

It All Begins with God – God “Before” Me [#5]

By Bob Young

In the final sermon in the series, we seek to understand what it means to say that “God goes before us.” We look at what God accomplished in Jesus by studying three New Testament descriptions of Jesus, descriptions that suggest that Jesus is our trailblazer.

Here are the three texts. Jesus is—

- In the book of Hebrews, Jesus is pioneer or trailblazer. Older translations say “author.” He is one who cuts the path through the brush, he blazes the trail. He enters the holy place with his sacrifice, he blows open the divider between heaven and earth so that we can also enter.
- 1 Peter 2 says that Jesus is for us an example. Further, he enables us to follow in his steps. Many other NT passages suggest that Jesus is a model or example, it is enough for the disciple to be like the Master.
- In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul describes Jesus’ resurrection as first fruits. Jesus is the promise that God’s plan has become operative, that the restoration of broken relationship is secured, that our resurrection is certain.

In a university class focused on ministry, I asked the students to do self-reflection papers. The goal is to try to see ourselves honestly and thus to understand ourselves better. I shared a model autobiographical reflection. Afterward, one of the students approached me and said that she had a word to describe the ministry Jan and I shared. Her word—unhinderedly.

Her word caught my attention because that is perhaps my favorite translation of the last work of the book of Acts. The gospel went forth unhinderedly.

Henry Blackaby, in his book, *Experiencing God*, writes about finding out where God is working today so we can go to join him in his work. Seems much better than trying to convince God to join us in our work? Where is God at work today to advance his eternal purpose? How can I join him in his work? Seems that my work will be much easier if I simply join God in his work.

For me, this is an example of God before us. Obviously, there are many good things I can do today, good things you can do. But, if we would be faithful followers: where is God, where is Christ, at work today? What is he calling you and me to do today to advance his saving purpose?

Through the years, Jan and I have tried to be especially aware of open doors. That does not mean we have immediately jumped at every opportunity that was presented. Our ministry work was primarily focused in two churches where we served for 12 and 8 years respectively. We spent 11 years in the university, in two separate assignments. We have tried to live out “God before us.”

It is fair to say that this principle, God before us, explains much about our current involvement in mission work.

Why does it matter that God goes before us? What difference does it make in your daily life?

The opposite idea would be that God is behind us, the idea that we just need to stop all progress and go back to the way things used to be, the idea that we somehow get closer to God in reverse than in forward gear. Many in my tribe have tried to find a way forward by focusing on the past.

For me, the Jesus narrative is a story that pulls me forward rather than pulling me backward. God has in mind a future that is unimaginable. Jesus has already walked the road that he now calls me to walk as his follower.

Therefore, my primary commitment is not to going back and making things like they used to be.

I am committed to an inspiring vision of what can be, what the future holds, what is beyond our imaginations, more than we can ask or think.

In the study of these three descriptions of Jesus, I see two options described—will we go forward or backward? Which is the correct view of God? Does God call us to live in the past, to live in the future, or to live in the present?

The first day I went to work at OVC, I was approached by a current student who happened to be on campus during the summer. He was accompanied by an incoming student. Both planned to be in my Bible program. They had a question? Are you conservative, or are you liberal? Sometimes, when God goes before us, he gives us answers we haven't thought of. We wonder where that answer came from. My response went something like this: many who lean toward the conservative side tend to live in the past, many who lean toward the progressive or liberal side tend to live for the future. I think God calls us to use his Word to live in the present, informed by the past and pointing toward the possibilities of the future.

I know well the "old paths" passages of the Old Testament. They are Old Testament. God before us must take into account that God sent Jesus. God sent Jesus to walk a new path. Now he calls us to follow where he has gone. He gives us principles to guide us. What contributes mightily to the lack of daily application of religion in our world today is the idea that we need to go back—when God is calling us to possibility living in the present, keeping our eyes on the goal.

This is the thrust of our study of the God who is "before us."

Let's briefly reexamine the Bible foundations of these three concepts in light of the challenge I just shared—

- Pioneer and trailblazer, Jesus makes possible our salvation (Heb. 2, 6:19, 10:19-25, 12:1-2).
- Pioneer and example in life. Jesus demonstrated compassion, humility, service, sacrifice. He calls us to follow. This is God before us, calling us forward (1 Peter 2).
- Pioneer and first fruits. Jesus is the promise of resurrection, he is promise that the process works (1 Cor. 15). We follow him—in service, sacrifice, suffering, death, life, relationship with God.
- [In a full-length sermon, each of these would be explored and expanded.]

How will we discover what God is up to without careful study of Scripture, trying to understand the God who wants us to move forward at warp speed, the God who goes before us. God has a vision for humanity – joyous, fulfilling, possible. How can we simply plod along? The dominant view in the majority of churches holds us back from the kind of growth God intends.

We are too self-centered (it is not about us, about our group).

We are too self-confident (we cannot solve the problems). We are too self-contained.

Let us go forward—because God has come to be "with us," has accomplished a saving work "for us" in Jesus, now lives (dwells, is at home) "in us," promises to be "beside us" always, and is constantly "before us" leading us forward.