

# Looking Forward

A while ago, we found my old camera. I had it when I was 18; it's a semi-electronic Single Lens Reflex and it was pretty well state-of-the-art at the time.

My son was fascinated. He'd never seen a camera that uses photographic film. He examined it reverently as though it was an antique – and suddenly I felt like an antique myself. He gazed in awe through the viewfinder and I showed him how to focus and set the aperture. I explained that when you press the button, the shutter lets in light which reacts with the film inside. Then you wind it on to take another picture. You can only take two or three dozen pictures, then you send the film off to be developed, and only then can you look at the pictures you've taken.

“So how does it take movies?” he asked. “It doesn't,” I said. He was appalled.

Determined to maintain some credibility, I assured him that he shouldn't judge the old relic until he'd seen what it could do. So we bought a roll of film, and went out and took some photos. Two weeks later we got the prints back and I had to admit, they're not actually as good as the photos I get from my pocket digital camera.

## The Danger of Nostalgia

Old things have charm. Sometimes it's because their style recalls the tastes and style of a previous age; or the technology is simpler, or the construction seems more robust, or sometimes their fascination is simply due to the knowledge that they've been part of



the lives of generations of people now gone. Old things are a link with the past, and there's romance in that.

Nostalgia has its place – but it can be unhealthy. Wise king Solomon said:

*Do not say, “Why were the former days better than these?” for you do not enquire wisely concerning this (Ecclesiastes 7:10).*

## A World in Decline

People have always been prone to looking at the past with fondness, but perhaps never more so than in our day and age – because all the signs are the world really is getting worse.

The Bible said it would. In his great prophecy, known as the Olivet Prophecy, Jesus warned that this will be a dangerous and fearful time:

*“When you hear of wars and commotions, do not be terrified; for these things must come to pass first, but the end will not come immediately.” Then he said to them, “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. And there will be great earthquakes in various places, and*

*famines and pestilences; and there will be fearful sights and great signs from heaven” (Luke 21:9–11).*

The apostle Paul in his letter to Timothy warned of a decline in morality and behaviour:

*But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power (2 Timothy 3:1–5).*

If you stop and think about your experience of the world you live in, it’s likely you’ll recognise that these are statements that apply to today!

Many people today recognise that the world is becoming an increasingly dangerous and unpleasant place. Some withdraw from it and take refuge in fond memories and fantasies of better times in the past. The Christian, on the other hand, recognises these things as signposts to the coming Kingdom. As Jesus said in the same prophecy:

*Now when these things begin to happen, look up and lift up your heads, because your redemption draws near (Luke 21:28).*

## **Longing for Egypt**

There was an occasion when an entire nation gave in to a severe bout of nostalgia. Early in the Bible we read how God rescued His people Israel from slavery in the land of Egypt, and

brought them out to lead them to the Promised Land. It was a long journey through an inhospitable wilderness, and people being people, they quickly started moaning. They recalled their previous lives:

*We remember the fish which we ate freely in Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic (Numbers 11:5).*

Actually, their lives in Egypt had been terrible: they had “groaned because of the bondage, and they cried out” (Exodus 2:23) – but they’d forgotten



all that! When life in the wilderness got uncomfortable, they looked back. These false memories of Egypt were more appealing to them than the unknown Promised Land.

In the Bible the Christian’s life is compared with the journey of Israel through the wilderness (see, for example, 1 Corinthians 10). He or she has left their old life of slavery to sin, and are travelling through the wilderness towards the Kingdom which God has promised. The warning is there – be objective when you look back!

**“Learn from the Past; Live in the Present; Look to the Future”**

I don’t know who coined this phrase but it’s an excellent piece of advice,

and when you look at it from the Bible's perspective it's particularly profound:



It was foolish for the nation of Israel to yearn for their old life in Egypt, but God did not want them to forget about it. When He rescued them from their slavery He told them to remember the occasion, and He gave them the Passover feast as a yearly reminder of it (see Exodus 12:24-25). Jews today still keep the Passover, observing God's command. As God told them in His Law:

*Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm (Deuteronomy 5:15).*

Many of the Psalms in the Bible are concerned with reminding the Jews about their history. For example, Psalm 78 is largely a poetic catalogue of all the great things God had done for His people, and the many ways they had been foolish and let Him down throughout their history.

It's good to learn from the past, that's how we equip ourselves for the future. But it's not good to dwell on regrets. One of the great liberating blessings of being a child of God is that He forgives, entirely and unconditionally, whatever it is that we may

have done – any and every time we tell Him we're sorry. Foolish or wicked things we've done may play on our minds, but not His. This is what the prophet Micah said:

*Who is a God like You, pardoning iniquity and passing over the transgression of the remnant of His heritage? He does not retain His anger forever, because He delights in mercy. He will again have compassion on us, and will subdue our iniquities. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea (Micah 7:18-19).*



If you're one of those people who puts slogans on their walls, how about this one:

*This is the day the LORD has made; we will rejoice and be glad in it (Psalm 118:24).*

A recognition that God is a God of love and you are in His hands makes for an up-beat outlook on life. Life is a gift, and when (as happens in everyone's life) things go badly, one of the best remedies is to do what the old song says, "Count your blessings one by one!"

The book of Ecclesiastes, the Bible's book of philosophy, asks the great questions about the meaning of life – why we are here and what is the purpose of life. It advises:

*Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might; for there is no work or device or knowledge or wisdom in the grave where you are going (Ecclesiastes 9:10)*



Jesus said this:

*Do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble (Matthew 6:31–34).*

What a brilliant recipe for life! Don’t stress over what tomorrow will bring – trust in God, and live in the present. But notice that phrase in the middle – ‘Seek first the kingdom of God’. This is the critical point for us, and where we should be setting our priorities.

There are some people who have no care for God, and their attitude is “You only live once so enjoy it while you’re here”. There were people in despair who once said, “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die!” (Isaiah 22:13).

That is entirely different from the attitude which Christians should have.

The way to live a good life is not to devote it to having a good time, it’s about making the most of your time.

What does it mean, ‘seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness’? It means to try in your life to be like God; to try to serve Him, by doing His will with your life; and to look forward to the time God has promised when His kingdom will arrive and be a reality on this earth.

The Apostle Paul described it as belonging to God and to His coming Kingdom, and he put it like this:

*Our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to his glorious body (Philippians 3:20–21).*

In other words, we belong to God and our allegiance is to Him, not to the present world order of self-indulgence. We eagerly await the return of Jesus, who will reward those who have ‘sought first the kingdom of God’ with everlasting life.

The Bible is full of promises of the Kingdom that is shortly to be established on this earth. *Glad Tidings* is full of it as well, as you’ll have noticed if you’re a regular reader.

The old camera is back in the cupboard. Life moves on, technology progresses. It’s good to look to the future – especially when you know what the future holds.

*As it is written: “Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him” (1 Corinthians 2:9).*

**Chris Parkin**