

MAKING PROGRESS

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Progression

Regression is one step forward, two steps back. Some feel they are not getting anywhere in life. A step forward seems to be answered with two steps backward. A Christian has teaching which halts spiritual and emotional regression, no matter the circumstances of life, which may never be reversed whether the category is social, vocational, or even financial. One who was headed in the wrong direction spiritually was the former Saul of Tarsus. After he obeyed the gospel (Acts 22:16), as the apostle Paul he wrote critical information showing how a Christian could make progress toward a rewarding goal. Of particular interest is the fact that at the time he was writing on the subject with lasting merit, he himself was incarcerated for his principles and preaching. In one of his four “prison epistles” he wrote, “Brethren, 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 toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 3:13-14). Observe what went into Paul’s teaching on making progress or progression.

Realization

“Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended....” A realization emerges from this part of his statement acknowledging that he was not yet where he should be. Paul’s perception is shared with other Bible writers like Peter, who said, “But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and for ever. Amen” (II Pet. 3:18). And, James, who wrote, “Wherefore lay apart all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness, and receive with meekness the engrafted word, which is able to save your souls” (Jas. 1:21). John added, “Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God: therefore the world knoweth us not, because it knew him not. Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is. And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure” (I John 3:1-3). And, lastly Jude said, “But ye, beloved, building up yourselves on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Ghost, Keep yourselves in the love of God, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto

eternal life” (Jude 20-21). Realization may be the most difficult element to acquire in order to begin making progress.

Determination

“But this one thing I do....” Paul gave thought to many concerns daily. For example, in addition to external encumbrances such as his imprisonment, he once spoke of his daily care of all the churches (II Cor. 11:28). But, that to which he refers in this phrase is his determination to focus on a reasoned course of action that would cause him to be more at peace with himself and more useful in God’s service.

Obliteration

“Forgetting those things which are behind....” Students of Paul’s life know what he needed to forget. He told King Agrippa, “I verily thought with myself, that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. Which thing I also did in Jerusalem: and many of the saints did I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I gave my voice against them. And I punished them oft in every synagogue, and compelled them to blaspheme; and being exceedingly mad against them, I persecuted them even unto strange cities” (Acts 26:9-11). He effectively could not continue to serve Christ while doting on the past. Like Joseph when he came to power in Egypt and named his firstborn son Manasseh because God had made him to “forget all my toil, and all my father’s house,” Paul had to obliterate from his memory a heinous past.

Concentration

“And reaching forth unto those things which are before....” In addition to reading (I Tim. 4:13), meditation (v. 15), and study (II Tim. 2:15), Paul expressed the need to bring “into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ” (II Cor. 10:5). The determination to act or do yielded the motivation to obliterate from conscious thought the hindrance of an evil past and concentrate on “the things which are before,” that is, personal, spiritual growth and maturity (Phil. 3:12).

Destination

“I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.” Imagery from the ancient athletic games, which were the forerunners of the modern Olympic games, is used by Paul to express the intensity of the effort expected not only of himself but surely of all who would seek the same prize. The

notion of pressing toward the mark draws a word picture of the sprinters a fraction of a second before they cross the finish line leaning forward and stretching their bodies to their fullest extent in the hope of winning the race. The “high calling” is the gospel by which sinners learn what is expected of them in order to be saved (II Thess. 2:14). Once saved by the grace of God through their obedience to the gospel (Rom. 1:16; 10:16; Hear the word of God--Rom. 10:17; Believe Christ is the Son of God--John 8:24; Heb. 11:6; Repent of sins--II Cor. 7:10; confess Christ--Rom. 10:9-10; and be baptized in order to be saved--Mark 16:16; I Pet. 3:21), the Lord adds such as should be saved to his church (Acts 2:47), which is the unique body of the saved (Eph. 5:23). Those who are saved must “give diligence to make your calling and election sure” (II Pet. 1:10). The “high calling” is in Christ, and the only way a penitent believer can get into Christ is by baptism (Rom. 6:3; Gal. 3:27).

Paul believed he made sufficient progress to be awarded the “crown of life” or heaven. Near the end of his life he wrote, “For I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing” (II Tim. 4:6-8).