

13-14 Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead, I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus.

"Towards what is ahead... the prize" – the winner in Greek races received a wreath of leaves with the award, Paul's picture of everlasting glory for the Christian who wins through. The prize is eternal life, assured when we turn to Christ as our Saviour and Lord, and Christlike growth which is gained more gradually.

SUMMARY The new thing that God was doing in Paul's life was costly. As a Jew he had plenty to be proud of – but his pride in having a first-class degree in religious zeal had to be broken.

APPLICATION Pride is the greatest barrier to us having a real relationship with God through knowing Him personally. God can't have first place, where there's no space. We need to make room for Him, and that starts with the ornaments we used to think were the most precious.

QUESTION What spiritual qualification might be a barrier to the renewal God wants to do in you?

PRAYER Lord, my flesh is weak and it doesn't like change.

Yet Jesus said memorably that He could only be doing what He saw the Father doing.

Help us to grow into that same resolve that Jesus had to talk to You, and walk with You.

We want to be found doing Your will and pursuing Your mission in the world – whether we find it comfortable or not.

To the glory of Jesus we pray, Amen.

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PRINT EDITION

Bible readings for April 3, 2022 commentary & references

Non-denominational Bible study for Sunday, April 3 (Revised Common Lectionary readings)

Prepare: read the Bible passages beforehand. Reflect: re-read to think about the message preached

Theme: **God is always doing a new thing**

Psalms 126 – Setting the scene

Isaiah 43:16-21 – Earlier moves of God point the way to change now

John 12:1-8 – Mary does a new thing in the way she honours Jesus

Philippians 3:4b-14 – Knowledge can impede God's new work in us

Isaiah 43:16-21 – Earlier moves of God point the way to change now

Don't look for a repeat of what has gone before but discern His purposes now

16-17 This is what the Lord says – He who made a way through the sea, a path through the mighty waters, who drew out the chariots and horses, the army and reinforcements together, and they lay there, never to rise again, extinguished, snuffed out like a wick:

"A way through the sea" — a reference to the Israelites' escape from Egypt through the Red Sea.

"Chariots and horses" — the refugees on foot were no match for their well-equipped and mounted pursuers, who perished as the parted sea rushed back on top of them.

18 "Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past.

"Forget the former things" — this is the Lord speaking through Isaiah 200 years before the exile, and longer before the return of those exiles. The message, then and now, is not to dwell on the Lord's past deliverances. He is not restricted to what He has done before. We are not to take a historic revival as the pattern for the next move of God.

19 "See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland.

"Doing a new thing" — not the "way through the sea" of verse 16 but this time "a way in the wilderness". The common factor is miraculously reversing nature, this time releasing "streams in the wasteland" rather than turning back the sea.

20-21 "The wild animals honour Me, the jackals and the owls, because I provide water in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland, to give drink to My people, My chosen, the people I formed for Myself that they may proclaim My praise."

"I provide water in the wilderness" — life-giving for animals who live there. Figuratively, spiritual refreshment and freedom for the exiles coming out of Babylon. Also, new spiritual life for people today finding personal faith out of dry religion.

"That they may proclaim My praise" — God's purpose is people turning to Him and declaring His praise. Beyond revivals, His ultimate purpose anticipates a time when creation generally will turn to God, Isaiah 42:10-12

Psalms 126 – Setting the scene

1 When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dreamed.

2 Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy. Then it was said among the nations, "The Lord has done great things for them."

3 The Lord has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy.

4 Restore our fortunes, Lord, like streams in the Negev.

5 Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy.

6 Those who go out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with them.

SUMMARY If we think about what God may be doing, our starting point is our knowledge of what He has done before. The Bible gives us God's timeline of faith. However, He constantly surprises us by doing what He has not done before, and saying, in various ways, "I am doing a new thing".

APPLICATION It's human nature to seek to preserve and maintain what we have known before. We like to visit heritage properties and steam railways and rediscover former breeds of farm animals. But spiritually we must keep moving on – because God is always moving on. Even if we have known the excitement of a renewing move of God, we start by wanting more of the same. But if we really want more of God, the challenge is accepting that it will be different.

QUESTION What was the last 'new thing' of God we experienced? What is our expectation of a move of God now?

John 12:1-8 – Mary does a new thing in the way she honours Jesus

Her gesture in anointing him is an unintentional prophetic act

1 Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead.

"Before the Passover" — which was on Thursday that year; Jesus arrived on the Friday before.

"Bethany" — a village two miles east of the city, already filling up with pilgrims travelling in; it made sense for Jesus to stay with friends just outside the city.

2 Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honour. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with Him.

"Lazarus... reclining at the table" — this was a main meal *deipnon* dinner hosted by Jesus' close friends Lazarus, Martha and Mary. Guests would be three or four to a low table; evidently Jesus and Lazarus were together.

3 Then Mary took about half a litre of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped His feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

"Pure nard" — oil of a fragrant plant from North India like gladiola perfume. An extravagant act of devotion, and a humble one — only servants attended to guest's feet. A single woman at home might not have her hair covered.

4-5 But one of His disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray Him, objected, "Why wasn't this perfume sold

and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages."

"Worth a year's wages" — probably an exaggeration. Judas, a less-than-honest witness, was not concerned for the poor.

6 He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it.

"He used to help himself" — the one verse which tells us that Judas was dishonest, although he had been trusted with the money bag. It was scandalous for a group's treasurer to steal money.

7 "Leave her alone," Jesus replied. "It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of My burial."

"Leave her alone" — Jesus in defending Mary gives meaning to the deed. Nard was used as a burial spice and Mary, probably without realising it, was anticipating His death and anointing Him for burial.

8 "You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have Me."

"You will always have the poor" — Jesus is not discouraging helping the poor but quoting Deut. 15:11. His impending death leaves little time for His disciples to share His earthly ministry.

SUMMARY People in Mary's village then would have been taken aback by the 'new thing' being talked about, her unexpected and dramatic action. Believers numbering billions now are in awe of her display of heartfelt devotion.

APPLICATION Sometimes we can find ourselves carrying out what later turns out to be a prophetic act. Mary used up perfume oil of great value, but gave a lead in showing devotion to the One who is of incalculable worth.

QUESTION Is our worship of Jesus allowed to be extravagant and demonstrative? If not, why not?

Philippians 3:4b-14 – Knowledge can impede God's new work in us

Paul counts former attainments as rubbish compared with knowing the Lord

4b-6 If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.

"Confidence in the flesh" — the danger of relying on oneself and anything inherited or earned. Paul sets out his Jewish credentials, a glowing record as a zealous Pharisee.

7 But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ.

"Gains to me I now consider loss" — the language of a balance sheet. On the road to Damascus, every 'credit' in Paul's glowing CV now became something he had to lay down to accept Christ — like Jesus' picture of seeds to fall to the ground and die, John 12:24.

8 What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ...

"Knowing Christ Jesus my Lord" — not simply recounting the life and works of Jesus, but being transformed by really coming to know Him.

"I consider them garbage" — he uses a blunt expression for what is polluting and to be put out straight away. He is saying that his former way of life with its religious credentials was not only worthless — but despicable, see Ephesians 2:3-7.

9 ...and be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ – the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.

"Not a righteousness of my own" — here is the dilemma: everyone starts off claiming to be righteous through 'doing right' in charitable works or religious acts. Our worldview is all about earning merit — but this is overturned by his "garbage" comment. Righteousness cannot be earned, but is received from God undeservedly, solely on the basis of our trusting Him in faith.

"Found in Him" — being "in Christ" is contrasted to "being in Judaism", Galatians 1:13-14 or "under the Law", Romans 3:19.

• *For further study: the righteousness of God that comes on us through our trusting relationship with Christ Jesus, 1 Cor. 1:30, 2 Cor. 5:21, Phil. 3:8-9.*

10-11 I want to know Christ – yes, to know the power of His resurrection and participation in His sufferings, becoming like Him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.

"To know Christ...and...His sufferings" — to know Christ personally is to identify with Him and swap the world's values for His. That brings with it misunderstanding and alienation, such as Christ experienced and warned about, John 15:18-21. However, the Bible witness is that the suffering of God's people is never final.

12 Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.

• *For further study, other places where Paul uses the imagery of athletics: 1 Corinthians 9:24-27; 1 Timothy 6:12; 2 Tim. 4:7-8.*