

Series Title / Forward

Our God-given Mission and Vision

Introduction: Looking back, we can see how God has been at work. Doesn't it always seem easier to see what God has been doing in hindsight. I can see his hand at work in my life, the people, the circumstances, the trials, the successes and defeats—all conspiring together to move me forward in my discipleship to Jesus.

As a church we've been on a growth trajectory for some time now:

- We've baptized scores of folks into Christ;
- Helped countless people financially and in terms of material resources through our Samaritan ministry;
- We've added new families, new staff, new programs; full team rosters; and your gracious giving has been stellar.
- And we've tried some things that haven't worked. Some initiatives that didn't take—and we learned from that.

Transition: Today we're beginning a series called *Forward: Our God-given Mission and Vision*. Our theme Scripture for this series is found in **Philippians 3:12-14** *"¹² Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ¹³ Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."*

Series Overview

Looking Forward: Today we're talking about 3 fundamental skill sets for developing a heart that looks forward not backward.

Pressing Forward: How do we forget what is behind us and press, or strain forward to the high calling of God in Christ?

Called Forward: Jesus is going to call us out of the crowd—to public discipleship.

A Forward-Looking Vision: Upward, Inward, Outward

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Let's start today's message with a story: It's the story of the Jewish people in Jesus's day...

Jesus grew up in a day when the expectation for a Messiah-king was very high. This was due in large part to the convergence of several factors:

(1) The Jews had been reconstituted in their land after years of exile. God had promised through Isaiah and Jeremiah that he would return them to their land and bless them and through them the nations.

(2) Politically, they had won their independence from Greek rule not too long ago—nearly 170 years earlier—the Hasmonean family ruled in Israel for 80 years—that's nearly a century of freedom, independence. The Feast of Hanukkah is their Independence Day celebration.

(3) A fractured Hasmonean claim to the Jewish throne led to Roman rule in 37 BC. The Romans cut a deal with Herod the Great who rebuilt Judea and region in the image of Greco-Rome. Rome gave him unprecedented autonomy and freedom and the people loathed him. Herod knew that he was not a descendent of David and so did the people. They also knew that Herod was an Edomite, a descendent of Esau not Jacob. As such, he could never claim the Messiah's throne. There are numerous prophecies in the OT about the downfall of Edom—God promised to restore Israel not Esau.

As a result, the Israeli people were heavily taxed to pay for these public renovation projects remaking their Jewish heritage in the image of Rome.

There is a seething anger, a smoldering anti-government resentment toward the usurper king who sits on David's throne and antipathy toward the Gentile power that pulls his strings.

(4) Some Jews even tried to do something about it. Under the leadership of **Judas the Galilean** (a title; patriotic nomenclature)—and in protest they marched against Rome with the stories of the revolutionary war of the Hasmonean sons: **Peter, John, Matthew, Judas, Lazarus, (not NT disciples—but 160 BC revolutionaries).**

So Judas the Galilean—recruits men from Galilee and leads a revolt against Rome and is crushed. Rome has a particular way of sending a message to a conquered people: **thousands of crosses strewn across the hillsides of Galilee with all their sons, fathers, and grandfathers dying an agonizing and prolonged death.** The message is, if you do this again, we'll kill you and put you on these crosses too.

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After Herod dies his sons squabble and scramble to divide up his kingdom—Rome has to step in and appoint their own direct Governor named Pontius Pilatus. He is a particularly ruthless governor who comes with all the accoutrements of Rome including 6000 Roman soldiers camped out in your holy City. Peace-keepers.

And for the faithful Jew who believes that God has restored them to their land, showed them the way of restoring their own independence (through military revolt); it seems as if the world cannot get any worse than it is.

And the people cry out for solace, comfort and consolation.

And a little humble Jewish girl and her husband who had this miracle baby present him at the temple to be circumcised according to the Mosaic law.

Lk 2:25

Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was **looking forward to the consolation of Israel**, and the Holy Spirit was on him. ²⁶ It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. ²⁷ Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, ²⁸ Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:

²⁹ **“Sovereign Lord**, as you have promised,
you may now dismiss your servant in peace.

³⁰ For my eyes have seen your salvation,

³¹ which you have prepared in the sight of all nations:

³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and the glory of your people Israel.”

“This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, ³⁵ so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

What do we do when we feel as though we are living in the last days; we feel like the world is just collapsing in on itself; the culture has become so far gone that it just can't be rescued? What is our consolation in the midst of it?

We look forward. How do we do that?

Like Simeon...

1. We acknowledge God's sovereign plan. His prayer begins with a central truth of the Jewish faith. There are two senses of the term "Sovereign": (1) As Sovereign freedom; maximal libertarian freedom; (2) As Sovereign Ruler. Acts 4:24 "'Sovereign Lord,' they said, 'you made the heavens and the earth and the sea, and everything in them.'"

How do we apply this truth about God?

- **Know that God is Sovereign over the nations (Dan. 2; Isa 6; Acts 17:24-27)**
 - Daniel 2 and the vision of 4 successive kingdoms leading to an everlasting Kingdom—according to God's plan.
 - **Acts 17:24-27** "The God who **made the world and everything in it—he is Lord** of heaven and earth—does **not live** in shrines made by hands. ²⁵ Neither is he **serv**ed by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives everyone life and breath and all things. ²⁶ From one man he has made every nationality to live over the whole earth and has **determined their appointed times and the boundaries of where they live.** ²⁷ He did this so that they might seek God, and perhaps they might reach out and find him, though he is not far from each one of us."
 - **1 Tim 6:15** Concerning the appearing of Christ and his judgment of the nations, Paul says, "God will bring this about in his own time. He is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings, and the Lord of lords." God comforts us with the knowledge that there is a high king of heaven who sits on the throne and is Lord over his creation.
- **Know that God is Sovereign over the Church**
 - **Isa 28:6** "So this is what the **Sovereign Lord** says: "See, I lay a stone in Zion, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation; the one who relies on it will never be stricken with panic." We are reminded that when our lives are built on the foundation of God's stone in Zion, Christ Jesus who is the foundation stone on which the church is built—we will avoid being stricken with panic over the crises in our culture. Who is your foundation?
- **Know that God is Sovereign over our lives:**
 - **Ps 71:4-6** "Deliver me, my God, from the hand of the wicked, from the grasp of those who are evil and cruel. ⁵ For you have been **my hope, Sovereign Lord,** my confidence since my youth. ⁶ From birth I have relied on you; you brought me forth from my mother's womb. I will ever praise you."
 - **Rom 8:28** "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." Being rooted and grounded in God's sovereign plan is the key, it's the antidote to fear. It's how you and I can resist the temptation to look backwards toward calamity and instead look forward—because we have the consolation that a Sovereign God is presiding over human history. That he is head and Lord over the church and our mission; that he is the Sovereign Lord of our lives—who cares for us, provides us, leads and guides and commands us to follow his will.

2. We keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, the author and finisher of our salvation. “For my eyes have seen your salvation,³¹ which you have prepared in the sight of all nations:³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel.” After all these years, now his eyes have beheld the consolation of Israel. In the same we, you and I can rest from worry when our eyes, our attention is focused on Jesus, the author and finisher of our salvation.

He is a light of revelation to the Gentiles. The people walking in darkness have seen a great light. And we rejoice that we have been included in the family of God, the promises and inheritance of Israel. This is the mystery of the Gospel. That God has welcomed and invited Gentiles now to share in Israel’s hope of the Kingdom of heaven and resurrection glory. Come what may, we sustain our gaze on Christ who is Lord of all.

- **We focus on Jesus in discipleship.** God’s plan for us is to conform us to the likeness of the Son. Our focus needs to be on becoming like Christ in his character, in his example, and in his teachings.
 - **Rom 8:29: (28)** God works all things for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. “For those he foreknew he also predestined to be **conformed to the image of his Son**” We tend to think in abstract predestinarian terms about this, philosophically. But God wants us to be conformed to the pattern of Christ’s teaching and his character as our model for life.
- **We focus on Jesus the hope of the church.** His return is our hope.
 - **Titus 2:13** “While we wait for the blessed hope, the glorious appearance of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.” We keep our eyes focused on Jesus who is, as Simeon the Jewish prophet said, a light of revelation for the world—and the glory of Israel. We fixate on his character that we may be conformed into the compassionate, sympathetic, truth-telling son. We want to know Jesus that we might become like Jesus in all that we say and do.
And we keep our eyes fixed on the day when he will return in glory to catch us away with him, to reign and rule over the nations, and translate us into the Kingdom.

Whatever situation unfolds, we trust that God is sovereign over it and that we are part of his salvation plan to bring as many as possible into the light.

The people who stay on mission to proclaim the gospel to the community and the nations—that people will experience consolation.

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As a church we are called to fix our eyes on Jesus, who is God's light those in darkness and the hope of Israel.

3. We devote ourselves to prayer.

Luke 2:36-38 "There was also a prophet, Anna, the daughter of Penuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage,³⁷ and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying.³⁸ Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to **all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.**"

Two characters in the story, one a devout Jewish man who had received a prophecy from the Holy Spirit that he would not die until he saw the consolation of Israel. And his eyes saw it. In thanksgiving he praised the Sovereign Lord of heaven and earth—because this child before him was evidence that God had not taken his hand off the wheel—the Sovereign king of heaven is still presiding over the course of human history. And this little child was God's plan to save and inaugurate his rule over the earth.

And the prophetess Anna who devoted herself to a life of worship, unceasing prayer and fasting. Giving thanks to God, she affirmed the child Jesus to all those who were looking forward to redemption.

Our world needs redemption. Our culture needs the people of God who are not fearful, nor panicked but who are anchored in the knowledge of the Sovereign plan and purposes of God.

People whose eyes are fixed on the author and finisher of our salvation.

People who are devoted to prayer because they know that prayer makes a difference. God answers prayer. God's sovereign plan works in and through the instrument of our prayers.

Application and Prayer:

1) **How strong is your view of God's sovereignty? Our experience of fear in the face of bad news is directly proportional to our view of God.** If we have a small god who isn't very capable, isn't in control of anything really, then fear can be our default response. That god is too small for your spirit. Too small to be worshiped. We must enlarge our view of God as Sovereign over all.

2) **How often do you fix your eyes and focus your attention on Jesus?** the Alpha and the Omega—the beginning and the end—the author and finisher of our faith? Are you studying him to emulate his words and actions? Are you meditating on his glorious return to bring an end to the rule of man and fulfill his reign over the nations?

3) **How healthy is our prayer life?** Am I daily drawing life from Christ; strength from the Spirit's presence; faith from God's word? Have I spent more time conversing with others about problems in our culture, listening to talk radio and complaining about these issues than I have spent praying? **You and I can nothing but pray until we pray.**