

Remember

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Sermon Series:
Deuteronomy

Deuteronomy 8:11-18

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Our identity as persons is rooted in memory. We are a composite of memory. Memory makes us what we are.

When we lose our memory, we cease to function in any significant way. Those who suffer from Alzheimer's and dementia have lost the most essential part of themselves.

Two elderly women were discussing memory lapses that come with growing older. One commented, "The worst thing is when your memory starts to go. I've known you all my life, but I can't think of your name. What is it?"

The second lady thought for a moment and said, "Do you need an answer right now?"

I've felt like that! The process of remembering and forgetting is altogether mysterious to me. How is it possible I can recall an event that happened 40 years ago but cannot remember where I put my keys or my glasses? I find myself walking into the kitchen in search of something I can't remember. This means I spend lots of time near the refrigerator without knowing why. So as not to make the trip a total loss, I fix myself something to eat.

Today, we are examining the subject of remembering and forgetting from the book of Deuteronomy. Moses stands on

the Plains of Moab at the outset of Deuteronomy with all Israel assembled before him (1:1-5). The Plains of Moab represent the last step in a 40-year sojourn from Egyptian slavery to Promised Land freedom.

We talk about Deuteronomy as a book, when, in reality, it's a sermon or collection of sermons by Moses. Deuteronomy serves as Moses' farewell address to his people as they prepare for entrance into Canaan. When Moses finishes his sermon, he concedes leadership to Joshua, climbs a mountain and breathes his last (34:5).

Moses admonishes the people in the opening verse of our Scripture lesson, "Make sure that you do not forget the Lord your God by failing to keep his commands, his ordinances and his statutes, which I am commanding you this day" (8:11). When Moses and his people wandered for 40 years in the wilderness, they relied on God for their survival. God led them with a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. God fed them with manna from heaven.

Moses anticipates their settling down in Canaan, building homes and making money. Complacency is right around the corner. "When you have eaten your fill and built fine houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks have multiplied and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have

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is multiplied, then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the Lord your God” (8:12-14).

I like Eugene Peterson’s translation of these verses in *The Message*: “Make sure that when you eat and are satisfied, build pleasant homes and settle in, see your flocks and herds flourish and more and more money come in, watch your standard of living going up and up—make sure you don’t become so full of yourself and your things that you forget God, your God.”

Note the progression in this passage. Prosperity breeds complacency, complacency fosters pride and pride produces autonomy. Autonomy results in an attitude of forgetfulness toward God.

Moses warns his people, “Do not say to yourself, ‘My power and might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth.’ But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you the power to get wealth” (8:17). Here’s the same verse from *The Message*. “If you start thinking to yourselves, ‘I did all this. And all by myself. I’m rich. It’s all mine!’—well, think again. Remember that God, your God, gave you strength to produce all this wealth.”

The danger of prosperity is thinking, I did it myself. The hazard of affluence is feeling self-made. Beware of taking all the credit. It is God who gives us the ability to produce wealth.

I officiated last week at two funerals for men in their 40s.

They were, by all accounts, men in the prime of their lives. They were highly acclaimed and successful. One left a wife and two-year-old son, the other, two children in their teens. The friends of these men who attended the service displayed a dazed expression. Death and disability bring us face-to-face with the fragility of life. Tragedy can strike at any moment. There is danger in thinking that my power and the might of my hand have made me what I am.

Remember is the antidote for forgetting. “But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth...” (8:18). Moses chronicles in our Scripture lesson God’s acts of covenant faithfulness. “Do not forget the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, who led you through the great and terrible wilderness, an arid wasteland with poisonous snakes and scorpions. He made water flow from rock and fed you in the wilderness with manna that your ancestors did not know...” (8:14-16).

The word “remember” doesn’t mean in Hebrew what it means in English. When we talk about remembering, we merely bring to mind something that happened. But the Hebrew notion of remember brings a past event into the present, so that what happened continues to happen now.

So, when God’s people are urged to remember their deliverance from slavery, they do not remember it merely as a historical

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fact; they are urged to live in the same reality of God's deliverance hundreds of years later!

"Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing" is a well-known hymn set to an early American tune. The second verse begins, "Here I raise my Ebenezer; Hither by thy help I'm come." I've sung these words countless times, but I've never had a clue to what Ebenezer means! The only Ebenezer I know is that curmudgeon Ebenezer Scrooge from Dickens *A Christmas Carol*. Evidently, Ebenezer doesn't mean much to other people as well, since some have attempted to rewrite the hymn with substitute words. Our Biblical illiteracy impoverishes the hymn.

In the book of 1st Samuel, after God had given his people a great victory against overwhelming odds, Samuel took a stone and called it "Ebenezer," saying "the Lord has helped us." That's what the word Ebenezer means—stone of help. This stone will perpetually serve as a memorial that God has helped them.

The hymn's author, Robert Robinson, was, in the language of his biographer, "once a member of a gang of hoodlums and lived a debauched life." At age 17, he attended a meeting where George Whitfield was preaching "to scoff at the poor, deluded Methodists." But Whitfield's strong evangelistic preaching struck a chord in Robinson's heart and he was converted to Christ, as referenced in the words of the hymn, "Jesus sought me when a stranger." Robinson wrote this hymn as a

reflection on his conversion. The hymn invites us to reflect on our Ebenezer. Can you remember an Ebenezer moment in your life? Can you identify a time when God delivered you?

When, in Joshua, God's people cross the River Jordan to take possession of the Promised Land, Joshua instructs people to take 12 stones from the river bed and construct a memorial (4:9). Whenever the children ask, "What do these stones mean?" God's people are instructed to recount the stories of God's deliverance (4:6, 21). These stones shall serve as a memorial to you (4:7).

Our nation's capital is filled with monuments to help us remember the sacrifice of fellow Americans. The Vietnam and Korean Memorials help us remember. The World War II Memorial helps us remember. Monuments, like Ebenezer stones, help us remember. I am reminded here of the refrain from Rudyard Kipling's poem *Recessional*, "Lest we forget, lest we forget."

If our house ever catches fire, I've already thought of what I will salvage, if given the chance. I won't bother with the check book or try to rescue valuable antiques passed down in the family. I'm heading straight for our photographs and videos. They may not have value to anyone else, but they are precious to us. They are our family's memory-makers.

Amnesia refers to the loss of memory. There are at least three general types of amnesia: anterograde, retrograde and transient

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global amnesia. I would add a fourth to the list—spiritual amnesia. Some of us suffer the effects of spiritual amnesia. We are plagued with the loss of spiritual memory. We forget God and all his benefits.

Are you familiar with Ebbinghaus's Curve of Forgetting? This curve measures the amount of material we retain or forget. By the end of this worship hour, you will know 100 percent of what you know. If you do nothing with what you learned today, by tomorrow you will forget 5-80 percent of what you learned. A month later, you will retain two to three percent of what you learned.

The only way to counteract the steep decline of forgetting is by taking steps to remember. The spiritual disciplines of public prayer, corporate worship and Scripture study help us remember the Lord our God.

The Lord's Supper is also an act of remembering. "Do this in remembrance of me," is etched right into our communion table. When Jesus spoke the words, "Do this in remembrance of me," he didn't mean think of me every now and then. When he spoke these words he meant, whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup you make my sin-bearing death the operative reality of your life so that my forgiveness of you characterizes your life also.

