

FINDING OUR FOCUS FOR 2017

Selected Scriptures

Introduction:

Today is the first day of a new year – 2017. Over the past few days I have been hearing and reading comments from many sources about what a negative and disappointing year 2016 has been. And I guess, if you look at the news, it certainly seems that way – Brexit, vicious American election campaign, shootings and mass murders, terrorist attacks (Brussels, France, Berlin), Fort McMurray wildfire, deaths of celebrities.

But what about the all the good things that happened this past year. Polls show that most people, when asked about their own personal lives, said that things were actually pretty good for them this year. There are thousands of stories of people helping other people, of people sacrificing themselves to help those around them, or loved ones.

But, regardless of how we see the year behind us, we are now at the beginning of a new year. Before us stretches a vast ocean of uncharted waters. We have no idea what the year before us will hold. Will it be good or bad? Will we enjoy good health or struggle with illness?

This morning I want to take a few minutes to try to prepare us for the year ahead. As we embark on our journey for 2017, I suggest to you that New Year's Day is a good time to try to focus our thoughts. I want to lay out for you today 4 different directions in which we ought to look as we try to get ourselves focused for another year. We begin with...

An Upward Look

The first thing we ought to do, today and every day, is to turn our eyes heavenward. We need to take time to focus on God, to get a fresh glimpse of His majesty, His magnificence, His glory. We need to worship Him. For it is only as we get our view of God straight, that the other areas will fall into place.

We have many examples of people who did this in the Scriptures, but perhaps no one more obvious than King David. David was a man

who knew how to worship. He seemed to be able to block out all other thoughts from his mind and focus on the wonder of God himself. Let me read a few of his writings:

- Psalm 47 – the power of God
- Psalm 63 – His desire for God
- Psalm 96 – Exalting God

An upward look - today, and every day we need to look up and exalt our great God.

A Backward Look

Another important area of focus as we stand at the threshold of a new year is to look back over the past – the past year, or even longer.

There is an important reason for this and it is not nostalgia. It is not because we want to live in the “good old days”. In fact, that is a real danger for many people. The reason for taking a good look back is to remind ourselves of God's faithfulness. As we look back at how God has led us this year, we are reminded of our dependence on God.

Again, we have some examples in Scripture, but probably none more complete than Joshua, as seen in his instructions to the people of Israel. Let us look at some Scripture:

- Joshua 4:1-7 – reminders of God's provision and faithfulness
- Joshua 23: 1-3, 14 – give setting – end of Joshua's life

Yes, there is a place to look back – what better time than now, as we stand looking at another year, before us. Let us look back at how God has been faithful, how He has led us over the past year, and when we do, we cannot help but be struck with the truth that we are totally dependent on Him.

Illust. – MEASURING YOUR LIFE

I did a bit of figuring and calculated that, as of today, I have lived a total of 22,160 days. As I look back and reflect on those days, I see God's mercy in providing daily nourishment, maintaining physical health, furnishing every emotional need, and most of all, meeting every spiritual need. I cannot help feeling a deep sense of overwhelming gratitude. I think of the patriarch Jacob who praised the Lord as he blessed his son, Joseph, saying, “The God before whom my fathers, Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has been my shepherd all my life long to this day,” (Gen. 48:15)

Surely, as we look back over the past year, and beyond, we can see God's providence and leading in the affairs of our lives. And can we not say, with the hymn writer, "All the way my Savior leads me, What have I to ask beside Can I doubt His tender mercy, Who through life has been my guide? Heavenly peace, divinest comfort, Here by faith in Him to dwell! For I know whate'er befall me, Jesus doeth all things well."

A Forward Look

-focusing on the goal. It is also important that we look ahead. We look back to see God's faithfulness, but we cannot live in the past. We must look to the future – look at what lies ahead, and move ahead with confidence. We cannot live our lives with our eyes buried in nostalgia, we must press on. Again, we find a great example in the Scripture, in the person of the Apostle Paul.

Philippians 3:10-14 – read and discuss Paul's desire in life, his goal, his ambition, and his work.

God has called us for a purpose – to make us like Christ, among other things. What plans are we making to bring that about? What effort are we putting forth to make that a reality? Look again at what Paul says in vv. 13-14.

As we stand at the threshold of another year, we need to approach it as Paul did each day of his life. We need to put the past behind and move on into the future. Think of all we have in Christ:

- Forgiveness
- Cleansing
- a new beginning

Today, tomorrow, the next day – they are not yet tarnished. They lie ahead of us to be used, either to move closer to our eternal goals, or to be wasted on our own temporal passions. Which will it be?

Heb 12:1-2 – "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, 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. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."

Review – Focusing our vision for a new year

- A look up – focusing on God and worshipping Him
- A look back – focusing on our dependence on God and His leading and provision
- A look ahead – focusing on the goal and striving toward it

Conclusion

As we conclude, I would like to mention one other area to consider. That is – An Inward Look. The New Year is a good time to look within ourselves and ask a few important questions to assess our own spiritual growth and devotion to God.

- Am I stronger in my faith now than I was a year ago?
- Have I grown in trusting God?
- Do I spend any more time in the Word and prayer than I did last year?
- With how many people have I shared my faith over the past year?

I trust that this coming year will be one of growth, of maturing for each one of us. Let us make Paul's goal our goal.

Read Philippians 3:10-14.