

## 2CH Sunday at 7.30

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Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

### Looking back

Presented by Alan Best

Good morning. I was recently planning some upcoming activities and I was struck by how important my diary is to me. I'm sure that nearly all of us have a calendar or diary that we use to help organize our lives and some of us would struggle to function if ours was lost. We often spend quite a lot of time considering possible dates as we plan events, both big and small, and if we are busy people we will also find ourselves looking at the present day to see what appointments we must keep.

When we consult our calendar or diary, when we commence a new year, or when we celebrate a birthday or anniversary, we may find ourselves looking back and remembering events that have taken place during previous days, weeks and months – and we also find ourselves looking forward in anticipation of things that are yet to happen.

I would like to spend our time together today thinking about some of the things that may happen when we look back.

For some people, looking back can be a negative experience because their memories of the past are dominated by failures that they are afraid of repeating – these failures may have occurred in any aspect of life, including education, sport, career or relationships. Some people have grown up being told that they were useless and would never amount to much, so they find themselves paralysed by the fear of being hurt again. For some others, looking back brings awful reminders of how they were abused psychologically or physically, and these experiences have left deep emotional scars that strike at the heart of their self-worth.

Whatever our past, the clear message of the Bible is that we are all valuable in God's sight. He gave us life and His arms are open wide to receive and care for us. The Psalmist understood his value in the sight of God so he wrote this in Psalm 139: *For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;* And Jesus reminded people of their great value to God during the Sermon on the Mount when He said: *Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?* (Matthew 6:26)

Are you held captive by past failures or mistreatment? Please remember that what God thinks of you is far more important than the things others may have said about you – He is able to deal with the things that others may have done to you. The damage may be severe and the recovery slow, but God invites you to give these things to Him, trust Him, and start to experience the joy of being His child.

For some other people, looking back brings a reminder of conflicts that remain unresolved, so their lives are consumed by resentment and anger. In the Apostle Paul's letter to the Ephesians we read, *"Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry."* But there are many who have let the sun go down on their anger hundreds or thousands of times. Maybe you have known of conflicts that have continued for years, even decades. Sadly, these often occur in families and there are never any winners in these situations. They destroy lives and will continue to do so until those who are involved deal with the unforgiving attitude that grips them. If we think this doesn't matter very much, we need to hear the words of Jesus when He said: *For*

*if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins. (Matthew 6:14-15)*

On one occasion, Jesus and Peter had an interesting discussion about forgiveness because Peter wanted Jesus to put a limit on the number of times he should forgive others. But Jesus would not do so. Listen to these verses from Matthew 18: *Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times."*

Friends, we must be willing to forgive if we want to be set free from past mistreatment or conflict – we need to understand that the desire for revenge is like a poison that will destroy us if we do not deal with it, and the Bible tells us that we must not seek revenge. In fact, we are commanded to do the opposite, by seeking the good of our enemies so we will not be “overcome by evil,” but instead, we will “overcome evil with good.” (Romans 12:21)

Then there are those for whom looking back brings the memory of sinful behaviour that looms so large that they imagine they have sinned too badly to be forgiven and receive God’s grace. On one occasion, Jesus was invited to dinner by one of the Pharisees, and during the meal, a woman who was well known throughout that town for her sinful lifestyle entered the house with a jar of expensive perfume. She was crying and wet Jesus’ feet with her tears, after which she wiped them with her hair before pouring the perfume on them.

We read that *“When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, ‘If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is — that she is a sinner.’”* The Pharisee could not see beyond the woman’s sinful reputation – maybe he believed that her sin was too great to deserve forgiveness. But in the exchange that followed, we read these words of Jesus: *“I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven.”* Then He said to her, *“Your sins are forgiven.”* What Jesus did for that woman so long ago He will do for sinners who come to Him in repentance and seek forgiveness, regardless of their past. In his first letter, the Apostle John wrote this to Christians about God’s forgiveness – *“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”* (1 John 1:9) The nineteenth century hymnwriter Horatio Spafford knew the reality of sins forgiven and we find these great words of assurance in his hymn, “It is Well With My Soul.”

*My sin – O, the bliss of this glorious thought,  
My sin – not in part but the whole,  
Is nailed to the cross and I bear it no more,  
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul.*

As we continue to think about the past, there will be others who also have a difficulty with forgiveness – not with God’s willingness to forgive their sins but because they are unwilling or unable to forgive themselves. So they remain haunted and overwhelmed by guilt. But this does not need to be the case, because the Bible tells us that when we ask God to forgive us, He removes our sin and remembers it no more. We need to take God at His word and hand our sin over to Him to deal with it forever. Instead of guilt that continually grips and torments us, we can be set free by the forgiveness of God. The Psalmist understood the extent of God’s forgiveness and wrote this in Psalm 103:

*For as high as the heavens are above the earth,  
so great is his love for those who fear him;  
as far as the east is from the west,  
so far has he removed our transgressions from us.*

Friends, looking back can be a wonderfully positive experience. We are greatly encouraged when we think about the grace of God. While we can remember the time when there was no place for God in our sinful lives, we also remember how we experienced the mercy of God as He rescued us and gave us new life when we put our trust in Jesus Christ and accepted the forgiveness He offers.

We know that this was something we did not deserve and could not earn. We were powerless to help ourselves, but as the Apostle Paul wrote to the Romans, “. . . *God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*” (Romans 5:8) As we think about this truth and God’s grace towards us, we can readily identify with John Newton’s words in his famous hymn:

*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound,  
That saved a wretch like me!  
I once was lost, but now am found,  
Was blind, but now I see.*

If this has been our experience, looking back will also remind us of the blessings of God we receive every day. Throughout the Old Testament, we see that this was true for the children of Israel, and many of the Psalms celebrate God’s goodness, such as Psalm 145, where we read:

*One generation will commend your works to another;  
they will tell of your mighty acts.  
They will speak of the glorious splendour of your majesty,  
and I will meditate on your wonderful works.  
They will tell of the power of your awesome works,  
and I will proclaim your great deeds.  
They will celebrate your abundant goodness  
and joyfully sing of your righteousness.*

Like the Psalmist, we can take great comfort and encouragement from our own experiences of God’s goodness to us as He has loved, guided and cared for us. And He doesn’t change, because unlike us, with our ability to be unreliable and inconsistent, He is the same yesterday, today and forever.

Looking back can be a worthwhile experience. But we must not allow this activity to rule our lives, especially if our memories are negative. As somebody has said, “*There is no future in spending the present worrying about the past.*” Of course, it is equally true that we cannot afford to live in the past if we have happy memories, and this can be a danger as we grow older, especially if current events make us afraid or dissatisfied. God calls us to trust Him completely, and when we do, we can confidently confront the events of our past and face the challenges of the present because we know we are in the care of our loving heavenly Father.

As we do so, we will discover that our experience is reflected in these words from another hymnwriter, Thomas Chisholm:

*Great Is Thy Faithfulness, O God my Father!  
There is no shadow of turning with Thee;  
Thou changest not, Thy compassions they fail not:  
As Thou hast been Thou forever wilt be.*

As we conclude our time together, I pray that God will bless, comfort and encourage you as you continue to think about these things.