

Sermon for Sunday, January 18, 1976, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
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"GAME PLAN FOR GOD'S SUPER BOWL"

Philippians 3:1-14

Well, today is Super Bowl Sunday. Lately the paper, television, radio and the luncheon talk have been full of Super Bowl X. There have even been some prayers about it. Last night it was Sydney's turn to lead our prayer together. When she finished, I said, "P. S., Lord--don't forget the Cowboys tomorrow." Sydney laughed and said, "Who do you think God is pulling for?" I thought about it for a moment and said, "Well, the Cowboys are his sentimental favorite, but he likes the Steeler line."

Anyway, with all of this Super Bowl talk and all of the speculation about who will cross the goal most often to win; with the sport pages filled with talk about game plans, and with each of the last ten years getting started off with the Super Bowl, several things came to my mind lately. First, our text for this morning come to mind. Phillips, in his translation, puts it this way: "But I do concentrate on this: I leave the past behind and with hands outstretched to whatever lies ahead I go straight for the goal..." As we begin a new year and are leaving the past behind, life for each of us is God's Big Super Bowl. Everything is at stake. And I was just sort of wondering--what is your game plan?

As we begin the new year in the secular world with most people thinking about the Super Bowl, that's a good question. If life is God's big Super Bowl, and if you really want to win out in life, what is your game plan? This morning I would like to share with you St. Paul's game plan for life. In our scripture for this morning in verse 13, St. Paul says, "but one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind..." Here we are introduced to the game plan of forgetting. As a pastor I do a lot of counseling. One of the things I have discovered is that most problems have their roots in the past. We hold on to old injustices, old wrongs, and they are a festering sore in our souls. We hold on to old failures, take them out and weep over them. We hold on to old grudges and resentments and in mulling them over, we fan them into burning flames of the old hostilities that contaminate life. As we are beginning a new year, we ought to take out those old, bad feelings and deliberately, one by one, surrender them up to God. I suppose St. Paul had as good a reason as anyone to hold on to old grudges and old injustices. He had been beaten, shipwrecked, imprisoned, stoned, and run out of town. He had been rejected by the Jews, and the Christians were suspicious of him. Yet, St. Paul had learned that he could not live in the past. There were simply some things he had to put behind him and forget--that was his game plan.

When I was a child I used to visit my grandmother who lived in the rural Mississippi hill country. In addition to running some truck gardens, she had a number of milk cows. We boys had the run of the place, but whenever we left the house she would call after us, "Be sure and shut the gaps behind you!" (For you city folks who don't know, a gap is a section of fence that can be let down to cross the fence--a sort of gate.) Yes, shut the gaps behind you. If we didn't, the cattle would get into the fields or the gardens where they didn't belong. So there are things in the past which must not be permitted to wander into the future. They don't belong in tomorrow, for they will spoil and ruin it. We must close the gaps behind us.

Wasn't that the game plan Jesus had? Even as he was suffering and dying upon the cross, he cried out to his Father, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." He was shutting the gap on the past, putting it behind him. And wasn't that the game plan for Stephen, the first Christian to die for his faith in Jesus? As the Jews were stoning him to death he cried out, "Father, do not lay this sin to their charge." He was closing the gap on the past. I suppose most of us this morning have old hostilities, hurts, resentments. As we begin a new year, let's leave these things behind us. Our game plan for God's big Super Bowl is forgetting.

In our scripture St. Paul says a second thing. He says, "and with hands outstretched to whatever lies ahead..." Here we are introduced to the game plan of expectation. The picture that St. Paul gives us is that of a man facing the future with his empty hands stretched out before him in eager hope and expectation. You know, one of the reasons it is important to forget the past is so our hands will be empty to receive what is before us. If your hands are full of yesterday, you have no space for tomorrow.

When my boys were just toddlers, they loved crackers and cookies. I remember once giving them a cracker for each little hand and then offering them a cookie! Now that is a frustrating experience. They wanted that cookie, but they were not willing to let the crackers go. In Africa there is a breed of monkeys that love rice. The natives will take a coconut, drill a small hole in it and put some rice in it. The monkey reaches in and gets a handful of rice, but his closed fist won't come out of the hole. He is so unwilling to let go of his rice that the natives can walk up and catch him.

Do you have a capacity for the future--for tomorrow? Do you have a sort of happy optimism about the future? As a congregation, I think we ought to have a sort of divine expectation about this year before us. I don't know about you, but I have a sort of holy anticipation, a sort of glorious expectancy about our church. God is doing something in our congregation. There is a sort of Pentecostal fire burning among us. Visitors coming here say, "What's going on in this church? We can feel the difference." Well, I don't fully understand it, but I will tell you one thing: I'm excited about Central. As we begin this new year, I'm standing on spiritual tiptoe in anticipation of what God is doing and going to do here. Well, that was St. Paul's game plan for life. His hands were outstretched to whatever lies ahead. Do you believe God loves you? Do you believe God desires the best for you? Do you trust God in your life? Then your game plan for life should be a sort of holy expectation about tomorrow. You can be excited about tomorrow because you are trusting God.

The third thing St. Paul says in our scripture for today is this: "I go straight for the goal." Here we are introduced to the game plan of concentration. I have a good friend who, to my knowledge, has never finished any project he has started. He lacks the ability to concentrate and before he can complete what he started, he is distracted by something else. Being an effective Christian demands the game plan of concentration, of going straight for the goal. There are so many things to distract us. Some of us will get distracted from Jesus by worldly things--the lust of the eye. Some of us will get distracted from Jesus by sexual things--the lust of the flesh. Some of us will get distracted from Jesus by ambitions--the lust of the heart. Some of us will get distracted from Jesus by pseudo-intellectualism--the lust of the mind. It is so easy to get distracted from the Lord. Other things seem more important and pressing at the moment and we think we can come back to God later. Well, life just doesn't work out that way and St. Paul knew it. He said, "I go straight for the goal."

Back when I was a young boy they still did a lot of plowing with mules. The harness on the mule's head had a thing called blinders. They were leather pieces that stood out on either side of the animal's eyes so he could only see straight ahead. They couldn't plow a straight line if the mule was always being distracted. Well, we need spiritual blinders so that nothing takes our eyes off of Jesus. The young people have a little chorus they sing that puts it very well. "Turn your eyes upon Jesus; Look full in his wonderful face. And the things of earth will grow strangely dim, in the light of his glory and grace." And that's true, isn't it? When our eyes are fixed on Jesus, when our game plan is to concentrate on him and to go straight for the goal, the world cannot distract us. Are you focused on Jesus this morning? What's your game plan for the goal?

So St. Paul introduces us to a game plan for playing in God's big Super Bowl--the game plan of forgetting, of expectation, of concentration. And then St. Paul writes this, "My reward is the honour of being called by God in Christ." Here we are introduced to the game plan of evaluating. How do you evaluate life? How do you measure your reward? What is the ruler, the yard stick, by which you measure the value of things--of events--of persons. St. Paul evaluated everything by Jesus. He wrote in our Scripture, "But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord."

I suppose when life comes to an end, when all things have been sifted down, the only thing that will really be important is whether or not we belong to God. As Paul put it, "My reward the honour of being called by God in Christ Jesus." Who or what is the most important thing in your life this morning? Are you going straight for God's goal with your eyes fixed on Jesus?

In the land where Jesus was born, one of the common scenes was that of the shepherd caring for his sheep. Even at the birth of the Savior, it was the simple shepherds of the hills to whom a special revelation was given by the angels telling of the child of God. It is the custom of the shepherds as they lead their sheep from grazing place to grazing place to walk before their sheep, leading the way. Any attack upon the sheep must first take account of the shepherd who leads them. As we are beginning a new year, Jesus the Good Shepherd goes before us. He is out front leading the way and before any danger comes to us, it must first pass him. St. Paul had a game plan for life--the plan of forgetting, the plan of expectation, the plan of concentration and the plan of evaluation. As he played out life's game for him, Jesus went before him and nothing could get to St. Paul unless it first passed Jesus.

Well, it is Super Bowl Sunday in more ways than one--what's your game plan? Let me share this little verse with you:

As the old year ends and a new one I begin,
There's a glory in my soul.
I've got a game plan to help me win
In God's big Super Bowl.