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Joshua #6

Sermon Summary #6

Forgetfulness: The Enemy of Faith Joshua 4:1-24

Every time I think it is but a passing fad, it makes a comeback. I'm talking about *nostalgia*. I've decided it will probably never go away. *People love the past*, particularly their own. I have to confess, aside from Christian music, the only kind I listen to is from the 60's! I suspect that one day I'll grow out of that, perhaps on my deathbed!

In any case, people love to talk about "the good old days" when life seemed simpler and supposedly less sinful. I doubt if it was either.

The Bible actually has a lot to say about remembering the past. Much is said in Scripture about not forgetting what has gone before. But the difference is that the Christian does not remember or reminisce out of some desire to return to days gone by or to relive the years of their childhood. Remembering is not for the purpose of complaining that things now are worse than they were then. The purpose for biblical remembering is to remind us that the God who acted back then is the same God who acts now. In other words, ***remembering is not designed to transport you back into the past but to prepare and equip and encourage you for the future!***

And there is no better illustration of this than what we find here in Joshua 4. Allow me to briefly remind you of how we got to this point in our story. It all began in chapter two when Joshua sent two spies into the city of Jericho to search out the land and to gain information on the size and strength of the enemy. Upon their return, Joshua commanded the people to keep their eyes fixed on the ark of the covenant, the place of God's presence and power. As the priests stepped into the flood waters of the Jordan, it parted, much as did the Red Sea some 40 years earlier, allowing the people of Israel to enter the promised land on dry ground.

However, before they made their way across the Jordan, *God told Joshua to instruct 12 men, one from each of the 12 tribes, to pry loose from the river bed a large stone, to hoist it upon their shoulders, and to carry it to Gilgal on the east border of Jericho.*

Although nothing is said explicitly in the text, I can't help but imagine that it was a time of incredible celebration and thanksgiving. There surely must have been dancing and singing around their campfires. They had, after all, waited for this day for centuries! They probably looked again and again upon the 12 stones that were set up as a memorial, running over and over again in their minds what had just happened, shouting aloud: *"God did it! He really did it! Praise be to the Lord God Almighty, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; indeed he is the Lord over all the earth!"*

Verse 19 says this all occurred on "the tenth day of the first month." What makes this significant is that it was on the tenth day of the first month, some 40 years earlier, that the first Passover Lamb was selected and slain that led to their deliverance out of Egypt.

There is one issue that needs to be addressed before I go any farther. Was there only one pile of stones set up, or two? According to v. 9, "Joshua set up twelve stones in the midst of the Jordan, in the place where the feet of the priests bearing the ark of the covenant had stood; and they are there to this day." It seems most likely that there were indeed two memorials established that day. In addition to the memorial of 12 stones set up by the people at Gilgal, Joshua also took it upon himself to create a second monument of 12 stones, placed in the Jordan River. As the water would occasionally recede, Joshua would return and look upon the stones and be reminded yet again of what God had done.

What was the **purpose** for these piles of stones? Why did God issue such a command, and why did Joshua repeat the act at his own initiative? There appear to be two reasons, two goals if you will.

(1) First, there was the long-range, *global purpose* that is articulated in vv. 23-24. These stones stood as a testimony “so that all the peoples of the earth” might know that “the hand of the Lord is mighty” and so that Israel would continue to “fear the Lord your God forever.”

(2) But there was a second and more *immediate purpose* for this commandment. It was designed to serve as a reminder to their children and grandchildren of the power and faithfulness and goodness of God in fulfilling his promise to his people. This is stated twice, first in vv. 6-7 and again in vv. 20-22.

The fact that the children will ask about the meaning of these stones indicates that there would be visitations to the site at Gilgal in years to come. I can envision many in Israel taking a family vacation to Gilgal National Park where parents would walk along the banks of the Jordan and gradually make their way to Gilgal to the monument of 12 stones. “Daddy, what are these stones for?” This would provide the perfect opportunity for a father and mother to tell the story of God’s deliverance of Israel from Egypt and his parting of the waters of the Jordan River as he proved faithful to his covenant promise.

Needless to say, this entire story reinforces the importance of passing on a godly heritage to your children and grandchildren, who in turn can pass along the truth about God’s grace and power to their children and grandchildren.

What will your children remember most about you? What will they remember mattered most to you?

Will they grow old thinking of you parked in front of the TV or glued to the internet or playing games on your I-phone or sending text messages rather than engaging them in meaningful conversation? Fathers, will they think most of the many excuses you had for not showing up at their dance recital or ballgame? Will they remember angry outbursts at their mother and constant verbal criticism? Will they think only of the countless excuses you came up with not to take them to church on Sunday or the many nights you weren’t there to read to them and pray for them as they went to bed?

What are you doing to preserve and sustain in the hearts of your children the knowledge of God? What are you doing to keep them mindful of his faithfulness? What are you teaching them that will build into their value system a reverence for God and confidence in his Word?

The example of my mother and father . . .

In the Bible there are several significant events that were the focus of Israel’s collective memory.

- Perhaps the greatest of all was ***the Passover feast***, designed to commemorate the deliverance of Israel out of Egypt. At the time of the first Passover, as recorded in Exodus 12, Moses said,

“You shall observe this rite as a statute for you and for your sons forever. And when you come to the land that the LORD will give you, as he has promised, you shall keep this service. And when your children say to you, ‘What do you mean by this service?’ you shall say, ‘It is the sacrifice of the LORD’s Passover, for he passed over the houses of the people of Israel in Egypt, when he struck the Egyptians but spared our houses’” (Exod. 12:24-27a).

- Yet another example is ***the Mosaic Law*** itself. Again, listen to the instruction Moses gave to the people:

“When your son asks you in time to come, ‘What is the meaning of the testimonies and the statutes and the rules that the LORD our God has commanded you?’ then you shall say to your son, ‘We were Pharaoh’s slaves in Egypt. And the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. And the LORD showed signs and wonders, great and grievous, against Egypt and against Pharaoh and all his household, before our eyes. And he brought us out from there, that he might bring us in and give us the land that he swore to give to our

fathers. And the LORD commanded us to do all these statutes, to fear the LORD our God, for our good always, that he might preserve us alive, as we are this day. And it will be righteousness for us, if we are careful to do all this commandment before the LORD our God, as he has commanded us” (Deuteronomy 6:20-25).

- For us today, the greatest act of remembering happens each time we celebrate *the Lord’s Supper or the Eucharist*. Let me highlight several things that are entailed by this act of remembrance.

First, it is a remembrance that is *commanded*. When we gather to celebrate the Eucharist it is not because think it’s a good idea, but because Christ himself ordained that we must. This command also reveals the weakness of the flesh even in those who have been born again, for it is remarkable that we who have been redeemed by Christ should need to be urged to remember him.

Second, it is a remembrance which takes a *tangible*, visible form. The elements are designed to prick our spiritual sense by physical means. It’s not sufficient simply to *say*, “Remember.” We must go on to present to the eye and to the touch this tangible representation of the truth about which we are speaking. And again, it is surely an act of merciful condescension to our weakness as sinners that the Lord has established the sacrament in this way.

Third, it is a *strengthening* remembrance. The Eucharist serves to intensify and increase our understanding of and love for Christ’s death. When we partake in faith the Spirit awakens us to the power of Christ’s redemptive love and the beauty of divine grace.

Fourth, it is a *personal* remembrance. We are not told to remember the night on which the sacrament was instituted. Neither the betrayal nor the trial nor even the crucifixion itself is the focus of our attention. Rather it is a remembrance of *Jesus himself* betrayed, tried, and crucified. Remember “ME”, we are commanded. “Recall and be strengthened and encouraged by all that I have been, am, and forever will be to you. My person, my work, all that is yours by grace,” says Jesus, “let it take root in your souls and feed on Me.”

Fifth, S. Lewis Johnson makes this observation:

“He says, ‘This is MY body.’ What is most remarkable about the words is the fact that He was telling these young Jewish men that they should no longer celebrate the God-appointed festival of the Passover and substitute in its place remembrance of Him! Do not think of Moses; think of Me! It must have been a staggering thing to them, if they thought upon the transformation of the ceremony, from Passover to Lord’s Supper. And, the fact that He made this significant demand of them, and the fact that they accepted this startling change of ceremony tell us much of the authority and dignity of the King. It was a plain statement to the effect that He was the true Passover lamb, that His death is the real atoning sacrifice, and that His blood is the genuine spiritual safety of the believer. Marvelous indeed!” (“The First Lord’s Supper,” *Believers Bible Bulletin* [October 11, 1981], 4).

Sixth, in this activity of remembering there is more than simply commemoration: there is also *confession*. Whoever comes to the Lord’s Table not only commemorates the death of Christ for sinners but also confesses, “Christ died for **me**.” Note v. 24 – “This is my body which is for **you**.” What happened to Christ’s body was for me, and in my participating in the sacrament I thereby make confession to that effect.

Seventh, the inevitable corollary to remembrance is *proclamation*. John Murray put it this way:

“In the Lord’s Supper we are commemorating the death of Christ. This is remarkable. Do we commemorate the death of loved ones? Scarcely! We remember the death and the date. But we do not commemorate. However, it is not merely a commemoration. It is a celebration. ‘As often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord’s death till he come’ (1 Cor. 11:26). We are proclaiming the Lord’s death and

therefore go on proclaiming. We do not go on proclaiming the death of any other person. A death is announced, and if we went on perpetually announcing, not to speak of proclaiming, we would be properly regarded as insane. But Jesus' death we proclaim" (*Collected Writings* [Carlisle: Banner of Truth, 1982], III:284).

In conclusion, we should also note that the Eucharist is *prospective* in nature as well as *retrospective*. It is a service of hope, for it constantly reminds us that one day he who is now only represented in the bread and wine will be with us in person, and the fellowship which is now incomplete will at that time be consummated in perfection. We do not celebrate the death of a dead Savior but of a living Savior, a Savior and Lord who is coming again!

- Finally, it is important that you remember and commemorate and tell your friends and children and grandchildren of the life-changing events in which God's grace to you was made known: your conversion, perhaps a healing that occurred, a deliverance from trials, an incident where God's provision or guidance was clear.

Let's think about this in more depth. *Why is there this stress on remembering in the Bible* (as seen, for example, in 1 Chronicles 16:12 and Psalm 105:5)? The simple answer is because *one of faith's most devastating enemies is forgetfulness and one of faith's most powerful allies is memory*. A couple of illustrations will suffice.

First, we are commanded to remember God's ways and acts and deeds in order to overcome despondency and hopelessness and doubt. This is clear from **Psalm 77**. This psalm was written by a man named Asaph who was deeply confused, struggling with doubts, wondering aloud whether God really loves him, whether God really cares, whether God will ever draw near to him again. Look closely at his brush with despair. It's found in vv. 4-9.

"You hold my eyelids open; I am so troubled that I cannot speak. I consider the days of old, the years long ago. I said, "Let me remember my song in the night; let me meditate in my heart." Then my spirit made a diligent search: "Will the Lord spurn forever, and never again be favorable? Has his steadfast love forever ceased? Are his promises at an end for all time? Has God forgotten to be gracious? Has he in anger shut up his compassion?"

How does Asaph emerge from this pit of depression and disillusionment? He **remembers!** He consciously calls to mind who God is and what God has done. Look at vv. 11-15.

"I will remember the deeds of the LORD; yes, I will remember your wonders of old. I will ponder all your work, and meditate on your mighty deeds. Your way, O God, is holy. What god is great like our God? You are the God who works wonders; you have made known your might among the peoples. You with your arm redeemed your people, the children of Jacob and Joseph."

Note the *action verbs*: "remember," "ponder," and "meditate." Asaph doesn't passively wait for God to renew his faith. He takes action! He plots out a strategy and then pursues it! He fights to regain his faith! Where do we see God's deeds? In what way are his mighty works and wonders available to us? In his Word! We remember and ponder and meditate as we read and reflect in his Word on all he has done.

When you find yourself in the sort of doubt and despair that Asaph experienced, set yourself to remember who Jesus is: sinless Son of God. Reflect and remember and ponder his character: kind, gentle, meek, loving, compassionate, approachable, tender-hearted, gracious, merciful. Dig deeply into the Word that tells of his sacrifice: his determination to endure the shame and suffering and horror of Gethsemane and the abuse of the Roman guard and ultimately abandonment by his Father, all for you. This is how the Spirit awakens faith and strengthens you for tomorrow.

Second, we are commanded to remember in order to fuel our worship and love for God and gratitude for all he has done. This is clear from Psalm 103.

“Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name! Bless the LORD, O my soul, and **forget not** all his benefits, who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, who satisfies you with good so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's” (Psalm 103:1-5).

Here David preaches to himself. He takes his soul in hand and says: “**Don't forget** all that God has done! **Don't forget** the multitude of his benefits! **Don't forget** how he has forgiven all your sins! **Don't forget** that he is the God who heals your diseases! **Don't forget** that he has redeemed your life from the pit! **Don't forget** that he crowns you with his steadfast love and showers on you his mercy when all you deserved was death and hell! **Don't forget** that he alone can satisfy you with good and renew your youth like the eagle's!”

Third, we are commanded to remember so that we might pass along to the coming generations the truth of God and his Word and the glorious ways in which he delivers his people. See **Psalm 78:5-7; 145:4**. In Psalm 78 it is once again Asaph who brings to our attention the importance of memory:

“Give ear, O my people, to my teaching; incline your ears to the words of my mouth! I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings from of old, things that we have heard and known, that our fathers have told us. We will not hide them from their children, but tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the LORD, and his might, and the wonders that he has done. He established a testimony in Jacob and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our fathers to teach to their children, that the next generation might know them, the children yet unborn, and arise and tell them to their children, so that they should set their hope in God and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments; and that they should not be like their fathers, a stubborn and rebellious generation, a generation whose heart was not steadfast, whose spirit was not faithful to God” (Ps. 78:1-8).

Every generation of Christian men and women has the biblical responsibility to pass along to the next generation the mighty and merciful acts of God.

We laugh a lot here at Bridgeway about the multitude of young children with which God has blessed us. We can't help but notice the number of pregnant mothers, new adoptions, as well as foster children in our midst. Parents: Start today! *Start today to set in place a way by which you can pass along to your children the truths of God's Word and the memory of the wonderful things he has done in your life.* Identify the places and the times and the special objects that are associated with those moments when God showed up powerfully to save you, to deliver you, to encourage you; those times when he spoke powerfully to you and showed you his kindness in Christ. Mark those moments. Preserve those times. Save those objects. Establish monuments or memorials like Joshua to which in future years you can return with your children and remind them of what it tells you about God.

Look at how David said the same thing in Psalm 145.

“One generation shall commend your works to another, and shall declare your mighty acts. On the glorious splendor of your majesty, and on your wondrous works, I will meditate. They shall speak of the might of your awesome deeds, and I will declare your greatness. They shall pour forth the fame of your abundant goodness and shall sing aloud of your righteousness” (Ps. 145:4-7).

Don't miss this point: David doesn't merely speak to the next generation or teach the next generation, although that is certainly a good thing. He says that one generation shall “commend” God's works to the next. Commend ought rather to be translated, “praise”! David doesn't envision dry and lifeless communication of facts. He's talking about celebration! He's talking about exuberant and passionate and joyful communication of God's deeds from one generation to another.

Conclusion:

As we close, let's return to Joshua 4 where we see, tragically, what happens when God's people fail to remember; when they simply forget. To see this we need to move forward in the history of Israel to Judges 2:6-15. Listen carefully to what happened after the death of Joshua.

“When Joshua dismissed the people, the people of Israel went each to his inheritance to take possession of the land. And the people served the LORD all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua, who had seen all the great work that the LORD had done for Israel. And Joshua the son of Nun, the servant of the LORD, died at the age of 110 years. And they buried him within the boundaries of his inheritance in Timnath-heres, in the hill country of Ephraim, north of the mountain of Gaash. And all that generation also were gathered to their fathers. ***And there arose another generation after them who did not know the LORD or the work that he had done for Israel.***

And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and served the Baals. And they abandoned the LORD, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt. They went after other gods, from among the gods of the peoples who were around them, and bowed down to them. And they provoked the LORD to anger. They abandoned the LORD and served the Baals and the Ashtaroth. So the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he gave them over to plunderers, who plundered them. And he sold them into the hand of their surrounding enemies, so that they could no longer withstand their enemies. Whenever they marched out, the hand of the LORD was against them for harm, as the LORD had warned, and as the LORD had sworn to them. And they were in terrible distress” (Judges 2:6-15).

Although the first few generations who entered the land remained faithful, as time passed they failed to pass along to the next generation the remembrance of what God had done. Soon, their memories began to fade. It came upon them gradually, but evidently the command to remember was ignored and the memory of what God had done for Israel disappeared from their collective consciousness. How did this happen? The explanation is simple but devastating: parents failed to recall to mind what God had done; in turn they failed to tell their children, who in turn had nothing to say to their children about the mighty exploits of God and his goodness and faithfulness. Simply put:

Spiritual amnesia led to apathy that eventually led to apostasy

“Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name! Bless the LORD, O my soul, and **forget not** all his benefits!” (Ps. 103:1-2).