

Facing the Future by Faith

"...not knowing the things that shall befall me" **Acts 20:22-23**

Summary

This passage draws from Paul's journey to Jerusalem to reflect on the believer's unknown future. It teaches that, while much is concealed from us, enough is revealed for faith, duty, caution, and comfort. We are not called to pry into the future, but to trust the wisdom and goodness of God, to attend to the duties of the present day, and to rest in the assurance that he will guide, sustain, and finally receive his people.

Outline

1. **Paul's case applied to common experience:** His words, though spoken as an Apostle, furnish instruction for men and Christians entering a new period of life.
2. **The concealment of the future:** Like Paul, we know not what shall befall us; yet this ignorance is neither accidental nor unkind, but ordered by divine wisdom.
3. **The duty of trust:** Since God knows the way we take, we are called to confidence, patience, and restraint from vain curiosity.
4. **The wisdom of daily dependence:** The year is presented as a succession of appointed duties and trials, to be opened day by day, not anticipated with anxious intrusion.
5. **What may still be known:** Though particulars are hidden, the general course of life is clear enough to guide prudence, duty, and preparation.
6. **The certainties of earthly life:** Nature, society, creaturely insufficiency, trial, bereavement, age, and death all belong to the known condition of man.
7. **The greater certainties of faith:** Above all these stands the unchanging God, who hears prayer, never forsakes his people, gives strength according to their day, guides them by counsel, and receives them at last to glory.

Text

Paul speaks here as an Apostle; yet what he says of his own path applies also to us as men and as Christians. At the beginning of

another year, his words remind us that, with regard to the future, we are both ignorant and informed. Some things are hidden from us, while others are plainly made known.

Though Paul sometimes prophesied, he did not possess foreknowledge at his own command. It was given only when God pleased, and for particular purposes. In ordinary life, he too had to learn the will of God by events.

So it is with us. We enter another year not knowing what a day may bring forth. Yet this concealment is wise and kind. If we had known beforehand the trials through which we have passed, our hearts might have failed; but when they came, strength was given for the hour. Were we now shown the changes before us, the knowledge might oppress us, and unfit us for present duty and enjoyment. Therefore he says, "I will bring the blind by a way that they knew not; I will lead them in paths that they have not known: I will make darkness light before them, and crooked things straight: these things will I do unto them, and not forsake them."

Let us then trust in him. He claims our full confidence, not only by his goodness, but by his wisdom. Though we go forth not knowing whither we go, he knows the way that we take. Let us also restrain vain curiosity. We are too prone to draw back the veil and look into the future; but its secrets are not given to us. Our strength, the strength of faith, is "to sit still." The year before us may be viewed as a desk containing three hundred and sixty-five letters, one for every day, each appointing its trial and its work. We are to open only the letter of the day. To unseal tomorrow's letter beforehand would only embarrass us, and disobey our Master's rule: "Take, therefore, no thought for the morrow... Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof."

Yet Paul's ignorance was not entire. Though he knew not what would befall him at Jerusalem, he knew that bonds and afflictions awaited him. So it is with us. Though the future is not laid open in detail, it is not wholly concealed. We know enough of its general course to guide present duty and sober preparation. Reason itself teaches us to look forward; and Scripture says, "The prudent man foreseeth the evil and hideth himself."

Some things, then, may be reckoned upon. In the natural world the seasons will return in their order: "seedtime and harvest, and

cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night, shall not cease."

In society also, the same general course will continue. "The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be;" and there is "no new thing under the sun."

We may also be sure that earthly possessions and enjoyments will never fully satisfy the soul. They never have done so; they were never designed to do so; they are incapable of doing so.

We may expect trials of one kind or another; for they belong to our present state. "Man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward."

We know too that all earthly connections are uncertain. Some may forsake us, some may be separated from us, and some may be taken away by death. The desire of our eyes is mortal, and childhood and youth are vanity.

With growing years we must look for growing weakness and privation. The senses decay, desire fails, and age brings its appointed burden. "The days of our years are threescore years and ten... yet is their strength labour and sorrow."

And we know that death is before us. It is the way of all the earth. Whatever else may be doubtful, every living man may say, "I know that thou wilt bring me to death, and to the house appointed for all living."

But this is not all we know. We know that God is still the same; that he hears prayer; that he will never leave nor forsake us; that as our days, so shall our strength be; and that he will guide us with his counsel, and afterward receive us to glory.

This sermon is taken from William Jay's devotional, *Morning and Evening Exercises* (January 1, Evening), first published in 1854.