

Phil 3:13

¹³ Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

My son Miles is 2 years old. Cute kid, you see him running around everywhere on a Sunday. He's at the age where running is the greatest thing. He's learnt how to run so he's going to run. And the best part of running is that he likes to be chased. I don't know why it's a thing, but he wants you to chase him. I think it'd be absolutely terrifying to be constantly chased by someone 4 times bigger than you, but for some reason, he enjoys it. So what he'll do is he'll start running and he'll look back at you and say, "Chase, chase!" and expect you to run after him while he screams for his life.

The problem with this activity is that when he's running away from you, he'll also constantly look back at you to see where you are. And as you can imagine, when he is running as fast as his two year old legs will carry him and not looking ahead, he runs into everything. BAM, corner of the table. BAM, wall. BAM, tripped over the dog. BAM, stepped on his sister. Sometimes he's riding his bike and BAM, crashed into a tree. He's just constantly running into things and falling over and injuring himself. So when he runs and he looks back, we keep on saying, "Watch where you're going!" Look in front of you, look at what's ahead, watch out for obstacles.

I think that we can do exactly the same thing in our lives. We can get easily distracted looking back, looking around, looking everywhere except where we're going and where we want to go. Sometimes, we don't even know where we want to go, so part of the distraction is that we're looking to the left and right and all around because we don't know where to focus.

For me, it's getting caught up in looking at the year past, regretting the things I didn't do that I said I would, not finishing what I started, or even just looking back trying to remember what happened this year.

At the end of the day, all of this is with the idea that if I can figure out 2023, then I can start 2024 better, right? And I think for all of us, we can easily get distracted looking at everything else except what's ahead. It's easy to fall into the trap of overthinking and basically, end up complaining and whining about the year that was.

The problem is that if we want to end 2023 strong and start 2024 with better things, we actually need to have the right focus. So today, I want to talk about how to do those two things – ending this year strong and starting next year with better things.

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The bible actually tells us to forget what is behind and to strain toward what is ahead. For now, I want to just focus on the idea of forgetting what is behind. You know sometimes, the biggest obstacle to ending the year well is that we're holding on to everything that happened this year. And

not just the difficult things and the things that have been hard, sometimes, it's even the successes and the things that went really well.

And yet, the bible says, "forgetting what is behind." How do we forget what is behind? How can we just forget the pain or the success that has marked our lives in such a significant way this year? How can we just forget grief that we feel? How can we forget that relationship that was broken? How can we just forget that debt that isn't just going to go away tomorrow? Conversely, how can we just forget that promotion or new blessing? How can we just forget that transition into the next stage of life? How can we just forget that successful new job?

Let me share two stories to help us figure this out.

Luke 17:11-19.

¹¹ Now on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus travelled along the border between Samaria and Galilee. ¹² As he was going into a village, ten men who had leprosy met him. They stood at a distance ¹³ and called out in a loud voice, "Jesus, Master, have pity on us!"

¹⁴ When he saw them, he said, "Go, show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were cleansed.

¹⁵ One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. ¹⁶ He threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him—and he was a Samaritan.

¹⁷ Jesus asked, "Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? ¹⁸ Has no one returned to give praise to God except this foreigner?" ¹⁹ Then he said to him, "Rise and go; your faith has made you well."

These 10 lepers went to Jesus with a sickness, went to the priests and were healed along the way. And nine of these lepers would have just kept on going with their lives, telling everyone what happened, but imagine what their life was like after that moment. This amazing miracle happened, they were healed, and it would have marked the rest of their lives, but it would be like hearing that you won this incredible prize, celebrating that you won it, and never claiming it. Their skin was healed, but their soul was the same. They received their healing, and then just went on with their lives. Jesus was just the guy who healed them, nothing more. They didn't come back to praise and thank God.

But look at this Samaritan who was healed, then came back to Jesus, praising God, thanking Him. Jesus says, "rise and go." After the Samaritan thanked God for his healing, Jesus told him to go. Praise God, then keep on going.

Your miracle and blessing and provision and God given success is only complete after you come back and give Him praise. **Thanking and worshipping God is the appropriate response.** To prepare for the better things that God has for you next year, you need to thank and praise and worship God for what He's done this year. **Praising God completes the miracle.**

Deut 8:10

¹⁰ When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the Lord your God for the good land he has given you.

Deut 8:17

⁷ You may say to yourself, "My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me." ¹⁸ But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth

If we don't go back to praise Him for it, God's not ready to bless us with something new simply because we've forgotten to thank Him and praise Him for what He's already done. When all the good has been poured out in our lives, we need to go back to God and thank Him, praise Him, and worship Him for it. Our appropriate response to God's goodness is always worship.

Our second story is in *2 Sam 12:20*. This is the completely opposite situation. How do you forget what is behind when everything has been difficult. How can you just not carry it with you when it's been a year that you would love to forget, but it's too painful to just let go.

Now in this part of scripture, we read about David going through one of the most difficult situations that any person could ever go through. We read about David navigating the death of his infant son. David is praying and fasting, lying on the ground in sackcloth, hoping that the child would live, but unfortunately, his son dies. And when David finds out that his son has died, this is his response.

2 Sam 12:20

²⁰ Then David got up from the ground. After he had washed, put on lotions and changed his clothes, he went into the house of the Lord and worshiped.

I'm not going to pretend to understand how difficult this situation would be and how hard it would be to do this, but what I know the bible says is that the appropriate response in any and every situation is to worship.

Have you worshiped God yet? I'm not talking about crediting God for it or saying that it was God who did it, I'm not saying that you should angrily worship God because it's His fault, I'm saying that in spite of what has happened, in spite of how painful it was and is and might even continue to be, have you just worshiped God yet?

Hab 3:17

*¹⁷ Though the fig tree does not bud
and there are no grapes on the vines,
though the olive crop fails
and the fields produce no food,
though there are no sheep in the pen
and no cattle in the stalls,
¹⁸ yet I will rejoice in the Lord,
I will be joyful in God my Savior.*

*¹⁹ The Sovereign Lord is my strength;
he makes my feet like the feet of a deer,
he enables me to tread on the heights.*

Though it does not, yet I will.

I don't know what might have happened in your life this year, but can I encourage you this morning that you can still worship God, you can still praise Him, you can still rejoice in Him, you can still lift up His name, you can still declare who He is, you can still give Him praise and glory and offer yourself as a living sacrifice to Him.

When we worship God, we forget what is behind. The word 'forget' in Philippians 3 doesn't mean to not remember, it actually means to not hold on to and to not dwell on. It means that even though it has happened to you, you don't need to carry it around with you.

And whether this has been the greatest year of your life or the worst year of your life, it's not time to dwell on it and carry it into next year. Our appropriate response, whichever year it has been for you or if it was somewhere in between, is to worship God.

If we end this year with worshipping God, we end this year strong. We forget what is behind.

Heb 12:1, 2

Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, ²fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.

Praising God allows us to throw off everything that hinders. The good, the bad, the difficult, the blessings, the pain, the success, the myriad of things that happened that could hinder us for next year, we praise God, throw all of that off, and move forward.

We're about to finish with a time of communion and prayer, but let me just wrap this up with one more thought.

How do we start 2024 as a year of better things?

Heb 6:9

we are convinced of better things in your case—the things that have to do with salvation.

Next year will be a year of better things, the things that have to do with salvation, if we would just fix our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.

I love that the scripture says to run with perseverance the race marked out for us. There's a race that God has marked out for you to run, and it's not the same as someone else's. The path that He has for each of us is different to one another. What that means is that if we want to run the right race, if we want to be on the right path, the first thing to do is to not try and run someone else's race.

But God makes it really easy for us. If we want to run the race that has already been marked out for us, which is a long term race, it requires perseverance, then we just need to do one thing – fix your eyes on Jesus.

Matt 6:33 tells us to seek first His kingdom and everything else will be added to us.

If we want to run our own race well, fix your eyes on Jesus. Look at where you're going. Don't look back, don't get distracted, just look at Jesus. So don't go into next year trying to make better things happen for yourself, go into next year fixing your eyes on Jesus, journeying with Jesus, spending time with Jesus, and He will bring better things in 2024.

So church, can I encourage you this morning, that we can end this year strong and be ready for the better things God has for us next year. Regardless of how this year has been for you, the appropriate response is to worship Him, is to praise Him, and thank Him, just for who He is, for His love, His goodness, that He has been faithful time and time again. It's not based on circumstance or the things that have happened, we can praise God for the very fact that He is God.

Psalm 92:1, 2

*¹It is good to praise the Lord
and make music to your name, O Most High,
²proclaiming your love in the morning
and your faithfulness at night*

The scripture tells us, without any other qualification or justification, that it is good to praise the Lord. It then says to proclaim His love in the morning and His faithfulness at night.

When you proclaim God's love in the morning, it's actually declaring in advance that God is going to be who He says He is, it's declaring in advance the good things, the better things, that God has in store for you. It's praising and worshipping God before anything has happened, that He loves you, and if He loves you, He will bless you, He will give you good gifts.

And then it says to proclaim His faithfulness at night, because after the day, the month, the year, we can still praise God for what He's done, we can declare that God is faithful to us. It's not saying that nothing bad will ever happen, it's simply proclaiming a truth – that at the end of it all, God is faithful.

Imagine if we would end this year proclaiming God's faithfulness, praising Him for being faithful, and then start next year by proclaiming His love, that He has better things in store for us in 2024. In one day, we would end 2023 strong and would start 2024 ready for what God has for us as in our own personal lives, the lives of our families and friends, our connect groups, our church, and then the impact that would have on our community, workplaces, and the world at large. We would all start the year different, ready, and prepared, our eyes fixed on Jesus, for a year of better things.