

Leaving the Past Behind
(Rev. Dr. John Bartol)

Forgetting the past ... I press on ... to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.— Phil.3:13b, 14

As a first step toward a happy new year, let us look at some reasons why negative baggage from the past needs to be put behind us and buried.

First of all, let us forget the resentments and injuries of the past. In today's world, wherever you have people occupying the same space there will be friction and personality clashes. But the way we deal with and respond to these conflicts can make us better or bitter, stronger or weaker.

Many of us have hurts that need to be healed and, given time, they will do so. But only under one condition: The wound has to be kept clean from bitterness, resentment and refusal to forgive.

We also need to forget our successes. This may sound like strange advice, but I think more people have been harmed by success than by adversity. Success can be a blessing when handled with humility and gratitude. But we are never more like the devil than when we allow ourselves to become guilty of ego- mania and use our success to dominate and control others.

Most of all, we need to put behind the sins and failures of the past. On the debit side of life we act like a cracked record, playing the same old mistakes and failures over and over again. God wants us to look at the credit side. Though we have sinned, there can be mercy and pardon. Not because of our goodness, but because of what Christ has done on our behalf. As far as the east is from the west, God can remove our transgressions from us and bury them in the depth of, the sea.

Years ago in Scotland, two brothers were convicted of stealing sheep. The brutal punishment of that day required them to be branded on their foreheads with the letters "ST," which stood for sheep thief. One brother, unable to bear the stigma, wandered from country to country and, full of bitterness, died and was buried in a forgotten grave.

The other brother, who repented of his misdeed, said, "I can't run away from the fact that I stole sheep, so here I will remain until I win back the respect of my neighbours and myself." And as the years passed by, he established a fine reputation of respectability and integrity.

One day a stranger saw this older man with the letters ST branded on his forehead. When asked what they signified, a native replied, "It all happened a great while ago and I can't remember the details. But I think it's an abbreviation

for the word saint, because if ever there was a Christian saint, that man is.”

Yes, what a wonderful testimony. The grace of God in the penitent and believing heart is able to change and transform the offensive markings and scars of sin into a badge of honour and beauty.