

Psalm 105:5

“We Will Remember”

In the later years of his life, the great 19th century American philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson suffered from an increasingly faulty memory. When things would slip his mind, he complained of his “naughty memory,” as he called it. Sometimes Emerson would forget the names of different objects. In order to speak of them, he would refer to them in a round-about way. For instance, when he could not think of the word “plow,” he would call it “the implement that cultivates the soil.” More important was the fact that he could not remember the names of people who were quite familiar to him. At the funeral of his friend, the poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Emerson commented to another person, “That gentleman has a sweet, beautiful soul, but I have entirely forgotten his name.”

The loss of memory is a sad thing. It cuts us off from days gone by. It strips away the treasured residue of past experience. It erases our personal history and leaves us unaccountably blank pages. I remember in my own family when I was growing up that I enjoyed going to talk to those of my grandparents’ generation. They were of the Greatest Generation, and in their end years their short-term memory was gone, but they remembered with clarity things that happened long ago. Many times we would have the same conversations over and over because they did not remember what I shared with them the last time I visited... and that was okay! I enjoyed the time I had with all of my grandparents, aunts, and uncles... a time that has now passed. Certainly it is unfortunate, inconvenient and at times embarrassing not to remember. Yet without a doubt, for some people the failure of memory is largely unavoidable.

That is not always the case. Sometimes we are forgetful because we neglect that which has gone before us and become inattentive to those who have preceded us. We center all of our attention only on our own time and place. We act as though the present is all that matters and the past is some shabby thing that can be safely cast off and left behind like a worn-out pair of shoes.

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Here we are with Memorial Day upon us. On this occasion we are called upon to remember and respect those who have died, those whose days are gone. It is no surprise to us that many people do not reflect upon the past during this holiday any more than they do on any other day. In our age of ever-accelerating change, we

don't tend to look to the past to find our wisdom. We view what "has been" as largely irrelevant to what is now. The ancients are not our models. We place little value in traditions and inherited customs. And so when Memorial Day rolls around, our thoughts do not automatically turn to the past and to the departed. Most people appreciate Memorial Day largely because it is an extra day off work.

While today is a day to remember those who have given their lives in service to our country, it can serve to promote a value that is elevated throughout the Scriptures, that value being the importance of remembrance. You see, a failure of memory is not just something which leads to personal inconvenience or social embarrassment. It is a spiritual danger. A failure of memory in those things which are most significant results in a failure of faith. Forgetfulness erodes the foundation of our relationship with God.

A quick scanning of the biblical documents make apparent the importance that is placed upon remembering. Throughout the scriptures we find references to monuments, memorial feasts, and ritually repeated stories, all of which serve to reinforce the sacred memory of the people of God. In various ways the great saving acts of God were rehearsed and re-presented so that the people would not forget what God had done for their sake.

That's how the early Scriptures were recorded. They were oral traditions that eventually were written down. People would talk through the Biblical stories of Creation and other life events until that day that the Scribes took upon themselves the sacred duty to record the history of God's people and to protect it at all costs. And even then, because it was written down, people started to forget!

With pounding insistence the call to remember is repeated throughout scripture. God wanted them to remember that He called Abraham in his old age and promised him many children. He wanted them to remember when they were in bondage in a foreign land and were freed by divine power. God wanted the people to remember that it was He who brought Israel to greatness, though she was weak. God called to the people again and again to remember His commands.

The Psalmist summed up the message well when he wrote in Psalm 105:5 (NIV), "Remember the wonders he has done, his miracles, and the judgments he pronounced,"

Historically, those who forgot the past fell into thanklessness. It is unlikely that we will do any better. If we forget the value of our heritage and the source of our

blessings, it will become very easy for us to take for granted all that we have and all that we are. It will be very easy for us to begin believing that we can make our own way without God. With the blindness of pride we will very likely begin trusting in our own wisdom and power rather than relying upon the guidance and might of our Maker. Then in our wrong-headed self-confidence we will lose our way. For this reason it is crucial that we remember.

I suppose that every culture and country has its memorials. The best memorials lift our sights above the mundane affairs of the moment in order to focus our attention upon the highest aspirations and accomplishments of those who have preceded us. When we visit the Lincoln Memorial, Vietnam Memorial, Washington Monument, World War II Memorial, and many more in Washington, it is natural to begin meditating upon the impressive deeds and high values of these forebears. Visits to such places can help stimulate us to embrace more noble and exalted goals.

But sometimes memorials can serve less honorable purposes. Not only do memorials call attention to the best in the past; they also can be used to cover up the worst. An impressive monument can bestow dignity upon a dubious endeavor or questionable person of days gone by. Such memorials do no service to the truth for they hide unflattering facts. At times a memorial itself can be greater than the person it is supposed to honor. For instance, Michelangelo's sculpture for the tomb of Pope Julius II is a magnificent creation, but the Pope it was to pay tribute to had a questionable moral compass at best. But we don't want memorials to highlight the dark side of the past, the atrocities and treacheries. We prefer our memorials to comfort and reassure us, rather than warn us or disturb our complacency.

Sometimes dwelling on the past is a means of escaping the problems of the present and the disturbing prospects of the future. Sometimes we are tempted to glorify days gone by. I suppose we all know people who seem to continually talk about how great things used to be. Life was simpler, friendships were closer, motives were more pure, morals were higher and so on. This is the Golden Age syndrome. For some people the Golden Age was the 1920s; for others it was the 1960s. No matter what our favorite period may be, the problem with looking back to a Golden Age is that we distort the past and we come to believe that the best days of life have already gone by. Everything else that follows is anticlimactic. Consequently some people, who are disappointed with the present and distressed over the future, tend to live in the past. Their memories are highly important to them but they do not have hopeful memories.

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You see, a hopeful memory does not drag us into the past and lock us there. Hopeful memory does not tell us that the best of life has already come and gone. Rather it thrusts us into the future. When the prophets of old called upon God's people and told them to remember the works that the Lord had done in the past, this was to prepare them for the future. They were not called upon to remember the past for its own sake. The practice was not a self-indulgent diversion. Rather they were to remember the wonders of the past so that their lives would be open to the even greater wonders God would do for them in the future.

The Lord's Supper is a hopeful memorial. It does not falsely glorify the past. When we partake of the bread and cup we remember the broken body and blood of the Lord. Images of deceit, betrayal and cruelty impose themselves upon us. The memorial feast confronts us with the disquieting fact that we humans are all too capable of striking out against true holiness and supreme goodness and treating it as demonic if it does not work out to our advantage. That is not the kind of memory we hold dear. But the Lord's Supper does more. It reminds us of the sacrificial love of God. It speaks to us of a love that will not let us go but which reaches out to us, despite our evil.

Yet in the Lord's Supper we see even more than that. We also see the promise of Jesus Christ that He will come again and that we will eat and drink anew with our Lord in the kingdom of God (Mark 14:25). The Lord's Supper points us not only to the past but toward the promised future as well. The past and the future are made into vital contemporary realities for us by the presence of Christ. The meal is a memorial that reinforces a hopeful memory.

With Memorial Day upon us it is proper to think of the past and of those who have gone from this world. But for those of us who are Christians, this is not exclusively an exercise in looking behind and dwelling upon what has been. For we believe that more wondrous things are yet to come for those people of faith who have already died. We live in light of the resurrection and we believe that death will not be the end.

In 1969, Clarence Jordan died of a heart attack. As some of you know, Jordan was the author of the Cotton Patch Version of the Bible and was the founder of Koinonia Farms, an inter-racial community and innovative ministry in rural Georgia. His work had faced vicious opposition from many in his area during the 50's and 60's. In fact, when Jordan died, the local coroners and undertakers were

of little help. Jordan was buried in a plain cedar box on a hillside on his farm. Millard Fuller, the founder of Habitat for Humanity, officiated at the funeral. Just after the casket was lowered into the ground and the grave was filled, an unexpected thing happened. Fuller's two-year-old daughter stepped up to the grave and began to sing the only song the little girl knew.

Happy birthday to you, Happy birthday to you,

Happy birthday, dear Clarence

Happy birthday to you.

Happy birthday at a funeral? How strange and yet how truly appropriate. For when a Christian dies, it is a birthday of sorts because death is not an ending but a new beginning. And so when we think of our dead, let us do so with a hopeful memory for an amazing future still awaits them, and the rest of us as well.

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