

Remember

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Remember

Seek the Lord and his strength, seek his presence continually. Remember the works he has done, his miracles, and the judgments he uttered... (1 Chronicles 16:11-12).

If you've ever spent much time at the ocean shore, you may have seen sand sculptures. Little children are always out with their plastic shovels and buckets moving sand around, but there are sculptors who do amazing things with sand. Life-size race cars, elaborate castles, DaVinci's *Last Supper* ... some of the designs are incredible in their detail.

And then the tide comes in, and the waves roll up, and it's all washed away. You'd never know, walking along the beach, that yesterday there were works of art in this very place.

For poetic souls among us, who notice things and make connections, metaphors spring up where sand castles used to be. All of life is like that, isn't it? Here today, gone tomorrow. So the Psalmist says in another setting:

As for mortals, their days are like grass;
they flourish like a flower of the field;
for the wind passes over it, and it is gone,
and its place knows it no more (103:15-16).

Or the hymn writer:

Time like an ever-rolling stream
soon bears us all away;
We fly forgotten as a dream
dies at the opening day.

That's not a morbid thought, necessarily. It's just the way things are in this world. Things change day to day, and what gives continuity to life is our memory.

Our lives are stories, where past and present are held together by recollection. In a sense, who we are is the narrator of our individual story. "I" am the one who was born to these parents in that year, and grew up in this place, and went to school there, and know these friends, and married this person, and have these children, and work for that company. I accomplished these things and never got around to those; I'm motivated by this, and could care less about that ... and the continuity in all of this – the memory of it – is what makes me myself.

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In a very real sense, a person is what a set of memories is about. That doesn't mean we have to remember everything consciously ourselves. When we were babies and young children, all sorts of things happened that we don't remember. So years later our parents flip through photo albums with us and they say, "When you were little, you used to do that ... remember?"

Lots of experiences we don't recall, either because they were too trivial to remember or because we'd just as soon forget. Mistakes we've made, dumb things we've said, and embarrassing moments of all kinds we're happy to erase from memory. In fact, there's a very rare condition in which people remember everything they ever experienced, in every detail. You might think that would be a blessing, but people who have that condition consider it a curse. They remember so much that the details are like noise: they can't focus on what matters because all the trivial things get in the way – not to mention the difficult things they wish they could forget, but can't.

For most of us, when we get older our short-term memory slips a bit. Then the same thing that causes us to need reading glasses causes us to forget where we left them, and we find ourselves asking why we came into this particular room just now. For some of us later on, memory slips even more, so that somebody else has to do our remembering for us. But even then, who we are is the subject of a story. That's what it is to be a person. We are the one that somebody remembers.

A corollary to all this is that it matters what kinds of things we remember. In fact, the person we become is shaped by what we remember. The skills and knowledge we accumulate determine what we're able to do in life. But more than that, our attitudes and values, what we want and how we treat other people, depend on what we remember and what we forget.

So, for example, we value people we remember fondly, and we're inclined to treat them well. "Remember me to your sister," we say, because we want to keep that connection alive. We look forward to reunions with people we miss, and we sit around reminiscing in ways that bind us together even when we're apart. Old friends are precious because our stories intertwine with theirs.

But enemies and antagonisms work the same way. We dread seeing some people because they remind us of unpleasant things, and we expect that when we see them again something bad will happen. Even some siblings barely speak to one another, because their thoughts of each other are wrapped in nasty memories. And of course some people build up stereotypes about whole groups of human beings, based on their memory of individuals within that group. The world is full of animosities driven by racial or ethnic or class or gender stereotypes, driven in turn by people's memories.

It matters what we remember, because memories shape our lives – our motivations, our peace of mind, and the way we treat one another. That's why the Bible is full of reminders about what we need to remember.

“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy,” is one of the Ten Commandments. The fact that so few people keep that commandment today helps to explain why so many lives are frazzled. Even many who believe in God live, for all practical purposes, as though they did not. We live as though we were in charge, forgetting that God is God and we are not; and so we’re always running up against our limitations, surprised by how little we really do control.

In Deuteronomy’s version of the Ten Commandments, repeated on the edge of the promised land, Moses tells the people:

Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day (Deut. 5:15)

Remembering the sabbath is tied to remembering all that God has done for us. That’s partly by way of being grateful to God, but also by way of guiding how we live. Among other things, this means being good stewards of God’s gifts. When you do well, Moses says,

Do not say to yourself, “My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth.” But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth... (Deut. 8:17-18).

Remembering God’s goodness should make us grateful and generous stewards; it should also give us hope in times of trouble. So the psalmist says, “I cry aloud to God, that he may hear me. In the day of my trouble I seek the Lord.” But then he remembers: “I will call to mind the deeds of the Lord; I will remember your wonders of old...” (Ps. 77). King David says, “Seek the Lord and his strength, seek his presence continually. Remember the wonderful works he has done....” In remembering we find hope: the God who was gracious before will surely be gracious again.

And it’s not only we who remember; God remembers too. God’s remembering is one of the great metaphors of the Bible. So in Genesis, the rainbow in the story of Noah’s flood is a reminder:

When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth (Gen. 9:16).

Throughout the Bible, God remembers the covenant, even when God’s people forget. The prophets are forever reminding us who we are. We are people of the covenant. We have this pact with God. God has promised to deliver us, but in return, God expects us to be faithful, and live as God commands.

We’re not very good at keeping up our end of the bargain. We always fall short, living mostly for ourselves, instead of loving God fully, and our neighbors as ourselves. So God not only has to remember the covenant, he also has to forget our sins. God says through the prophet Jeremiah:

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I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ... for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more (Jer. 31:33-34).

In the New Testament, God goes a step further. The Letter to the Hebrews says that God brings the covenant in person, through Jesus Christ. "I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more." Now God's covenant will be written on the heart of everyone who is in Christ. God will forget our sins, and we will remember God, and live in him.

What we remember shapes the person we become. We know *who* we are by remembering *whose* we are. If we remember God, and that we belong to God, and we seek to love God and live for God, then we will have strength for the present, hope for the future, and an identity for all eternity.

Of course it's not these bodies that last forever. These bodies pass away, as we all know. That's why it isn't the end of the story when our minds grow forgetful with age or illness. God can fix all that. As Paul says to the Corinthians, "... if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens" (2 Cor. 5:1). God can give us a new body in the resurrection. Then, just as the lame will walk and the blind will see, so the forgetful will remember and our minds will be restored.

In the meantime, what matters is what we choose to remember – that is, how we focus on what we want to become. If the story of our lives is about how we grow closer to God, and learn to become what God wants us to be, then God will want that story to continue. God apparently enjoys a good story. That's why God made so many people. We are stories in God's book of life.

Remember that all of creation began with a word. "God *said*..." according to Genesis, and things came into being. John's gospel says that the word God spoke was none other than the one we know in Jesus Christ – the Word who was in the beginning with God, and was God, the Word through whom all things were made. To put it another way, our individual stories are part of God's own story. That, above all, tells us who we are. "And remember," Jesus says, "I am with you always, even to the close of the age."