

## **“FALL BACK, SPRING FORWARD”**

**Philippians 3:4b-14**

**A Sermon by John Thomason**

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I once saw a sign in the window of a Starbucks coffee shop around this time of year. It showed three containers of coffee sitting side-by-side, inviting customers to make a choice. The first was a standard-sized cup labeled “Tall.” The second was a bigger cup labeled “Grande.” The third container of coffee was not a cup at all, but a large bucket. It was labeled, “The Day After Daylight Saving Time Starts”!

The sign acknowledged what many of us feel when we have to adjust not only our wall clocks but our body clocks. We feel sleep-deprived, hung over, and need a pick-me-up like coffee in sizable quantities. When Daylight Saving Time starts, our challenge is compounded by the fact that we must first remember to change our clocks and then also remember to change them in the right direction. Fortunately, someone came up with a slogan to orient us to the correct time: “fall back, spring forward.”

On this 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent, our Epistle lesson is a reminder that you and I not only have wall clocks and body clocks; we also have spiritual clocks which need to be adjusted periodically. In his letter to the Philippians, we find the apostle Paul setting his own spiritual clock, and setting it in the right direction. Much like you and I do each year on a Saturday night in the early spring, Paul makes a conscious choice not to fall back into the past, but to spring forward into the future.

Paul’s choice is remarkable, because he has plenty of reasons to fall back into the past, to remain focused on bygone days which, in his case, are filled with both shame and glory. I was recently reminded of the complexity of Paul’s past when I watched a movie entitled, “Paul, Apostle of Christ.” It’s a fictionalized but plausible account of the last few weeks of Paul’s earthly life. The story picks up when the apostle is imprisoned for a second time in Rome, now awaiting execution at the hands of the Emperor Nero. He is visited by one of his companions on his missionary journeys, the physician and evangelist Luke. Over a series of poignant conversations, Paul dictates his memoirs to Luke. In hospice care today, dying patients are often encouraged to engage in a similar kind of process called a “life review.” It’s a form of oral history in which one thinks back on one’s life and relates significant memories to another person. A life review is an effective way of bringing one’s life to a close. In the movie, this is exactly what Paul does in his conversations with Luke. Paul is close to death; he’s naturally looking back on his past; and what he sees is a checkered past, a mixed pattern of good choices and bad choices, lofty achievements and staggering losses.

In the movie portrayal, Paul clearly looks back on his life with a measure of regret. Specifically, he still bears the weight of guilt about his actions as a young Pharisee. In his zeal to uphold the Jewish Law, he persecutes Christians, hunting them down and executing them like criminals. And so, as an old man Paul is tempted to fall back into remorse and self-loathing over dark deeds he cannot undo.

I dare say this is a temptation that some of us struggle with – to look back on our past and focus on our missed opportunities, stupid mistakes, and moral blunders. I'll never forget what a man once said to me from his deathbed in a hospital room: "There are so many things I would do over if do-overs were possible." God knows, we could all say that! The grim reality is that you and I cannot change what we've been or done in the past. But throughout his epistles, Paul reminds us of a deeper reality: the past cannot be changed, but it can be cleansed. By the grace of God, the failures in our past can be forgiven, if not forgotten. Therefore, we have no cause to fall back into despair; instead, we're called to spring forward into hope.

As Paul does his "life review," his memories are certainly not all negative; he also recalls his positive experiences – the special identity he inherits as a Jew and the monumental effort he makes to be a righteous Jew. "If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh," he says, "I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of the Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless" (Philippians 3:4b-6). Do you hear it? Paul is tempted to fall back into the past in another way: by indulging in nostalgia – obsessing about the good ol' days when he was somebody special both by birth and by achievement.

Over the years I've known older people who can talk only about their younger years. They stop creating new memories and fixate on their old memories. But it's not just the elderly who fall back into the past and get stuck there. I read about a woman in her mid-forties who was counting the days until her high school reunion. Her life in the present was dull and drab; she felt she hadn't amounted to much as an adult. But she remembered her days in high school as glamorous and exciting. She had been born into a wealthy family and lived a life of privilege. When she got to senior high she became a cheerleader and a class officer. She ran with the popular crowd. Back then, she was somebody! And she couldn't wait to turn the clock back at her high school reunion and be that person again – someone whom others looked up to.

Let me ask you: do you ever feel that the best days in your life are in your rear-view mirror? Do you ever define who you are in the present by who you were in the past? If so, you're in good company, because no less a figure than Paul struggles with this same tendency. As a righteous, zealous young Pharisee, he is a big man on the Jewish campus. As he grows older he's tempted to relish his past achievements and rest on his laurels. And yet, here in Philippians, he goes on to make an astonishing statement: "Whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ" (vv. 7-9).

With all this talk about gains and losses, Paul sounds like an accountant during tax season; but between the lines we feel his heartbreak. Paul has it all and then loses everything – property, potential for making money, his Jewish friends, his high status, perhaps his wife, assuming he is married. As Paul looks back on his life, he not only feels guilt; he also feels grief; and a lot of his fellow Christians are grieving with him. Most of them suffer financially because they refuse to strike deals at pagan temples and no longer curtsy to the emperor's claim to total devotion. Families are ripped apart; husbands dispense with wives who convert to the faith; Christian children are disinherited by their parents; Nero burns Christians as torches in his

garden. Today, you and I may sing, “my richest gain I count but loss,” but what losses have we really endured because of our faith in Christ? Perhaps nothing more than a bit of free time on Sunday mornings. But still, still, all of us here have experienced losses in our lives and the searing pain that goes with them.

One of my early heroes in the ministry, Carlyle Marney, once served as the pastor of a prestigious church in Charlotte, North Carolina. One Communion Sunday, he stood before his congregation and spoke the following words: “What a bunch of losers we all are.” Of course, he wasn’t saying that they were losers in the competitive sense; nearly everyone in his audience was successful and affluent. He was simply acknowledging that each of our lives is marked by major losses, no matter how much money we have in the bank. Over the years we lose jobs, relationships, dreams, cherished family members, and then finally our own health and strength. The question becomes, how do you and I regard these losses? Do we remain fixated on them and paralyzed by them? Or, by the power of God, do we summon the courage to put our losses behind us and anticipate the gains we might derive in the future?

Don’t miss this important detail here in Philippians: Paul loses everything, but his old identity and security are not merely taken away from him; he surrenders them voluntarily! He chooses to give up something good in order to receive something better. He exchanges a life based on trying desperately to please God for a life that is grounded in God’s grace. He exchanges the security of his past for the adventure of God future, even if it brings loss and suffering. “This one thing I do,” Paul says: “forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus” (v. 13).

And then he says, “Let those of us who are mature be of the same mind . . .” (v. 15a). Friends, I cannot think of a better agenda for each of us during the Lenten season. If you and I are focused only on reminiscing and regretting, it means that we’re stuck in the past, when God’s future is stretched out before us. Perhaps it’s time for all of us to re-set our spiritual clocks – not to fall back, but to spring forward.