

In this eighth chapter of Deuteronomy, Moses warns the people of God of the ease with which they can forget the Lord and his great kindnesses to them and urges them to be careful not to do so, but to remember the Lord and all that he has done. This warning and this exhortation is as necessary for you and me as it was for the Israelites in that long ago day.

That generation of course, as the chapter reminds us, had much to remember. They had just finished those long years in the wilderness, which were necessary, after all, only because their parents had rebelled against the Lord and faithlessly refused to trust his promise to bring them into Canaan in triumph, even though he had brought them so miraculously and triumphantly out of bondage in Egypt, had brought them out, as it were on the wings of eagles. And they had also to remember how often they had tested the Lord, how often they had complained against him and rebelled, and how, nevertheless, patiently, generously, and miraculously the Lord had met their needs and sustained their lives. There was the manna to remember and the quail, water from the rock, the deliverance from the snakes, and so on. How true had all of God's promises proven themselves to be; how safely Israel had lived according to the Word of God. It was not by their own skill or effort or endurance that they had managed those long years in the desert, but by the goodness and provision of God. All of this was fresh in their minds as they sat poised on the eastern bank of the Jordan, ready to cross and possess the promised land.

You would think such a history as this would have been so indelibly printed on every Israelite heart that forgetting it would be near to impossible. But Moses knew their nature and ours too well to think that. He knew that when they entered the lush and fruitful land that God was giving them, and settled down into their new homes on their new farms, and when they began enjoying their new found wealth and prosperity, it would be entirely natural for them to forget all about the desert and all about what God had done for them, even to forget that the new land and their new prosperity was his gift to them. Moses knew full well what the human heart is capable of: how it can so quickly and so completely forget what it has no business ever forgetting; and how it can so quickly begin to take credit itself for the Lord's achievements.

Most men's memories, especially with regard to the great matters of the soul, are like a sieve, which lets the fine flour through but catches and keeps the chaff and the bran. I know my memory is like that: holding fast to what I would much better forget, and forgetting what I ought to hold fast in mind.

If you are going to live a faithful life, Moses tells the Israelites, if you are going to live by faith in the Lord, with gratitude for his goodness, making a determined and heart-felt effort to keep his commandments for love's sake, then you must resist this natural tendency to forget the Lord and his works in your life and set yourselves to remembering them instead, every day and in every way calling to mind the Lord and all his benefits. Never trust your natural powers of recollection. You may remember many things naturally, but your flesh being what it is, you will not remember the truly important things, the things of God, unless you set out to do so.

What we read here in Deuteronomy 8 we will often read in the Bible. Remembering has a great deal to do with the living of the Christian life -- remembering what God has done for us in the distant past and remembering our own lives and our own experience of the Lord. And the Christian man or woman, boy or girl, who keeps the Lord and his works in remembrance, is the person who will most joyfully and zealously live the Christian life.

John Newton was a Christian who saw the crucial role of remembering, of recollection, of a determined refusal to forget, in a Christian's life. He was a man who knew very well how fickle and unreliable our memories are, and how quickly even the strongest spiritual impressions and lessons can fade from the mind. He was, as you remember, raised by a most godly and principled mother, who taught him with much affection the Word and way of the Lord, who prayed with him every day, and who saw to storing her son's mind with those magnificent and gracious words of Holy Scripture which, once memorized, can never be completely shaken from the mind. She taught him to sing from Isaac Watts' Divine Songs for Children. She had already dedicated him to the Christian ministry. But she died when he was only 7 years old.

And all of this so wise and careful and affectionate training, he admits in his autobiography, **he soon forgot.** 'I forgot' or 'I soon forgot' or 'This too I totally forgot' you read over and over again in Newton's account of his life. He forgot his mother's training. Then, when he was a boy of 12, he was thrown from a horse and almost killed. At the time, the near approach of death made a great impression on him, but he says '**I soon forgot.**' Some

years later, when he was a sailor, he had agreed with some friends to row out to a British warship which was anchored in the harbor. But, he was unexpectedly detained, his friends left without him, the boat capsized and they were all drowned. He missed being in that boat by five minutes and couldn't swim. 'I went to the funeral and was exceedingly affected,' wrote Newton, '**but, this also I soon forgot.**' Then there was a dream which he had one time, a dream in which, with tremendous vividness, he saw himself as falling under the wrath and judgment of God. At the time, Newton says, that dream made a powerful impression on him, but, he says, '**I totally forgot it.**' From one ship to another, the young sailor got into one mess after another, always as the result of his own irresponsibility and a crude and profane lifestyle which was too much even for the 18th century British Navy and Merchant Marine. But he also forgot the lessons which his own sins had taught him over and over again.

As you remember, he not only eventually became involved in the slave trade, but was at one point, actually enslaved himself by traders he had thought to work for. And then, finally, in a great storm at sea, when he and the whole ship's crew despaired of life, the Lord arrested him and convicted him and he cried out for God's mercy. **That day** he would later write: 'is a day **much to be remembered by me**; and I have never suffered it to pass unnoticed since the year 1748. For on that day -- March 10, 1748 -- the Lord came from on high and delivered me out of deep waters.'

Some years later, when he was now a Christian minister, settled in the parish of Olney, writing his famous hymns, above the mantle of the fireplace in his study, he had painted on the plaster of the wall, this verse, not from Deuteronomy 8, but from Deuteronomy 15:15 to the same effect: 'But thou shalt **remember** that thou wast a bondsman in the land of Egypt, and the Lord thy God redeemed thee.' When he was an old man, he once said to a Christian friend whom he met in the street: 'My memory is nearly gone; but I remember two things; that I am a great sinner, and that Christ is a great Savior!'

Many of you know of the long friendship that Newton had with William Cowper, the brilliant poet and hymnwriter, who was so terribly afflicted with depression that he was incapable of living by himself or caring for himself. The steadfast love that Newton's showed him is an inspiring story in itself. Cowper -- who lived so long under a dark cloud and who, though clearly a Christian, felt so little of the joy of his salvation -- died a few years before Newton and John Newton liked to picture to himself his reunion with his friend in heaven. He wrote a poem in which he represented himself as grasping Cowper's hand and joyfully telling his friend that it was now just as he had so many times told him it would be.

Oh! let thy memory wake! I told thee so;
I told thee thus would end thy heaviest woe;
I told thee that thy God would bring thee here,
And God's own hand wipe away thy tear,
While I should claim a mansion by thy side;
I told thee so -- for our Emmanuel died.

There is the lesson; there the exhortation: '**Oh, let thy memory wake!**' John Newton, who had forgotten so much, for so long; but had then written on his study wall a summons always to remember the Lord and his works -- who better to expound over again to us Moses' sermon in Deuteronomy 8: 'Oh, let thy memory wake!' He saw the Christian life as a matter of active remembering from its beginning to its end. Indeed, one of the great glories of heavenly life, he saw, was just this: that we would never forget what we ought not to forget, but our memories would be active and strong and always animating our love for the Lord. Do you want to know how to live the Christian life to the full extent: well '**let thy memory wake!**'

And if you and I would 'let our memories waken' day after day, call them awake, what joy and strength and conviction and faith and obedience would be ours! How we weaken all these things by our forgetting what we know and what we ourselves have experienced of God and his mercy. Now there are many ways to awaken your memory of the Lord, his word and his works. Newton wrote a verse above his mantle. Some of you have them stuck to the door of your refrigerators. There is also the time-honored practice of keeping a journal, for the Christian purpose of recording for your memories sake, the Lord's dealings with you, the lessons he has taught you, the blessings he has showered you with. The systematic reading of Holy Scripture is, of course, another way to keep fresh in the memory the greatest works of the Lord, those by which our salvation was accomplished.

But I want briefly this morning to call your attention to another way by which our memories are regularly to be called awake, a way, indeed, the principle means that God himself has appointed to call to our remembrance what our souls must not forget. I am speaking of our weekly worship in this church on the Sabbath day. One of the great purposes of worship in Holy Scripture is precisely this: that our memories should be awakened, that God and his greatness and his wonderful works should be once again called to our minds. The necessity of its regular repetition is as much due to our forgetfulness and need to remember as it is to the rightness of our regularly worshipping God and giving thanks to him.

In Holy Scripture, worship is given the form of a weekly renewal of the covenant between God and his people. And that is the principle of our worship here. We go through the gospel from start to finish in our worship every week. We set God before us with praise; we confess our sins; we turn to Christ and his death and resurrection for our forgiveness and peace with God, and then we consecrate ourselves anew to living to God's praise, with our offerings, our prayers, and with the attention we pay to God's word as it is read and preached to us. Every worship service is to be a recollection and a renewal of our salvation and of the meaning, the significance, and the wonder of it. Every worship service is to provide us with the opportunity to recommit ourselves to the Lord and to living for him as we remember all that he is and all that he has done for us and all that he has promised soon to give us.

Every worship service is a summons to us to 'let our memory awake' and to purify our hearts and souls before the Lord in light of all that we there remember.

We will soon come to the table of the Lord. What is its purpose? The Lord himself said: 'this do **in remembrance of me.**' It is a means appointed to bring our Savior and our salvation once again before our eyes so as to awaken our love, gratitude, faith, hope, and loyalty. In Moses' day, the sacrifices, the weekly worship, the three great feasts, the sermons of the priests, all had this same purpose, to awaken, to enliven the memory of God and his works.

And so with the sermon in our worship. In this day of ours, sermons have too often and in too many places become lectures. It has become a common thing for people to take notes. That is not a bad thing, of course, unless in the taking of notes, one has come to think of the sermon as chiefly teaching, instruction. There is teaching in a good sermon, of course. There will be sound instruction in the meaning of a text of Holy Scripture. But that is not the main element in a sermon, or it should not be!

Most of what I tell you in a sermon, most of you already know. You have, many of you, been Christians a long time and heard many sermons, and read the Bible yourselves for many years, and some of you have read widely in Christian books. My greatest purpose is not finding something to tell you that you didn't know before. The great purpose of the sermon is to impress the truth on your heart; to bring it forcefully to your remembrance so as to awaken conviction, faith, and love. This is the sermon's primary purpose, not to impart information. The truth is to be there, of course, but it is the force of truth that the preacher is after in his preaching.

Jonathan Edwards, who knew if anyone did what preaching was about, once wrote: 'the main benefit obtained by preaching is by impression made upon the mind at the time, and not by an effect that arises afterwards by a remembrance of what was delivered.' That is why a preacher like Martin Lloyd-Jones even discouraged the taking of notes, for fear that treating the sermon that way and taking the time and thought to write, one might miss something of the impact of the Holy Spirit at the moment, which is the true essence of the sermon.

That is what Moses is speaking of here. He doesn't think that Israel will actually forget the Exodus and the wilderness in the sense that the people will no longer know that these things happened. They will and they always did remember them in that bare way. But what Moses means is that they must remember them in that spiritual way, in the force of that history's impression on the heart, so that the Exodus and the wilderness continue generations afterward to awaken faith, hope, and love, in the hearts of God's people.

An example is found in Psalm 77. The author speaks of a time of great trial and distress in his life. He was greatly discouraged. He began to suffer from doubts. Then his deliverance came. He says it happened this way: Then, I thought, "To this I will appeal: the years of the Right Hand of the Most High." **I will remember** the deeds of the Lord; yes **I will remember** your miracles of long ago.

He is not speaking of a mere intellectual exercise. He is speaking of the great force that truth had upon his heart; how it called him out of his discouragement and set his feet on the rock once again. His God was great and mighty. The God of Creation, of the Exodus, the wilderness, and the conquest was perfectly capable of rescuing him from his present distress. This remembrance restored his trust in God and made him willing to submit to God's will difficult as it was. That is the kind of remembering Moses is speaking of here and that we are to be after in our weekly worship: remembering that stirs the heart, that breaks our pride and willfulness, and awakens our faith, hope, and love.

You can listen to a capable sermon, learn new things from it, even enjoy it, and leave the church without ever having happen what Moses is talking about here. He wants the truth to **live** in the hearts of God's people.

Now, this is God's appointed means to awaken and enliven our memory of him and his word and works. And, if we would remember in that life-giving and sanctifying way that Moses is talking about, then we should never come to church without **intending just that: that our memories would be called awake! that the truth would live again in our hearts.** Before the worship and from the beginning to the end of it, that should be our effort and that should be our prayer.

Lord, make me to feel, to sense, really to know again this day that greatness and glory. Make my heart to thrill to the knowledge that my God has done great things and is worthy to be praised. Make the words I say to you in our worship be from my heart and with all my heart. Bring to my remembrance at least some of what you have done specifically and personally for me and how you have forgiven my great sins through Christ Jesus and loved me and cared for me as your son or daughter. Open my heart to be moved by the truth I sing, by the fact that we are addressing you in prayer according to your gracious promise and invitation, that you will receive my paltry offering. And when I am before you in the preaching of the Word, and all through the sermon, Lord make your truth alive in my heart; grant it force, power, sway. Make me to remember, O Father, as if I had crossed the Red Sea, and eaten the manna, and looked for salvation to the bronze serpent; as if I had been in the Upper Room, and been standing before the cross and then at the empty tomb and in the Upper Room Easter night; as if I had been among those upon whom the Spirit fell at Pentecost. Lord, awaken my memory in that way. Awaken it so that I will not forget all you cause me to think of here in your house -- not only that you will not slip my mind in the days to come, but that I will live under the force of that truth, always seeing it, always answering to it.

That is what true worship requires and that is what we ought to carry away from it week by week. And we shall much more than we do now, if we come to worship with that intention and seek in worship to fulfil it. Come to this house, every Sabbath, **to remember the Lord your God. Determine that, though all the rest of mankind forget him, you never shall. Never!**