

THE POINT OF NO RETURN

by Ray C. Stedman

Anyone who has ever taken a journey knows that in the process you inevitably reach a place that is called the point of no return. It is the half-way mark; you have gone so far that there is no point in going back. No matter what happens you might as well press on and you either reach the goal or your journey is a failure. In these days of extensive air travel we are frequently aware of this point of no return, for by its very nature air travel stresses the importance of this point beyond which there is no turning back.

Now the end of a year is that kind of point in time. On New Year's Eve we realize more than at any other time in our lives that we can never go back in time. Sr. Helmut Theilicke says we think differently on New Year's Eve than at any other time, for then we see time as it really is -- not as a clock with a round face where the hands come back to the same point again and again, but as a flowing river which passes a single point and never returns. On New Year's Eve we feel that we have passed a point of no return. We can look back and remember, but we cannot retrace a single moment of the year that is past. Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher whose writings have attracted so much attention these days, once said, "Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards."

Before us stretches a new year. We have never been to this place in time or in our lives before. Again, on New Year's Eve, we feel as we never do at any other time, though perhaps it is something we ought to feel every single day of the year. We feel the challenge of the unknown, of the unexplored, of the year ahead of us yet to be discovered. Most of us feel a bit of excitement, perhaps a bit of fear, a feeling of weakness as we come into a new year.

This last summer I stood at the entrance to the wooden stockade where Lewis and Clark spent the winter of 1805-06 on the Oregon coast before their return back across the unexplored areas they had traversed but once. As I stood in that fort doorway, I tried to imagine what it would be like to have seen this country for the first time, to explore a land which had never been seen by white men before. In my imagination I tried to picture what they must have seen as they crossed the broad plains and saw the shining mountains in the distance and were continually expecting unknown perils that lay in their pathway. They had no maps, no charts of the region they covered, and they could never know what lay over the next hill, what perils might be theirs or what broad vistas of enchanting scenery would open before them. Such is this time to us, as we come to the close of an old year and the beginning of a new.

At this point some may wonder if there is not some word in Scripture that can help us here. It will be no surprise to you who know the Bible well to discover that in its completeness the Bible has indeed a word for this very hour, and more than one. In the book of Deuteronomy we discover just such a word, an anticipation of the feeling that we experience on this last Sunday of the year. Israel was facing a situation which combined both of the concepts that we have already mentioned. On their way from Egypt to Canaan they had come to a point of no return. They were standing at the edge of the Promised Land, just across the Jordan river, and they could not go back into the howling wilderness behind them. Before them stretched a land of promise, unexplored.

Now I am perfectly aware that the Bible uses this land of Canaan as a symbolic description for us of the Spirit-filled life, the land of promise in which God expects his people to live. But to the degree that every passing year is a mirror of our whole life, this land is also symbolic of the new year to us. It is a land of promise, with possibilities of victory and failure. It is an unknown land, yet to be explored, but there are certain great features of it that can be known to us in advance, just as Moses reminded Israel in the eleventh chapter of Deuteronomy, beginning with verse ten:

"For the land which you are entering to take possession of is not like the land of Egypt, from which you have come, where you sowed your seed and watered it with your feet, like a garden of vegetables; but the land which you are going over to possess is a land of hills and valleys, which drinks water by the rain from heaven, a land which the Lord your God cares for; the eyes of the Lord your God are always upon it, from the beginning of the year to the end of the year." {Deut 11:10-12 RSV}

The first noteworthy thing about this land is that it is a land that needs to be possessed. There are many blessings but they need to be laid hold of, they need to be captured. Israel could have walked through the land of promise and seen it from end to end, but never once lived in it, never taken up residence there. And it is possible to drift through an entire year and never live in it. Life is built like that in so many ways. Time is not the only factor in living. There must also be an intelligent application of knowledge before the passing of time can be called living.

- There are many persons who are living in marriage, but they do not possess the joys of partnership because they are unwilling to put forth the effort in terms of courtesy, love, and thoughtfulness.
- There is many a student who is simply passing through his courses, but his courses are not passing through him, because he is unwilling to possess them through diligence and application.
- There are many who live near the land of health but who are unable to possess it because they will not accept certain forms of discipline or give up certain habits.

There are great possibilities in store for each of us in the coming year, without question. For everyone here who is a Christian there is an unheard-of possibility next year, for God has said,

Eye has not seen, ear has not heard, neither has it entered into the heart of man the things that God has prepared for them who love Him. {cf, 1 Cor 2:9b KJV}

Possibilities, yes, but they remain to be possessed, and it is quite possible to pass through all of next year -- as perhaps we passed through all of this year -- without realizing any of them.

I will suggest quickly three things about how to possess these possibilities. I only summarize that which we have mentioned many other times:

1. Possession must begin first with a desire to possess. If you are content with what you are today, then you will never be any better than you are now; you may become worse. Contentment with what you are has a way of deteriorating ultimately into being very distressed with what you are. If you have no urgent desire to lay hold of more, my counsel to you, as we are standing at the verge of a new year, is, pray that God will awaken in you a hunger and a thirst. Jesus said, "He that hungers and thirsts after righteousness shall be filled," {cf, Matt 5:6}. That is the first thing.
2. Then, you must understand the principles involved in possessing the great heritage of promise. Possessing what God has to give never comes by uncrucified self-effort, religious activity, or pious deeds. Possession comes by learning to act on the basis of a fact already true! Have you learned that yet? The possession of God's blessing is not something God does when we ask for it, but, rather, faith lays hold of what already is in Jesus Christ. If you do not know what that means, then my counsel to you is, study this great principle, study these things until you understand them. There will be no truth you will ever learn that will be more vital, more transforming, more important than to learn that simple truth in experience.
3. Then the third thing about possessing is that you must apply these principles in the present moment. Unfortunately, there are some here who well understand the principles of victory but who do not enjoy them in experience because they do not apply them in the moment in which they live, the present moment. Do not wait to begin tomorrow. Do not wait until New Year's Day. We always think that it is possible to obey God in some other situation, but not in the one in which we are right now. If we were in some other circumstance then we could do what God wants, but not now. We want to wait until after lunch, or next evening, or next week, or next month. Or else we feel that it is too late -- that the hour has passed us by, that we have gone too far down the road, that we have already entrenched ourselves in habits of thought -- that "you can't teach an old dog new tricks." But this is the way of

defeat. We must learn to live in the present tense, for, instead, we live either in the past tense, or in the future tense.

As Major Ian Thomas says, "We say 'Ebenezer, hitherto hath the Lord helped me,' or 'Maranatha, the Lord cometh,' but what we need to discover is the glory of the forgotten tense, the present tense, that God is the eternal 'I am,' the eternal present tense, and that he is adequate for every human need right now."

When we apply that, then we will discover that we are possessing what God has for us to possess. Someone has said, "Life by the yard is hard; by the inch it's a cinch." Try that in the new year.

The second thing you will notice about this land is that it is a land of varied experience. "It is a land," Moses said, "of hills and valleys, which drinks water by the rain from heaven." A land of hills and valleys, the ups and downs of life. The hills are those high places of courage and understanding and fellowship, places of far vision, places of invigorating atmosphere. Life has its hills (thank God for them), but it also has its valleys, the low places, sometimes very dark and forbidding. Or, even if they are pleasant, life tends to be monotonous in a valley. Our vision is limited, our outlook is circumscribed, and it is the "same old thing" day after day.

Now the promise for this land of the coming year is for both hills and valleys, but with each there is the promise of an abundant supply of water -- springs of water fed by rain from heaven. Notice that Moses contrasts this to the way Israel lived in Egypt. He says, "In Egypt you sowed your seed and watered it with your feet." That may be a rather strange expression, but if you have ever watched a farmer out in his field tending his irrigation ditches, you know what he means. Farmers build dams of little piles of earth in the small ditches running out through the fields, and kick them into place. If they want to open up another ditch they simply kick the dam out of the way. So the Egyptians watered their fields from the Nile river and its overflow, by the little dams they built and kicked aside with their feet.

This is an excellent picture of life without Christ, for Egypt is always a picture of that. It was a strange land, half desert, dependent upon the flow of a single river through it and the overflow of that river each spring.

Life without Christ is like that. All the resources of a non-Christian life are artificially arranged. So many creature-comforts are provided -- even when life becomes utterly unbearable, there are tranquilizers! But in the land of promise, the land under the blessing of God, you will find, if you look for them, springs of water in both the hills and the valleys. Water is always a picture of the Holy Spirit. Back in Chapter 8, Verse 7, Moses describes this land further. He says,

"For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs, flowing forth in valleys and hills." {Deut 8:7 RSV}

In both the valleys and the hills! What a picture this is of the supply of the Holy Spirit that is available in the high places where we need God's guidance, God's correction of our vision, God's focus, and in the low places where we need his refreshment, his comfort and his vigor. Jesus said, "If anyone thirst let him come unto me ... out of his innermost being shall flow rivers of living water," {cf, John 7:37-38}. The rivers are not only for you but for those around you, whether in the hills or in the valleys. You will be a blessing to those around. Those are the possibilities of the land.

Then, the third thing is that this is a land of divine concern:

"... a land which the Lord your God cares for; the eyes of the Lord your God are always upon it, from the beginning of the year to the end of the year." {Deut 11:12 RSV}

Now we come to the greatest truth of all. Each year is a land to be possessed, by intelligent obedience to principle. Each year is a land of hills and valleys with hidden springs of water available. But beyond, beneath, and above all these truths is this greater one -- that God is deeply concerned about your life from the beginning of the year to the end of the year.

Do you sometimes feel that your life is of very little significance? Do you ever get the "if onlies"? "If only I

could be here, if only I could be there, if only I had done this." What a depressing experience that is for each of us! Do you look at others and think "Oh, they seem to grow spiritually so much faster than I do. They have so many more abilities and talents than I. There is so little that I can do." Soon discouragement sets in and hard on its heels follows that deadly paralyzer, depression. But remember, there is no such thing as an unimportant Christian! Each one of us is absolutely necessary to the body of Christ -- absolutely essential! God will not dispense with any one of us. That is the story of the ninety and nine is it not? "Lord, you have ninety and nine here in the fold; why not be content with these?" "Oh, no," he says, "there is one that is mine that is not here. I cannot leave him alone." And out on the hillside he goes looking for him. Absolutely indispensable!

Read First Corinthians 12, that wonderful picture of the Body, and Paul's teaching that every part of the Body is indispensable to the Body as a whole. We need each other.

If you feel discouraged, defeated, or insignificant, I suggest that you remind yourself, "I am myself and I am meant to be myself. I am not meant to be anyone else; God does not expect me to be anyone else. Therefore, I must not despise myself, or be constantly comparing myself with someone else. Instead, I am going to live the life that God gave me to live, in the circumstances in which he has placed me, knowing that it is as necessary to the total program of God that his life be manifest in my humanity as much as in the life of the greatest saint who ever lived." Our Lord taught that in the story of the widow's mites. The world pays no attention to mites. Two million, yes, but two mites, nothing! But not in the sight of God! The widow's mite, Jesus said, was worth more than all that was cast in {cf, Luke 21:2-4}, for God does not see as we see; he does not look at the outward things. And the one who is in the place of obscurity and insignificance is oftentimes the one most cared for and most beloved in the eyes of God.

This last week a man said to me, "I want to thank you for what you have done for me and for what you have meant in my life. And I hope that you can find the occasion to thank the people of your church for me. I attend your church only once in a while, but I want you to thank them for me." And then he went on to explain: "You see, I have been a Christian for only a little while and I still have a very suspicious mind. I do not know why I think the way I do, but I am always testing people, trying them out to see if Christianity really works. And, you know, when I come to your church and someone smiles at me, or speaks a warm word to me, or greets me, and remembers who I am, that proves to me that Christianity is real. So I would like you to thank the people of your church." So I am taking the occasion now to thank you for having let the life of Jesus Christ shine through you.

A smile may seem an insignificant thing, but it is not -- the whole of life is important. "It is a land that God cares for, a land that the eyes of the Lord your God are upon from the beginning of the year unto the end."

Your life counts, whether or not you think it does. You may not see anything that is taking place, but God sees and God knows. The remarkable thing about the Bible is how many "insignificant" characters appear there in the most strategic places -- how men and women have done single, isolated deeds of kindness and by them affected and changed the whole course of human history. Read Hebrews 11. May the wonderful truth that God is deeply concerned about your life in the new year lay hold of your heart and move you to possess your possessions, to move in and lay hold of what God has for you. No matter what the year may bring in terms of world history, may it be an unforgettable year for you -- a land to be possessed, a land with hills and valleys, a land of infinite concern to God.

Prayer

Our gracious Father, thank you for this simple picture and for its truth to our hearts today. How mighty are these truths, how easily grasped, yet how we resist putting them into practice, and thus discovering how real they are. As we stand here at the threshold of a new year, looking out to the land to be possessed, we pray, our heavenly Father, that thou will teach us to live in the present all through the year, not in the past, nor in the future, but remembering that everything that happens, whether it be failure or success, is under thy divine scrutiny, feeling the force of thy solicitude for us. We thank you for this. In Christ's Name, Amen.

Title: The Point of No Return
Series: Single Message: Doctrinal Topics
Scripture: Deut 11:10-12
Message No: 1
Catalog No: 77
Date: December 27, 1964

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