



Roanoke, Virginia

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“God’s Memory”

Exodus 16:2-15, Psalm 105:1-6, 37-45

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Exodus 16:2-15

² The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. ³ The Israelites said to them, “If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the pots of meat and ate our fill of bread, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.”

⁴ Then the LORD said to Moses, “I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not. ⁵ On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather on other days.” ⁶ So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, “In the evening you shall know that it was the LORD who brought you out of the land of Egypt, ⁷ and in the morning you shall see the glory of the LORD, because he has heard your complaining against the LORD. For what are we, that you complain against us?” ⁸ And Moses said, “When the LORD gives you meat to eat in the evening and your fill of bread in the morning, because the LORD has heard the complaining that you utter against him—what are we? Your complaining is not against us but against the LORD.”

⁹ Then Moses said to Aaron, “Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites: ‘Draw near to the LORD, for he has heard your complaining.’” ¹⁰ And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked toward the wilderness, and the glory of the LORD appeared in the cloud. ¹¹ The LORD spoke to Moses, ¹² “I have heard the complaining



of the Israelites; say to them, 'At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the LORD your God.' ”

¹³ In the evening quails came up and covered the camp, and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. ¹⁴ When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. ¹⁵ When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, “What is it?” For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, “It is the bread that the LORD has given you to eat.

Psalm 105:37-45:

37 Then he brought Israel out with silver and gold,
and there was no one among their tribes who stumbled.

³⁸ Egypt was glad when they departed,
for dread of them had fallen upon it.

³⁹ He spread a cloud for a covering
and fire to give light by night.

⁴⁰ They asked, and he brought quails
and gave them food from heaven in abundance.

⁴¹ He opened the rock, and water gushed out;
it flowed through the desert like a river.

⁴² For he remembered his holy promise
and Abraham, his servant.

⁴³ So he brought his people out with joy,
his chosen ones with singing.

⁴⁴ He gave them the lands of the nations,
and they took possession of the wealth of the peoples,

⁴⁵ that they might keep his statutes
and observe his laws.

Praise the LORD!

I was new to seminary. I learned in college the value of making a good first impression on professors. I wanted to be known as a student with promise for ministry, and particularly for preaching. The professor I most wanted to impress was the highly respected professor of preaching, Wellford Hobbie—who grew up in this very congregation. I shared with Dr. Hobbie a copy of a sermon I preached the summer before coming to seminary because I wanted his feedback. I hoped to hear something like, “George, in all my years of teaching, I’ve never seen anyone enter seminary with such promise for the pulpit.”

A couple of days later, Dr. Hobbie gave me his feedback. I do not think it was possible for Wellford to be unkind. However, he would be truthful even while being kind. Handing the sermon back to me he said, “George, there are a lot of good Christian truths in this sermon (that’s the kind part), but it really doesn’t have anything to do with the passage.”

I was embarrassed, but my seminary education in preaching began with that comment.



Later, after I got over my embarrassment and realized that he was right, I wondered how I could be so egotistical and foolish as to think that he would be impressed by a sermon I wrote before attending seminary. Then I figured it out. Yes, my ego and being foolish were factors, but the biggest reason I thought my sermon was special was because of the reception it received when I preached it. As Elizabeth Moore will be here, I was a college summer intern at First Presbyterian in Greenwood, MS. Boy, they spoiled me.

- I would go visit folks and they would say, “[Oh, George, you have the heart of a pastor.](#)”
- I would teach a Sunday School class and They would say, “[Oh George, how can someone so young have such wisdom and maturity.](#)”

And then, on my last Sunday there, I preached that sermon and you would have thought that the great Scots preacher, James Stuart, had just given the sermon... only with a really thick, Mississippi accent. I received there what interns receive here, and what I know Elizabeth will receive—encouragement and support. I stand by the last line of that ill-fated sermon when I said as an expression of thanks to that congregation that it is “[through Christian fellowship that Christian ministry takes root and grows.](#)”

But, there was something beyond the encouragement wonderful churches like this offer. When that congregation saw me preach, they remembered Eade Anderson. My father served First Presbyterian in Greenwood back in the 60s. And though it was during the Civil Rights era and there were tense times between church and pastor, Dad loved that church and that church loved Dad. As the years passed after Dad left, appreciation for his ministry only grew. So,

- when they fed me as an intern (which they did), they were breaking bread with Eade and Jane’s son;
- when they listened to me teach a class, they were listening to Eade and Jane’s son who once attended children’s Sunday School and Bible School at that church;
- and when I preached that Sunday, they were listening to a sermon given by the son of the one who once preached in that pulpit on a weekly basis.

When they heard me, they remembered Dad.

When God saw Israel, God remembered Abraham. That’s the message of Psalm 105 in explaining why God remained faithful to Israel even when Israel didn’t return the favor and complained.

The psalm reminds its listeners how God delivered them from Egypt. Most of the world would wonder, “[Why bother?](#)” Live long enough in a world with slaves, or a world with grinding poverty, and you grow used to it—as if that is the natural state of things. You might not like it. You might see the plight and hear the groans and have some sympathy—(feel the pull of the heart strings) but it is what it is. It is not going to change.

But remember, God heard the groans of Israel’s slave ancestors and did something. The psalmist says, that “[God heard their groaning and remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob.](#)” God looked at those slaves and remembered their daddy. He remembered



Father Abraham. God sent Moses and delivered Abraham's children from the land of their oppression.

That's the kind part. As the psalm closes, another groaning is remembered. The Psalmist jumps to those same slaves, now liberated—living free in the wilderness—whining, complaining, *groaning* about their freedom. God's memory was long in remembering Abraham, but their memory was short. They forgot the cruelty of the whip and the withheld straw for bricks. They only remembered the food and shelter they had been given. “[Would that we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate bread to the full.](#)”

Who would blame God for giving them up then and there. “[Ingrates!](#)” But, the psalmist reminds them, God gave them manna in the morning and quail at night. God stuck with them through decades of complaining in the wilderness until they came into a land that they could call home. And why? “[Same reason,](#)” the psalmist says. “[For he remembered his holy promise, and Abraham his servant.](#)” God remembered Father Abraham.

The psalmist is reminding the people of faith of God's remembering for a reason: they are to remember too. Over Israel's history, there were times when the people—or more particularly the leaders of the people—forgot what it meant to be a distinct people of God. They lost moral standing in the world. The book of Judges tells of a repeating cycle—

- the people of Israel forgetting and chasing after other gods,
- getting in trouble for doing so,
- groaning to God about it,
- and God hearing them and rescuing them once again.

The books of Kings and Chronicles don't follow such a predictable pattern, but within its pages are many stories of the powerful and elite of Israel being short on memory and long on personal ambition.

This is a problem. It is a problem, first because *memory is identity*.

In 1953, a man with a severe form of epilepsy had parts of both temporal lobes of his brain removed and a cut was made deep into his limbic system. After the operation, he was unable to form a memory. Known in medical literature as H.M.,¹ this man could read a book, but not remember from one page to the next what he had just read. You had to introduce yourself to him again and again. He could not work because he could not remember instructions. He described his life as “like waking from a dream—every day is alone in itself.” He spent much of his time sitting and crying. He did not really know who he was. We are what we remember, he remembered nothing.²

Having an identity as children of God means remembering what God has done and what God expects. The prophets knew that Israel, in forgetting the stories of their faith, would be gullible to the stories of others who would want to guide Israel to selfish ends. This is what they meant by “chasing after false gods.”

¹ To read up on H.M., here is one source: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2649674/>

² Illustration provided by Todd Jones



Which leads to the real problem. Memory is not only identity. *Memory is also morality.* In forgetting who they are as a people of God, people forget *what they stand for* as a people of God.

There is a training procedure some Air Force pilots go through to teach them the dangers of “hypoxia,” which is oxygen starvation. While oxygen levels are lowered in a simulation chamber, pilots-in-training are to write answers to simple questions. In one instance, they were asked to add some simple figures, circle capital letters in a paragraph, and write out the name of the first US president.

Those who want to be fighter pilots do not lack self-confidence. When the test was over, the pilots all thought they had nailed it. Then, they were told to put their oxygen masks back on. After a few deep breaths, they were told to look again at their sheets. The first lines were legible at first, then they began to get some things wrong and their handwriting deteriorated. George Washington’s name was completely unreadable.³

In the psalmist’s view, when people gradually lose the oxygen supply of their moral tradition, their ethics become illegible. All sorts of things become justified in the name of God.

Remembering the moral tradition

- means keeping the commands
 - to keep the sabbath,
 - to honor one’s elders,
 - not to lie or steal
 - because violating those commands is simply wrong.

In chasing after other gods, we start making exceptions when it suits us, and no one will know.
- It means watching after the least among you and working for reconciliation and peace in the world.

In chasing after other gods, we start blaming the weak for being weak.
- It means putting one’s prosperity, power, and selfish needs aside when it comes to the well-being of others.

In chasing after other gods, we make selfishness a virtue and dominating others a life goal.

As the tradition is forgotten, the moral handwriting remains legible for a time.

- One gives to charity without remembering why.
- One doesn’t lie to loved ones or cheat friends but bends the rules when it comes to making a living or getting what one wants in the community.
- One remembers one’s manners because we need to be polite and nice but forgets one’s moral obligations in the world. If others groan, we believe in God and hope God hears them. But what does it have to do with me?

³ Illustration provided by Mark Durrett.



When it comes to moral amnesia, Israel's prophets were harsh. Condemning. But our psalm isn't written by a prophet but by a poet. The psalmist has a gentler approach. We might call Psalm 105 "a helpful reminder." It reminds us that when God looks at us, God remembers Abraham to whom God made promises, and God remembers what he wanted Abraham and his descendants to do: to be a blessing to other people. "I will bless you," God said to Abraham, "and you will be a blessing to the world."

God remembers, the psalmist is saying. Will you? Will you remember what God expects of us? After all, we will be known for the commitments we keep. Remembering is identity—and remembering is morality.

I first preached this psalm when I was a minister in Jackson, Mississippi. I was serving in the deep south where it was common in churches to ask for, hope for, and pray for a revival. I said then that revival is exactly what Psalm 105 calls for. The psalmist wants a revival of memories because a moral revival is all about remembering. It is in the revival of memories of what it means to be children of Abraham and brothers and sisters of Christ when we remember not only what God had done for us, but also what God expects of us if we are going to be worthy of Jesus' name.

So, let's not chase after other gods that would have us celebrate that from which God delivered slaves: what favors the selfish. Let's remember the stories that remind us

- that God did not think it beneath his dignity to respond to the cries of slaves,
- nor thought it beneath him to be born as a baby needing to be cleaned.

Let's remember what God has done for us, and then let's remember to respond with gratitude, humility and grace—living moral lives that are acceptable to the one who loves the whole world.

