

## The Former Things Will No Longer Be Remembered

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

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Psalm 25:1-7, Isaiah 65:17-19

Years ago I got involved with a small group of people who were studying the Psalms. As part of our study we decided that we would commit ourselves to memorizing the Psalms. We would have memory work, just like the old days. We started out with good intentions but we soon discovered that our brains weren't like the old days. I remember memorizing Isaiah 53 in 6<sup>th</sup> grade, but memorizing the psalms in middle age was WAY harder. Middle age has clogged neural pathways, and the synapses aren't firing like they used to. And so every class we would get together and we'd start by reciting the Psalm – sort of – and we'd end by complaining about our deteriorating memory. The neural pathways were not working like they used to.

Our complaining reflects how our society feel about memory in general. Because when it comes to memory, more is better. A good memory is something to be prized. Forgetfulness is a problem. You can buy books and go to seminars on mega memory. You can buy pills that promise to improve your memory. As far as I know there are no books on power forgetfulness. In general forgetfulness is something we fight.

But what about memory and forgiveness? What about when it comes to forgiving another person their sin? Isn't forgetfulness a good thing there? Aren't we supposed to forgive and forget? Well, not necessarily. Lew Smedes and many other scholars have made a pretty good argument that forgiving doesn't necessarily involve forgetting, and in some cases it probably shouldn't. For instance: Should we forget the holocaust? Should we forget that we human beings are capable of trying to exterminate each other? Perhaps we can forgive the particular perpetrators of these offenses, but should we forget what they did? Should we forget the two world wars that were fought this century? I remember back home in Canada the monuments to the first world war often bore the inscription, 'Lest we forget.' The people who suffered through that war were bound and determined that neither they nor the next generation forget the horrible things that happened in the trenches. In the past, many veterans of that war got together with German veterans and there was a sort of forgiveness offered in those meetings. The former enemies embraced. But no one forgot. They remembered and urged others to remember so that nothing like this would ever happen again. The old saying says that those who forget the past are doomed to repeat it. And that is absolutely right.

But let us admit, that while remembering is an important part of the work of restoration, it's also a terrible burden for us. Because while it may be dangerous to forget. It is painful to remember. In many cases it's *unbearably* painful. As people, as Christian people, we long to be relieved from the burdens of a sinful world. We long to have the general cloud of misery lifted from our life. But when you think about it, so much of what keeps that cloud in place, so much of what makes us restless and makes us long for relief has to do with our memory. Because memory isn't just recalling things from long ago; memory has the power to bring things from the past into the present, to make them viscerally present. You know how remembering an embarrassing moment can cause you to blush even decades later: When you were in sixth grade you threw up right in the middle of the school play. Forty years later one of your old school friends comes up to you and says, "remember that day..." And you say "Ooohhhh. Don't remind me." All those feelings that you had 40 years ago come back to you. That's the power of memory.

Of course, when we're talking about memory as a burden, we're dealing with things much more sinister than embarrassing moments. There are other memories, other secrets that are far more painful. I'm thinking of two kinds of memories: First, there are the memories of our sins; the things we've done to other people. And second, there are the memories of our hurts, the things other people have done to us. *These are the memories that really weigh on our hearts.* These are also the memories that the psalmist wrestles with in Psalm 25. This Psalm - especially the first part, is the prayer of an anxious man. And what's making him anxious are the memory of the things his enemy has done to him, and the memory of the sins he has committed. "Remember not the sins of my youth, and my rebellious ways" "And do not let my enemies put me to shame and triumph over me."

Memory is obviously good, and it is important to remember some of the injustices of the world, but memory can also be an instrument that the devil uses to torment us. Memory can be a tool that the devil uses to keep us

enslaved to our sin. A marriage relationship is damaged by adultery. The husband is unfaithful and though the wife forgives the husband and the two of them are determined to make things work, the memory of his failure plagues the husband. All his interactions with his wife and family are seasoned with shame. He can't deal with his wife in the free and joyful way he used to. His dealings are hesitating and uncertain. The memory of his sin colors everything. The relationship is held captive by memory.

And for an addict, isn't it the memory of their sin that keeps them captive to their addiction? I knew a young person who grew up in a good Christian home. He was a good student and a good kid, but one time at a party he was goaded into trying heroin. Once. Only once. That was all it took to make him an addict. He ended up in long-term rehab and he would tell you that the memory of what it felt like to be on heroin was part of the struggle he endured every day. He was held captive by memory. "Remember not, O Lord. Remember not the sins of my youth. Remember not my rebellious ways." That's the prayer of someone who knows what it means to be held captive by sinful memories.

But it's not just the memories of our sins that plague us. It is also our hurts. A mother has a habit of criticizing her daughter. She never lets her accomplish anything without a word about how it could have been better. She is 35 years old and comes back for Christmas and the mom criticizes the way she dresses her kids for church: "You're not going to bring them to church looking like that are you?!" And the daughter blows up. It's not just the particular offense that gets her. It's the memory of all the other times she's been criticized. She may have forgiven her mom a hundred times in the past for her sins, but every time it happens again, the old memories return whether she likes it or not.

Or, a much darker example, think of abuse victims and soldiers who have experienced trauma. Remember Chaplain Herm Keizer? Herm passed away about 6 years ago. Herm did a lot of work with veterans who suffered moral injury through battlefield trauma. The things they saw in combat, the horrors they witnessed, damaged their own sense of humanity. Sometimes people call it soul injury. A lot of that injury is transmitted through memories of the trauma. It is those memories that keep searing their souls. *Memory is an important tool in forgiveness and justice and redemption, but it is also a tool the devil uses to hold us captive.*

It's when we realize what a painful burden our memories can be that the real depth of God's promise in Isaiah 65 becomes clear to us. Because there will come a day when the burden of memory will be lifted. The final step in God's restoration, the final act of the new creation will be divine forgetfulness. The old order of things will pass away. The tears will be dried. There will be no more mourning or death, and everything will be made new. In a case of blessed amnesia. The daughter will not remember her mother's criticism. The husband's guilt over the hurt he caused his wife will be removed. The addict's longing for a high will be gone. The father won't recall the pain he felt at the graveside of his son. The soldier will no longer be visited by dreams of blood and carnage. God promises in Isaiah 65 "Behold, I will create a new heaven and a new earth. The former things *will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind.*"

And then Jeremiah adds an even more amazing promise to what Isaiah said. In Jeremiah 31, in the passage I read earlier, we hear that not only will we forget our sins, but God will forget our sins too! God forgetting? The omniscient One forgets? How is such a thing possible? I'm not sure I understand this word, but I receive it. God will forgive our iniquity and he will remember our sin no more.

What do we make of God's forgetfulness? This is not divine amnesia. Forgetting sin is not God's way of letting people get away with something. No one is getting away with anything. In Revelation 21, we see a fuller vision of what Isaiah sees in his prophecy. And there it's very clear that the old order passes away only after judgment has been completed. The last judgment is described in Revelation 20. At that time everyone will be held accountable for what they have done and either they will pay a price for their sin or that price will be paid for them. When Revelation 20 comes to an end the scales of justice have been leveled. There will be no one left who can claim they have been dealt with unjustly. There will be no more blood crying out from the ground. But the new creation isn't finished when the judgment is over. The new creation isn't done until the old order of things passes away and the new order takes its place. And the old order will not completely lose its power over us until our painful memories are taken away. When that finally happens, when the memories of our failures and our traumas are washed from our mind *then we will be free.* Free to love each other completely without suspicion, without reservation, without mistrust. This final forgetfulness is obviously something for the future. It won't happen in this life. As long as we live in this world, we will always have our memories. So, you might fairly ask, does any of this make a difference to our life today. I think it does. It certainly changes our

way of looking at things. Today, in this imperfect world full of necessary evils like guns and air raid sirens we know that we are called to remember: To remember Auschwitz, to remember 911, to remember Vietnam, to remember our own moments of weakness and failure. But just like a soldier takes his gun into battle with his heart focused on the day when the war will be over and he won't need that gun anymore, so we remember the evil and injustice in this world with our hearts longing for the day when we will forget. Yes, we are people who remember, but we remember in order to forget. We don't remember as a way to hold it over a sinner, to hold them captive to what they did. We don't remember as a way to control them, and punish them. We remember with an eye to their redemption and their freedom. That's a small distinction with an enormous difference.

And I think knowing that we will be able to forget one day also helps us not to be possessed either by our sins or our hurts. Because it is easy to let your whole life become defined by the terrible thing that you did. Or that thing that they did to you. The wound is temporary. It may be terrible, but it is temporary. But, here is a forgiveness that can give you your life back. Your whole life. I'm not sure that makes our memories any less painful, but perhaps it makes them easier to bear.

These are tremendous promises. How do we know that all this is possible? Where does the assurance that all this is really true hang for us? It hangs right here...on the cross. When Jesus hung here he died not only to carry our sins, he carried our sorrows as well. Here we see that Jesus wasn't just after justice, he died so that we could be at peace. Here we see that we will not be remembered according to the sins of our youth, or according to our rebellious ways. Here we will be remembered according to his great mercy and steadfast love.

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