

## FUTURE PERFECT

Jeremiah 29:11-13, Selected Texts (NASB)

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There are moments when it seems like our future is teetering on a knife edge. In the book *Ann of Green Gables* by L. M. Montgomery a young orphan girl with an indomitable spirit finds herself in a bleak orphanage where the children are treated harshly every day, are worked very hard, sleep on thin mattresses in a drafty dormer, and are fed gruel hardly fit for animals. In spite of the conditions Ann Shirley manages to thrive.

One day when she is eleven years old Ann is called to the headmistress's office and told that there is a family looking for a child to help run a farm on Prince Edward Island. Ann is filled with excitement that she will get out of the cruel orphanage and get to live with a real family in a real house on a real farm. Ann is packed off onto a train, travels across Canada, and ends up sitting on a bench at the train station waiting to be picked up.

A kindly old gentleman peeks around the corner of the train station and sees her. At first he startles with surprise, and we are not told why. Very courteously he introduces himself as Matthew and gives Ann a ride back to the house--the one with green gables--without saying very much. Ann talks non-stop on the way. He introduces her to the mistress of the house, his sister, a severe-looking woman named Marilla who is furious that Ann has been sent to them from the orphanage. They had asked for a boy. Ann is kept standing in the parlor while Matthew and Marilla go off to discuss the problem. Ann had won Matthew's heart on the ride back to the house, but his sister was as cold as ice toward the girl.

Imagine what it must have felt like to be Ann at that moment. She had come from nothing and was facing what looked like the best opportunity she ever had. Yet right at the moment when things seemed to be going well she was threatened with being sent back to the orphanage. Her future was teetering on a knife edge. If it tipped one way, she would have a new life. If it tipped the other way, seemingly on the whim of Marilla Cuthbert, she would get back on the train and return to a life without real hope.

There are many situations we face in life which are just like that. The prospect of a single medical test can strike us with fear, or the potential appearance of a pink slip at work. Entering school can be frightening, but graduating can be more frightening. We can be afraid to die, and in some situations, more afraid of not dying. Sometimes our families face challenges which threaten to change them forever.

An individual church can seem like it is teetering on a knife edge. Our own city, Rochester, New York, has lost about 85,000 jobs in the years I have lived here. New York State has some of the highest taxes and most restrictive regulations of any state in the Union. We are an established church trying to stay effective in a suburb where there are, as usual, six church planting efforts within a ten minute drive of our front door. To make things more frightening, we are currently

spinning off a church planting effort and helping to revitalize yet another church. What will happen to us?

No one, not even the angels, knows the future except God himself. So how do we face the future? Over time I have collected five principles in my private devotions which help me face the future every day.

## 1. BE ON GUARD AGAINST ATTEMPTS TO HIJACK YOUR FUTURE

First, the world is full of people and evil spirits who would like nothing better than to use you and I as cannon fodder for some project of their own. We need to be on our guard against all attempts to hijack our future. The Lord Jesus faced this problem every day of his three-year ministry. One episode took place after he had healed many people. The healings had generated a large crowd of about five thousand which was following him everywhere. The day was fading and Jesus, out of concern for their well-being, fed them by miraculously multiplying five loaves and two fish until all were filled.

What happens next shows how much Jesus Christ took care with his future: **"So Jesus, perceiving that they were intending to come and take Him by force to make Him king, withdrew again to the mountain by Himself alone"** (John 6:15). He knew that the crowd was little more than a mob with no thought of who he really was. If he let them inflict their will upon him--who would not want a miracle-worker for a king?--the high and holy purposes of God would be diverted. Christ will indeed rule on the earth during the millennial kingdom, but he knew that it was not to happen at that time, and not by the corporate will of a bunch of hungry sinners.

People who want to hijack our future abound. While we should listen to what others say in order to be sure that we check our own perceptions, we should never just follow what we are told. No one can follow God's will for you except you. Have you set your mind to discover the will of God every day and then set your heart to doing it? This advice will be of no help if you do not. At the moment when you are teetering on the knife edge, watch out for those who would steer you toward their own ends. Do what Jesus did: do not trust other people to direct your path, trust God.

## 2. REJECT ENVY AND TRUST GOD TO GIVE YOU WHAT HE WANTS

Secondly, as our future teeters on the edge it can be very easy to look at the good things God has given others and be envious. There will always be someone with more money, a more beautiful house, a better job, a bigger church, a better car--you name it. Even those who have faith in God must fight this battle. The faithful disciples of John the Baptist saw that the great transition from John to Jesus was taking place, and were concerned about their future: **"And they came to John and said to him, 'Rabbi, He who was with you beyond the Jordan, to whom you have testified, behold, He is baptizing and all are coming to Him.' John answered and said, 'A man can receive nothing unless it has been given him from heaven'"** (John 3:26-27).

I cannot tell you how meaningful John's statement has become to me. I have had people tell me I should be a District Superintendent, I should be on national radio, I should publish books, I should plant a church, and I should teach at a seminary. Maybe God will do one or more of those items in my life, but the most important thing I have learned to do is what God has called me to do right now, which is be the best pastor I can be for the church to which he has called me. Whatever the community and church is like, I can do one hundred per cent of the will of God for me by being faithful to my calling.

If we do not shut down the pathway of envy in our hearts we will never be happy in the Lord. Think of how frustrated this makes our Lord! He is eager to give his fatherly blessing to us on the sole basis of faithfulness to him, and we keep telling him: "No Lord, but I should be in that other job, or in that other house, or in that other school" --make your own application! I wonder if he wants to say to us: "Why don't you just receive the blessing I want to give you right where you are?"

Like John the Baptist, it is crucial that we see every good thing we have as coming from God's hand even if it comes through some secondary means. If we will stop looking around at all the nice earthly things we may be able to listen to the word of the Lord through Paul who tells how to receive our blessing: "**He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?**" (Romans 8:32). Whether we ever get the better job or car, we have Jesus Christ, and he is the most valuable thing we possess. If God is willing to give us his beloved Son, he will certainly give us everything we need.

### 3. PURSUE LIFE IN CHRIST RELENTLESSLY

Thirdly, when our future is teetering on the edge it is vital to see that we must be active, not passive. What should we be doing? Pursuing life in Christ relentlessly. Jesus gave us this command which is found in John 6:27: "**Do not work for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you, for on Him the Father, God, has set His seal.**" We are all pursuing something. If you have ever tried to stir someone out of laziness or apathy you will have discovered that what they are actually doing is pursuing inactivity with great zeal!

At the moment of concern for the future it is vital that we pursue not earthly goals, not religious forms, but the essential principle of eternal life as it can be found on the earth through Christ alone. I once heard of a family which moved to another state simply to be part of a particular church. The housing was not better there, nor were the job prospects, but the eternal life prospects were excellent. Jesus Christ is giving us a point blank command: "Stop running around trying to get every good thing on earth! Go for the joys of life in Me. You will not be disappointed." It is very likely that for our kind of busy lifestyle that doing less will result in more of what we really want.

No matter what others may do which affects your future you can always choose to commit yourself to having more of "**the food which endures to eternal life,**" more of Jesus, more of God, more joy in your salvation. Radio teacher Wayne Monbleau often used to say: "Are you wondering about what to do with yourself? Find the thing that is life to you and do that!"

And Christ is your life. He said this in the same discourse in John: **"It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life"** (John 6:63). If you are looking for life on this earth look to the Spirit of God and the word of God. The pursuit becomes a kind of treasure hunt as you walk in the Spirit and drink in the word of God.

#### 4. BE FAITHFUL TO WHAT GOD HAS GIVEN YOU NOW

Fourthly, when we are in a bind about the future there can be a tendency to let things slide in the present. Actually, today is the only day we have, and grace for today is the only grace we have. We must be faithful to use the gifts God has given us now.

The Lord gave my wife Barbara a word about this one night. We were on vacation in Florida by ourselves. Four times in the same night she woke up with this verse in her head: **"For to everyone who has, more shall be given, and he will have an abundance; but from the one who does not have, even what he does have shall be taken away"** (Matthew 25:29). Then, when morning came, she felt she was given the words: "Tell him." She took that to mean me, and so she did.

If you read the context of this verse you find the parable where a master gave three slaves differing amounts of money to invest while he was away on a long trip. The first two slaves invested the money and gave it back to their master along with the increase. The third slave buried the money in the ground and did absolutely nothing with it. I take the money to be the word of God specifically, and the last slave did not even receive it so as to be saved. But the money can represent all that God has given to us.

The punchline to the parable is the verse the Lord gave my wife. It is an urging to use whatever God has given us for the sake of his kingdom so that when Christ returns we will be prepared to honor him with the increase. It also means that when we bear fruit for the kingdom of God by making use of whatever God has given us now, he will give us more fruitfulness in the future. To me that sounds like an upward spiral of effectiveness for Christ which can continue for as long as we live so long as we keep reinvesting what we have been given. That's why I want to live a long time!

I think of the radio ministry as an example of how this works. For twelve years I prayed to get on the air, and then it happened. Perhaps God tested me until he thought I would do the right thing with such an opportunity. Few people probably know this, but the radio ministry team has produced about 450 unique programs in over eleven years of ministry. The broadcast was originally to about 1.1 million people, now it goes to 1.4 million, and plans are to add another million in the coming year as the radio station on which we broadcast adds repeaters. People in foreign countries have listened to the programs over the internet and requested copies. We have sent several of our program series to brethren in foreign countries for use in Bible schools. I have a book in preparation which will be a compendium of one thirty-three part series.

What has God given you? Your family, church, community, and friends. He has given you his word and his Spirit. He has given you spiritual gifts and ministry burdens. No matter what

happens tomorrow you have these things to invest for his glory today. Don't bury them in the ground! Face the uncertainty of tomorrow by building value for God's kingdom every day and he has promised to multiply it.

## 5. PRAY FOR GOD'S BLESSING CONTINUALLY

Fifthly, there is a tendency when we are spooked about the future to constrict our vision and reckon only on the resources we can see and count. The story of Nehemiah tells us that we should be sure to pray for God's blessing continually. Israel had been carried off into captivity in Babylonia as a punishment for her long rejection of God. Nehemiah prayed intensely, confessing the sins of the people, that God should restore Israel to her land. His job in Babylon was as cupbearer to the king, and when the opportune time came, Nehemiah floated the outrageous idea that he should be sent back to Jerusalem with the resources needed to rebuild the ruined city. This was absurd, but God directed the king's heart and he agreed.

Nehemiah marshaled the resources and the men and began rebuilding. He ran into many obstacles, especially the people of the land who were bent on preventing his success. The Israelites themselves were part of the problem because many of them took pagan wives. What would the point be of rebuilding the temple and city of God and then presenting him with people who had disobeyed him? That was why God sent them to Babylonia in the first place.

It was in the middle of these kinds of difficulties when Nehemiah breathed the following short prayer: "**Remember me, O my God, for good, according to all that I have done for this people**" (Nehemiah 5:19). Two parts of this prayer may be misleading. When Nehemiah prays for God to remember him, it does not mean what it would mean to say this to a human being. God never forgets anything, other than refusing to look upon our sins after we are forgiven. When God remembers us blessing comes!

The other issue is that it sounds like Nehemiah is bartering with God based upon his good works. But God is self-existent, so there is nothing we can offer to him in any kind of transaction. He does not cut mutually beneficial deals with us, but he may choose to negotiate. I am confident that Nehemiah knew that about God because it was the linchpin of Israelite theology. So when he presented his own faithful work to God, it was a reminder more of his involvement in the grace of God which was enabling the restoration of God's own holy city.

I think it quite proper for us to pray: "Lord, look how you have used me and carried me thus far. Tomorrow seems very uncertain, even frightening. I ask you, Lord, for your blessing for today, for tomorrow, and for the day after that." Remember the apostle James who wrote: "**You do not have because you do not ask**" (James 4:2b). As long as you ask with right motives it is right to ask God to bless you. Sometimes I have been so emotionally bound up that all I can pray is: "Lord, I need something good here!"

The idea of the future can be frightening. It is filled with many things which we cannot control. What we can control is how we go into that future and with whom. On the other side of today is a tomorrow filled with God and his blessing if we will go there with him.

Woven deftly into the fabric of the *Ann of Green Gables* story is the hand of providence. Yes, Ann Shirley does well in life because of her zest for life and irrepressibility, but it is much more than that. Marilla Cuthbert, who seemed so forbidding at their first meeting, turned out to be a woman prepared to love Ann as the daughter she never had, as did Matthew. At that fearful moment for the future when Marilla looked set to reject Ann she was not really balancing on a knife edge after all because God had purposed good for this lost orphan waif.

He purposes good for all those who trust in him, as he promised to his people, Israel: **''For I know the plans that I have for you,' declares the LORD, 'plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope''** (Jeremiah 29:11). That is the kind of God who holds your future and mine if we will fulfill the terms of the covenant, which is found in the same passage in Jeremiah: **''You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart''** (Jeremiah 29:13).

In the New Covenant era that means abandoning our sins in a spirit of humble repentance, receiving atonement for those sins which Christ provided by dying on the cross in our place, and then asking God to mold us into the image of Christ. Once we are certain that we are in him, then the purposes of God for his people are applied to us individually. I cannot imagine why anyone would want to face the future without the explicit blessing of God. No one gets to have a perfect future, but anyone can move into a blessed future by God's grace.