

Remembering Well



Computers make it easy to save digital images by the thousands and make them readily available for viewing. I recently went through the exercise of scanning and digitizing a thousand plus pictures from my and my family's past. They start from my high school days (in the sixties!) through to the time as a young family that we spent in Africa in the eighties. The picture above is of my wife and daughters and our trusty Land Cruiser on a day outing while in Zaire.

Having done all this work of digitizing, I now can sit and see decades of my life pass before my eyes in a very short time! Doing this makes an emotional impact on me. A strong sense of nostalgia comes on me while gazing at images of my wife as a young beauty (she's still a beauty) or of my adorable children as infants, toddlers then young children. The images of important people and places from my past move me with wistfulness for times long since gone. My feelings sometimes tend towards the maudlin and I must stop looking lest I become preoccupied with days long gone.

This exercise in nostalgia has led me to wonder, "What is the proper place of reminiscing for a Christian?" Indeed, does the remembering of times past have a

profitable place, or does it focus our thoughts in the wrong direction (i.e., the past). Should our focus only be toward the future? Doesn't the apostle say, "But one thing I do: forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead." (Phil 3:13b) This would seem to indicate that our minds are to be exclusively future orientated and reflection upon the past to be counter-productive to our progress in the Christian life.

But then I remember that the same apostle on occasion brings up his own past as a tool for bearing witness to the work of God done in his heart (see Gal. 1:11ff; Acts 22:2ff; 26:4ff). He also reminded others of God's gracious past dealings with them. For example, he brought to Timothy's remembrance Timothy's own spiritual heritage of a godly grandmother and mother (1 Tim 1:5).

I also have been struck how common in the Old Testament is the practice of the writers to give a review of Israel's history. We see this within several Psalms (see Psalms 78, 105, 106, 135, 136). Nehemiah does this as well (see chapter 9). Then in the New Testament we remember that Stephen was martyred following his own recitation of Israel's history. That history Stephen notes, was one of repeated rebellions and rejections of God's appointed messengers. Jesus' execution, Stephen asserts, was the finale of that history of violence against God's messengers. This exercise in remembering takes up almost an entire chapter of the book of Acts (7:1 – 53). This surely indicates that it was important within the context of that book.

On balance, I would say that going over the past isn't in and of itself a bad thing. The fact that the Scriptures sometimes do it, suggests that there is merit in it. The question before us then is "When is a look backwards good and when is it bad?" Or put another way "How can reminiscing profit and how can it hurt?"

In broad strokes I think we can break the answer down this way. Looking back is bad if it embellishes or inflates our own self-understanding while diminishing or dismissing God from the picture. On the flip side, looking back is good to remind us of our sinfulness while at the same time celebrating God's faithfulness.

Bad Remembering will be Forgetful of sin and Inflate Self-Importance

Jesus encountered Jewish leaders who operated with a sanitized memory about their nation's past. Since they were the descendants of Abraham, they were sometimes given to bragging. They assumed an air of superiority simply because they traced their earthly lineage from him. They boasted to Jesus "we are Abraham's children and have never been slave of anyone." (John 8:33b) True, they descended from Abraham, but the history of Israel since Abraham's time is littered with the stories of their enslavements. They were slaves in Egypt, they were sometimes slaves in their own country during the times of the Judges, they were slaves in Assyria and Babylon. Even as they talked with Jesus, they were under the thumb of the Romans. The Romans were just the latest in a series of oppressing

foreign powers over them in the past few hundred years. They were glaringly forgetful of this major characteristic of their own history.

They also had selective amnesia regarding the crimes that had been committed by their ancestors in order to inflate their own self-understanding as the people of God. Jesus sticks a pin in their thinking. He does it by His incisive use of parables that illustrate this history (see especially the parable of the Tenants, Luke 21:33 – 45). He also does it by cutting pronouncements. He says, "Woe to you, because you build tombs for the prophets, and it was your ancestors who killed them. So, you testify that you approve of what your ancestors did; they killed the prophets, and you build their tombs." (Luke 11:37)

It is easy to be hard on these people as if they were the exception. Truth be told, it is the norm for a people to embellish the story of their past. We Canadians critique American bravado and overt patriotism while being secretly proud of our history of self-effacing heroism. We are no more honest or better than they.

What's true of nations or peoples is true of individuals as well. We usually remember the past in kinder hues than the facts warrant. At best, the memory of our failings and sins fade with the years. At worst, we become the hero of our life's story. Some might call this a coping mechanism. The increasing burden of repeated failures and sins becomes unbearable if it is remembered accurately. Better, it is argued, to sanitize your memory

than to repeatedly face the weight of your failings.

But such embellishment or amnesia of the past is bad for us. If I am the hero of my own story, then I am idolater, worshipping at the altar of my own deeds. If I am the object of my adoration, I am prevented from directing worship to the place it should be given, namely, at the feet of Jesus. Similarly, if I am forgetful of my sinful past, that past cannot serve a good purpose of bringing me to the place of repentance and seeking after God's forgiveness. When Jesus said He didn't come to call the righteous, He was speaking sarcastically. The so-called righteous are those who are amnesiacs about their sin and need of a saviour. So long as they remain forgetful, their past can do them no good and Jesus' work cannot profit them.

Bad Remembering will Leave God out of the Picture or Mis-represent Him

The companion to amnesia toward our own failings is amnesia towards God. When a person embellishes the memory of self, that person pushes God to the margins or out of mind altogether. Paul describes the default pattern of fallen humanity as the willful suppression of the truth of God's existence and character in exchange for self-adulation and selfish sinful pursuits. (Romans 1:18ff)

What is true of fallen humanity in general was also exhibited in the practice of the Israelites. A prominent feature of the aforementioned Psalms is to repeatedly make this point. Psalm 78:11, 12 reads "They forgot what he [God] had done, the

wonders he had shown them. He did miracles in the sight of their ancestors in the land of Egypt, in the region of Zoan." Then Psalm 106: 20 -22 in words that probably inspired Paul's description of sinful humanity in Romans 1 reads "They exchanged their glorious God for an image of a bull, which eats grass. They forgot the God who saved them, who had done great things in Egypt, miracles in the land of Ham and awesome deeds by the Red Sea."

At the individual level we see the same God suppressing pattern. People who have walked away from God, often remember their days under gospel preaching in ways unrecognizable to those who sat under the same preaching but whose faith in God blossomed by it. Where the former recalls a God who is harsh, unfair and coldly distant, the latter remembers God for His kindness and grace for drawing near to him or her. How can the same events produce such divergent memories in people? The answer is that the one person puts aside or distorts the knowledge of God preached to them. The believer on the other hand, embraces the God revealed in the same preaching as revealed in the person of Jesus and who's Spirit makes them over in His image.

Good Remembering will be honest about our Sin and Failings.

Bad remembering sanitizes self while denigrating or suppressing the knowledge of God. What of good remembering then? It is just the opposite.

If we are honest about our past, we must agree with the biblical verdict about us. We are the offspring of Adam. We are born into sin. We then prove it by repeatedly sinning and then by dying (Rom 5:12 – 19). This is not to say that we never do good things, even noble things. But honest self-examination shows that every good deed is contaminated in some way or ways. Things like selfishness, false-modesty, secret envy, undetected lies, misunderstandings, doubt and so on are *always* present in even the noblest act.

People are like ornate but ruined mansions. Signs of opulence and grandeur are here and there but everywhere there is shabbiness, neglect and decay. Everything in us is ravaged by the elements (the world, the flesh and the devil). Everything in us is broken. Everything in us is running down. A lick of paint and a dusting won't fix us. Only a complete gut-job will do. A total renovation is called for. This is what the contemplation of our past should remind us.

Returning to Stephen, none of us is neither better nor worse than Stephen's description of his audience. "You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: you always resist the Holy Spirit!" (Acts 7:51) His point was not that his hearers were the worst generation ever to come along, but they were typical of every generation and of every person that had gone before. An honest look at ourselves will say that we were just the same. We too were stubborn, we too were like any sinner anywhere (i.e., uncircumcised in heart) and we too were living in active opposition to God. We would

have joined the crowd and picked up a stone to silence Stephen.

It wasn't until we came to admit that Stephen's words applied equally to us that we were put in a place where we could be renovated. Before that we lived amidst the ruins of the house which was us, oblivious that it was falling down around us. But when God, through the Gospel brought the realization of our sin and we believed, it was only then that the Holy Spirit entered us and, began God's renovating work within us.

Good Remembering will focus upon God's Faithfulness and Mercy.

If all there was to good remembering is our sin, then we would be devastated. Such remembering would be unbearable. Indeed, that is why some indulge in substances or activities that dull or distract from guilty memories or worse. Some even end their own life rather than live with them. Fortunately, this is only half the picture. The other half of the picture is as glorious as the first half is depressing. Going back again to those Psalms of remembering we find that they alternate between the cold water of honest recounting of sins past and the soothing waters of the remembering of God's faithfulness.

The theme of Psalm 105 is succinctly expressed in verse 5 "Remember the wonders that He [God] has done, His miracles and the judgments He has pronounced." The Psalm reads like a highlights reel of God's greatest deeds on

behalf of His chosen people. The summation of the Psalm gives the reason as "For he [God] remembered his holy promise given to his servant Abraham," (v 42). Similarly, Psalms 135 and 136 recount the acts of gracious deliverance for His people. Psalm 136 trumpets over and over the chorus "His mercy endures forever."

Reading all these Psalms together give the balance we need when contemplating the past. Psalms 78 and 106 focus upon the peoples' repeated sinfulness, while Psalms 105, 135 and 136 celebrate God's faithfulness. Nehemiah 9, also mentioned above, strikes the balance between these two. Verse 17 expresses it clearly, "They refused to listen and failed to remember the miracles you performed among them. They became stiff-necked and, in their rebellion, appointed a leader in order to return to their slavery. *But* you are a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love. Therefore you did not desert them," (italics added).

We find this balance across the pages of Scripture. For example, the cyclical pattern of the book of Judges highlight it very well. The people are described as being repeatedly rebellious, but God is repeatedly faithful to His promise made to the Patriarchs. Again, and again, whenever the people showed any inclination to turn to Him, He rescued them in dramatic fashion by the instrumentality of very flawed leaders!

In Christ we find the ultimate expression of God's faithfulness in action. All the promises of the Old Covenant come to

fruition in Him. The promise of a seed made first to Adam, then to Abraham and again to David find their true fulfillment in Jesus. It was a fulfillment that was despite the countless failings, rebellions, misunderstandings and sins by those to whom the promises were given. Its fulfillment was far grander than even the angels could anticipate, and it benefits us beyond our best imaginings. "What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived – the things God has prepared for those who love him - these are the things God has revealed to us by his Spirit." (1 Cor 2:9, 10a)

In conclusion we can say that it is ok to take time to remember the past. Look at old photographs or home movies and enjoy the memories they evoke. But in remembering be careful to avoid a wrong remembering that inflates self while diminishing God. Instead, remember the pit from which you were dug and thank God repeatedly for salvation. Let John Newton's words be our motto: "Although my memory's fading, I remember two things very clearly: I am a great sinner and Christ is a great Saviour."