

REMEMBER OR FORGET

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That's what I'm trying to do these days – what should I remember? What should I forget? When this year began I adopted a verse as a motto for this year one that I'm sure is familiar to you. Philippians 3:13-14 “Forgetting what is beyond and straining forward to what is ahead I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.” I subtitled that verse *Leaning Into the Future*.

Little did I realize how much the Lord would have us lean into the future by forgetting the things, which were behind for this year. But I don't think, *I know* that forgetting is not the fundamental theme of scripture. I asked my son George Paul, this week what he thought the New Testament emphasizes most – forgetting or remembering. He said, forgetting – scriptures emphasize forgetting. But I've done a word study in the New Testament on the themes “remember” and “forget”. There's some words that go with the word “remember” such as memory and recall and remembrance. And some words that go with forget like forgetting and forgotten.

If you take all these word groups and put them into two categories of remember and forget you'll find that the concept of remember is mentioned 72 times in the New Testament. Whereas the concept of forget is mentioned only 10 times and six of those 10 times we're told *not to forget*. And of the four remaining occasions only once are we positively encouraged to forget and that is the scripture I've just quoted. Where Paul recounts his status before he became a believer, before he became a recipient of God's magnificent grace. He's said I've laid that all behind me now. I have forgotten that and I strain instead toward the future.

It is with great gratitude that today I remember. My temptation would be to want to walk with you through all 72 uses of the word “remember.” I won't.

I'll just touch a few scriptures lightly that have really brushed by me anew as I have remembered. Then save one of them for a little more pointed remarks toward the close of the message.

One remember verses is Matthew 16:9, parallel passage Mark 8:19, where Jesus says to the disciples “Don't you remember the five loaves for the 5000 and how many baskets full you gathered?” He says this to them in the context of a storm when in the midst of needing new resources to combat the elements they had forgotten the resources he had supplied in a previous setting. Which is always the case of us when we go through swamp times in our life. We have a tendency to forget what the Lord has already done for us and we disconnect that past with our present so that in the present we forget the accomplishment that the Lord did for us the last time he brought us through. Jesus is asking, “Don't you remember?” The focus of that in terms of a seed point is he is the Lord who helps us, who always helps us when we do not have enough.

If you're here today and you're looking at your resources whether they're emotional resources or spiritual resources or economic resources he is the Lord who is committed to help us when we do not have enough.

I was thinking back in this church when we did not have enough. It seems like we were always tested in the area of finances in the church. Dreams always outstrip resources. It's just part of

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the building of the kingdom of God. And its part of the way the Lord has of us being freshly reliant upon him, to trust him for those resources.

I remember one time we were in a board meeting debating what bills we were going to pay. We finally decided we needed to at least pay a \$1000 in back bill of the ones that were due. A knock came at the door and one of parishioners interrupted the board meeting. At the time I felt it was rather rude. But she called me out and said, "Pastor, I just want to give you this. We're going on vacation for a couple of weeks. Just wanted to leave this with you." I went back to the meeting where we proceeded for another hour to try to figure out how we were going to get these funds that we needed. Absent minded I reached into my pocket for the envelop, opened it up and there was a check for \$1000 that she had left as their tithe.

I don't know how many times that that happened over the course of those years. I say that as an encouragement. He is the Lord who helps us when we do not have enough.

This last week I was reading again through the psalms of assent. A beautiful passage from Psalm 120 to 135 which were the fifteen psalms the pilgrims to Jerusalem sang as they mounted from the Jordan rift valley up to go to Jerusalem. In Psalm 125 there is an incredible phrase that says if the Lord had not been on our side, let Israel say, if the Lord had not been on our side, the flood would have engulfed us. The torrent would have swept over us. The raging waters would have swept us away. I've always liked the later part of that quotation but I'd not liked the first part – if the Lord had not been on our side – because I've heard it used so many times to say, I'm doing well because the Lord is on my side – what's wrong with you? Or it has been used to fuel American patriot patriotism as though God were more on America's side than some other ethnicity or nation's side.

So I've not liked the emphasis that sometimes has been put upon that verse. But it really struck me anew as I looked at that verse why it is appropriate to say that in regard to our resources. We find sometimes in life when things really do break against us that there is someone who will never break against us. Someone who will never cut cross grain to us. We can bank on it for sure. The Lord is on our side. "If the Lord had not been on our side the floods would have engulfed us."

Maybe you're in that kind of situation today where your circumstances seem to be flooding over you. Jesus is saying to you Don't you remember the five loaves for the 5000? And how much you had left over. Don't you remember how God has always brought you through?

The second word that has been delightfully on my heart is this little text from Luke 12:6 "Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God." God remembers each one. The key for me there is the fifth sparrow.

Jewel is a shopper. If you want to know where the deals are.... Here is a deal in the gospel text. Two birds for a penny. And if you buy two sets of two birds the fifth one comes free. So it's the five sparrows for two pennies because the fifth one is the freebie. Jesus says even that fifth one I remember. The one that is worthless. The one that's just tossed in to make the deal attractive. I remember that one.

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The analogy that Jesus strikes is that if he remembers the freebie he remembers us. He is the Lord. He is the Lord who not only provides our resources. He is the Lord who personally remembers us.

When I show up on the eternal shore it will not be the clerk at the DMV who greets me. Nothing wrong with the DMV. And if you work there, God bless you. It will be the Lord himself reaching out to me, to you, and saying, "I never forgot you. I remember you. I know you." God remembers us.

Another wonderful scripture that has percolated in my mind is Hebrews 6:10 "God is not unjust. He will not forget your work and the love you have shown as you have helped his people and continue to help them." He is not only the Lord who is to be remembered when our resources are short. And he also is the one who remembers us. But he also remembers our work. He remembers our work.

I was thirteen years of age when my parents were kind of down on their luck, so to speak. They had returned home as missionaries to China and Tibet. They then had pastored a couple places. They were looking to pastor another church but seemingly couldn't get in the doorway. They finally decided they weren't going to leave the ministry. God had called them to the ministry. They would just go pioneer a church somewhere. So the Lord, through a series of circumstances, led them to a little town on the Ohio River called Jeffersonville, Indiana across the river from Louisville, Kentucky. They took what last little savings they had and put it as a down payment on a building that doubled as a church with a little apartment in the back for us to live. I was the only child left at home at the time. Dad got a job in a packing factory across the river in Louisville, packing heavy crates. His health was not strong. Mom took a job selling Avon door to door. Those were the days in the Pentecostal church when selling cosmetics and wearing them was a no-no. I don't know why it was. We had preachers who wore expensive suits, drove big flashy cars, wore big rings and wore bright red ties... but it was a sin for women to wear red paint. But as a kid I was very sharp. I'd say to my mother, Are you pushing that lipstick? She was in her late 50s at the time. I was born when my mother was 43, which explains the brain damage. I remember their work in that place. I remember Dad coming home at four in the afternoon and we had no air conditioning in the house – couldn't afford it. It was too new in those days anyway. He'd just simply lay on the floor of the house with a circular fan blowing on him for a couple hours until he could get his strength back and then get up and eat. And then he and mom would go out calling on people. They did this for over two years with little results. The time came when Dad's health broke under the strain and they had to leave the church and subsequently thereafter it closed.

Over 35 years went by, 40 years, before I went back there. I remember the day that I came back into town and I drove to the corner of where our old church building had stood. As I come to the corner to see that old church which I knew now didn't exist as Assemblies of God congregation, but I didn't know that the buildings didn't exist. I parked and got out. There was just low income housing that had been built there. It had been bulldozed evidently long ago. I walked around the block, really crying hard. By that time both my parents were gone. I was thinking about their labor of love, how hard they'd worked in that place to establish the church and how there were not visible results left. I was complaining to God: "It's not fair. They worked so hard here to build your church. And the church didn't take. It isn't here. It's gone."

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I felt the Holy Spirit inside my heart say something not tender to me at all. But it was a very stern rebuke. A sharp rebuke. “How dare you say my church is not here! How do you know what happened to the church? You know better than that. You know the church isn’t the building. The church is people. So how do you know where those people are that your parents have touched. And how dare you say the work was in vein. You’re here aren’t here. And you were baptized on this site. And you taught your first Sunday school class here. (My job was teaching the 3 and 4 year olds in the back of the church in the one room Sunday school.) You began your ministry here. How dare you say the church doesn’t exist.”

It was like everyone else had forgotten Jeffersonville except now me. And the Lord.

I always carry on my person the reminder of that Jeffersonville, Indiana church because always in my date book is my mother’s Avon pen that she got in Jeffersonville. Avon’s highest honor.

God remembers our work. Don’t be lazy in the kingdom. Do the work of the Lord diligently. In due season we will reap if we faint not.

My parents never did anything big in the kingdom of God but they laid a lot of good seed. Just two months ago I was in northwest China to their old church. I’m delighted to tell you that that church has grown from a handful of believers to 3800 adult baptized believers. It’s powerful what God has done.

They are dancing in heaven today if word has already reached there. And I’m sure it has. Mom always said to me, “George, when we stand before God he will not ask us if we have been successful but if we have been faithful.” And she would also say, “It won’t matter a hundred years from now.” We need to live for the things that matter a hundred years from now. God remembers our work.

The last thing that I want to say is a scripture on remembrance that strikes me as most unusual because it is something that I would not think that we would forget. Paul uses it in his last letter that he writes to Timothy. 2 Timothy 2:8 “Remember Jesus Christ raised from the dead.” If you’re a believer how could you ever forget that? But I know because I’ve forgotten it myself on occasion. You can forget that. Remember Jesus Christ risen from the dead.

When do we forget that? We forget it sometimes in the midst of gain and success. When everything seems to be going externally well in our lives and we’re coasting on our comforts and basking in our leisure, in our enjoyment. But the fundamental realities of life are not our subjective feelings. The fundamental realities are the objectiveness of Christ’s resurrection from the dead. If I have left off the resurrection as my compass in life no matter how high my feeling state may be I am living in a wrongful manner. I must remember Jesus Christ risen from the dead and keep anchoring my life by the priorities that matter. By the things that count. Remember. In the midst of your success, when everyone is singing your praises and when you’ve never had it better don’t forget Jesus risen from the dead.

I need to remember him risen from the dead in times of suffering and in times of trial. I need to remember that because that is my anchor as a Christian that there will be a day when all is explained. Life is not a 60-yard dash with a brick wall for a finish line. That the Lord has come and moved in his resurrection power. And because he lives, I live also even in the midst of pain and suffering.

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I remember what the pastor told me in northwest China two and a half months ago when I was with him. He said of the entrance of the Communist reign in 1949. He said in 1949 there was no human heart but God brought us through. For 35 years those believers literally lived on the lam. Their churches were shut down. They couldn't appeal. And they can't even appeal to people today to become a Christian on the basis if you do, you'll live a better life. You'll have a better job. You'll feel more actualized. The appeal is simply Jesus Christ and him crucified and risen again from the dead. They knew what it was to be reduced to two ounces of flour rations per day for a 3-year period of time. Their only other food was grass roots and tree bark. The pastor's father said to him as he faced martyrdom, "I want you to remember what I'm telling you because in the days ahead God is going to use you but it all depends on whether you'll maintain your faith. Should you lose your faith I will disown you as my son and God will disown you too." He said to him, "No matter what happens we must not let go of our faith in good times or bad. We cannot forget his word."

What he was doing was not reading God's favor by the external circumstances but by trusting that underneath our feet is a floor that is firmer than anything in this world. It is the fact that on the third day Jesus rose again from the dead.

There have been some terrible fires in southern California recently. Fire is such a picture of devastation in our life. Maybe you feel like a fire has gone through your life emotionally and relationally or circumstantially. You need to remember today: Jesus Christ is risen from the dead!

I was at Glacier National Park a few weeks ago. We were high up in an overlook looking across the vast expanse of the forest. Below me was a forest service marker, which had this reading: "In a wilderness forest naturally caused fires are common and perhaps necessary. They burn the forest floor clear of dead branches, needles and less hardy plants and leave resistant species undamaged to promulgate healthier forests. The passing heat spurs germination of new seeds and new life begins. Over the centuries Glacier has seen countless fires always followed by new growth. Each phase from ashes to old giants playing a vital role in the forest's existence." The marker then noted as you looked at it the three differentiations of trees in the vistas below. The smaller trees were young. The middle trees, the darker old trees. It posed this statement and question: "In the valley below are three generations of trees. Can you see them?"

I thought as I looked at that how that's often true with fire in our life. The frustrating thing about a recent fire is that the new growth is so very small we compare it to the growth where it was before the fire came along. But we also know from the forest service that fire in our life gemminates new seeds. In fact there are some seeds that are only exploded through fire and they produce a whole new luxuriant species of the forest floor because of the pressure of the fire. It is because of the pressure of Jesus' crucifixion, which we remember today that the explosion of resurrection is released upon us. Remember Jesus Christ risen from the dead.

You may not have an answer in the next 24 hours to what you could be wrestling with today. But you have an eternal answer in Jesus. Because he is the living Lord.

I am not a Christian because Christianity offers a good philosophy of life. I have not been a pastor these years because it's simply something I wanted to do that I thought would make a good career. I am who I am and you are who you are if you are a Christian because Jesus was

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born in Bethlehem's manger of a Virgin – Mary. He lived a sinless life. He laid down his life as atonement for my sin. He rose again from the dead on the third day. He ascended into heaven and he is coming again. I serve a risen savior. Remember Jesus Christ! [end of tape]