of our unexplored past which haunt the present are unresolved feelings such as anxiety, guilt, and especially anger. Sometimes our controls are healthy but at other times we repress feelings, forgetting that we ever felt them. Growing up in this world is a difficult and often frustrating experience. Hence there is much anger. However, it is not the feelings that destroy us, only our failure to deal with them. Gradually, over the years the pressure builds until it takes its toll relationally, emotionally or physically. It weighs us down as unfinished business and poisons our systems. That is why the Biblical witness calls for the quick and conscious resolution of anger. "Don't let the sun go down on your wrath." "Leave your gift at the altar and go be reconciled with your brother." Feelings from the past, unresolved and set on the back burner to simmer, generally boil over or explode.

So there is a future in our past in ways we would like to forget. But if we look for them, it does not take long to find some of the more obvious examples. By this point you must be asking what remembering our past has to do with a Biblical text which talks of "forgetting" what is behind. I hope you would raise that question! It is a good one.

Far from forgetting his past in the sense of shedding it like an old coat, Paul has just remembered the shape of the rock from whence he came: "Circumcised on the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the law a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; touching the righteousness which is in the law blameless." That past is at least a part of the irrational inner struggle that Paul describes in Romans 7: "I can will

what is right but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.” What Paul was talking of forgetting and leaving behind was not simply his past but those injunctions that held circumcision up as an essential rite and the legalism that went with it. (Incidentally, he gave up his legalism but not his Jewishness in the best sense of the word.) He was saying that in order to get on with life, relationships and mission he was redeciding what it took to survive and be accepted and loved by God, himself, and others. Before Paul could put it behind him in the sense of canceling its power, he had to remember, identify and name it.

You and I too often want to forget it before we have ever remembered it. That is where our past gets much of its power over us. We could all write about our past as Paul did. For me it would read something like this: “A baptized (immersed) church member by the age of 9, the only son of a white, Anglo-Saxon middle class American family; as to denomination a (Southern) Baptist; as to dedication, committed to the ministry at 14, earning 4 degrees after high school graduation; as to church rules and regulations, almost spotless.” Those were the broad contours, the details are there upon closer inspection. (Sometimes those things are important in the present — but sometimes not.) What would your past sound like?

We, like Paul, need to remember our past so that we may deal creatively with it. The shape of his struggle is the shape of our struggle also: to become aware of what we thought as children we had to do to survive and be accepted by the big people, parents and God Himself. And beyond that we are called upon to become aware of the difference in that and the fact of our acceptance by our Creator as His good creation — both in our strengths and weaknesses and our likenesses and differences. Paul had to come to the realization that life does not, as he had believed as a child, hang upon circumcision and legalism. In Christ he came to see that life was found as he actualized that which was already his. He did not have to earn it but rather to more fully accept the gift of God’s acceptance of him and others in Christ. No matter how we learned to do life, that is where it is for us, too. Good news! We can get off the treadmill of trying harder. We do not have to rebel because we are free. We can denounce as a lie



that "the Father only loves us if . . ." By faith in Christ we can claim the great "You're O.K." of God about ourselves and others. We can embrace all of our past, in its light and its darkness because we are forgiven. We can choose that which is most appropriate for today in our present relationships and turn down the volume on the rest. (In their best moments this is what our parents would want us to do!)

When we do that our past becomes a beautiful, creative force for the future. Then we can more effectively reach out to claim that for which we have been claimed. How beautifully we have seen the past creatively used in our midst. We all have been enriched as our pastor has shared out of his growing and his suffering. In the last two Sunday nights the sharing of our laity in the "Faith at Work" emphasis has been a helpful mirror held up to us for our own pilgrimages. Being in touch with our past can also make us more sensitive to the needs of others and can free us to minister to them on the basis of their need rather than our own. The effective Christian knows what it is that he has forgotten as well as that for which he is striving.

What I am suggesting for us is that, because there is a future in our past, faith and commitment of ourselves to Christ is far more than we sometimes have admitted. In the last 20 years we have had to enlarge our view of God as Creator because we realized that the universe is more vast and complex than we had ever imagined. What is true for outerspace is also true of our inner-space. I am just now realizing some of the reasons for the disciples' (and our own) slowness of faith. Somehow Jesus understood and was patient with them while they were in the process of becoming. There is a question which the modern Christian must ask as he reads the New Testament: "How much more light does the knowledge of my century cast on the meaning of Scripture?" Knowing what I know about myself and my "cellar set of drives from behind," how infinitely richer becomes Paul's statement in I Corinthians 13: "When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became a man I gave up childish ways." Those hard statements of Jesus about loving Him more than father and mother mean more than I ever imagined when I thought He was talking merely about a geographical separation from ungodly parents. And the leaving of

father and mother in marriage, we have found, is a life long inward task begun but not completed at the altar.

When we first committed ourselves to Christ and each other it was like Balboa thrusting the tip of his rusty sword into the vast uncharted Pacific Ocean. The first time he saw it he claimed everything that its waters touched for the King of Spain. For all his dedication he could not begin to fathom all the hinter ground that took in or the centuries it would take to explore and actualize his claim. Just so with us when we commit ourselves to Christ and each other — we make the widest and highest possible claim. But it is a commitment which includes not only the present but the past, not only the conscious but the unconscious and the preconscious. One aspect of life in right relation to the Father, ourselves, and each other has to do with going back and discovering, exploring, charting, settling, civilizing and, yes, Christianizing those vast reaches of nearer ground. It is saying: "I claim me for you and for Christ" and then setting out on that inner journey to find out what that commitment means. It means pressing on toward the goal for which Christ laid hold of you.

There is a future in our past. When we are not in touch with it, it drives and controls us. But when we remember and deal with it — embrace it, explore it, civilize it, celebrate it — that past can become a friend and a catalyst for the future. We can then set down our own landmarks by which to live of love, justice and power. There is nothing that can separate us from the love of God — except ourselves. Therefore, let us get on with the inward journey that enables the outward journey. Let us remember so that we can "forget" and press on.