



Third Day Living
Beyond the Empty Nest
 (...and other times of transition)

Biblical Text: Philippians 3:10-15

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In 1864, Robert Browning wrote these lines to begin his poem, “*Rabbi Ben Ezra*” - * **“Grow old along with me! The best is yet to be...”**¹

I know, I know! I am more likely to talk about baseball than poetry from the pulpit. But hey, it's Mother's Day! But I read poetry, I do. And so do you.

Even if you did not know it was a poem, you probably know those words. You may have heard them in high school or in English literature at college. Or you may have heard them in John Lennon's song. * Or found them on a Mother's Day card for your wife. **And they are good words, wise words.**

The problem is that most of us don't believe them. Not really. Most of us are culturally conditioned, to look backward rather than forward. We are.

It's true today on Mother's Day. It's also true for mothers (and students) on the last day of high school, or the first day of school. * It's true at every transition, retirement, or move to a new house or job. It's true when we lose loved ones, or say goodbye to friends. We tend to look backward.

And if you are a mother, it is in some measure, true for you. Some young mothers remember days of fewer complications. Some empty nesters remember when the nest was full. Others, like my sister, were or are mother to someone else's children. All of us had a mother, some close - some not so much. Every Mother's Day, it is joyous for some or many, and hard for others.

And we tend to live in the land of remembrance, and sometimes regret. We calculate the worth of our lives in missions accomplished, or we dwell on missed opportunities. We tend to focus on endings rather than beginnings.

And yet, if we looked beyond the past, beyond the surface of life, or beyond the opening familiar lines of the poem, we might find that God has far more in store for us, and for our lives, than that. Listen to Browning again:

***“Grow old along with me! The best is yet to be... * ...the last of life, for which the first was made: Our times are in His hand.”**

¹ From the poem, *Rabbi Ben Ezra*, by Robert Browning, first published in 1864 in his collection, *Dramatis Personae*.

His hand. God's hand! There is deep theological resonance with the Apostle Paul's words from Philippians 3:10-15, written looking back on his life.

In your Bibles, after a few verses, you'll find verse 13: ** *"This one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead."*²

Don't miss the significance of his words. This is Paul, writing from prison, facing being a trial for his life. Even so, he sends a letter to the Philippians encouraging them to **be positive**, regardless of circumstance. He calls them to rejoice in the Lord, always, whatever may come! It's an amazing letter.

It's easy to be positive when life is good. It's easy **then** to look forward. **Faiths** is choosing to look forward when we have regrets, are in transition, or are facing an empty nest, broken dreams, disappointment, or uncertainty.

That's Paul's message. Or as another piece of familiar wisdom, from that great American theologian Yogi Berra, put it: * *"It ain't over until it's over."*³ But here's the thing. The Good News of God is even better than that!

I know, I know. Some of you are thinking, *"I can't believe he's still talking about baseball on Mother's Day."* I'm not. Not really. **I'm talking about life.**

And about our Bible text! Listen to how Paul continues in Philippians 3:14: *"I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus."*⁴

"I press on!" If that were all he said, it would help us. Don't get caught looking backward, **press on**. Shake off the *"if onlys!"* Don't dwell on the past. **Press on.** *"It ain't over until it's over."* **Press on.** OK, you missed an opportunity. You'd like to live that day, or month or season over. **Press on.**

But it is more than that. God hold the future! The end of the story, for all our stories, is already written! Tomorrow awaits us! And another tomorrow after that! And even on the **one day**, and there's only **one day**, of all the days of our lives, when there will be no tomorrow, heaven awaits us! Even then, there's just a different kind of tomorrow. Even when it's over - **it ain't over!**

Another way to say it is what we have been saying in this series - when God is involved in our lives: * *"The worst thing is never the last thing!"*

One of our members came to see me last week. She was feeling discouraged.

² Philippians 3:13, *New Revised Standard Bible*. Copyright © 1989, NCCCUA, Christian Education Division. Used by permission.

³ Famous Yogi Berra quotation: *"It ain't over till it's over."* It comes from July 1973, when Berra's Mets trailed the Chicago Cubs by 9½ games in the National League East. The Mets rallied to win the division title on the final day of the season.

⁴ Op. Cit. Philippians 3:14, *New Revised Standard Bible*.

She though maybe, * ***"The last thing is never the worst thing."*** That's not it.

But that could be true, it could. Honestly. There may be another ***"worst thing"*** in all our lives. There might. It's possible. I wish the life of faith had a * ***"Get out of Trouble Free"*** card, like Monopoly's ***"Get out of Jail Free"*** card!

That would come in handy! The worst thing comes, and bam! You play the card. But life is not a game. It's more complicated. There is no card to play.

But here's what you **can** do. You can hold on to the promise of God. Easter happened! Not just for Jesus, but for us! Paul is clear in verse 10 of our text from Philippians 3. * ***"I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection!"***⁵

I want that too, don't you? I want to live beyond life's toughest times and transitions. I want to always remember: * ***"The worst thing is never the last thing!"***

I also learned that from some of the people of God. Not all of them. Some times people can be negative. But the best people are always positive.

Like *Jack DeBoer and his wife Marilyn. They define positive! They've made a fortune, lost it all along the way, and came out on top once again, as the founders of Residence Inns, Candlewood Suites and other national names.

Jack's book, *Risk only Money is worth the read. He talks about success without risking family, friends, reputation, integrity, or faith. What people may not know about them is that success is not their motivator. A constant drive to live lives of significance, lives that matter, is! That's how I first met them.

Over coffee, they told me of their life passion, which began a long time ago with Marilyn, to change the lives forever of the poor children of Burma.

They could easily retire and fade away. But they are convinced that God has work for them to do. They know there will be more "best things" to come!

****"The worst thing is never the last thing."*** But here's today's message to put along side of it! * ***"The last thing is never the best thing either!"***

Whatever your season of life may be – **I promise, the best is yet to be.** You can't change the past. Or turn back the clock. But you **can** do some things!

You can focus on what is next.

You can keep God at the center.

You can choose to make a difference.

⁵ Ibid. Philippians 3:10, *New Revised Standard Bible*.