

2 Peter No. 5, “Memory as a Spiritual Grace”

2 Peter 1:12-15

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The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn

Peter’s exhortation to these Christians to move forward in their Christians lives, to hold fast but not to stand still, ended in v. 11. Now he will explain why he wrote what he did.

Text Comment

- v.12 Take note, Peter’s stern warning in the previous verses and his warnings in the rest of the letter were addressed to Christians *established in the truth*. These were not Christians of a few days or few months. Even established believers, in other words, are not above sliding into doctrinal error or serious sin. [Green, 87]

There is a charming detail here that we might otherwise not notice. The word translated “firmly established” is the same word the Lord used in his reply to Peter’s boasting in the Upper Room that he would never betray the Lord, the very night during which he betrayed him three times. Jesus, you remember, told Peter that he had prayed for Peter and that after the nightmare was over, he would “establish” or “strengthen” his brothers; same word. Peter was doing what the Lord told him to do and said he would do and he was doing it to the very end of his life! [Lucas, 68]

- v.14 Peter is probably referring to the Lord’s prophecy of Peter’s death by crucifixion, recorded in John 21:18-19. The Lord had told him *how* he would die, but not precisely when, though he had said that it would be when Peter was old. But time and events were converging. Peter was in Rome; the active persecution of Christians by the imperial government under Nero was making it increasingly obvious how unpopular Christians had become and how dangerous their circumstances. It didn’t take prophetic insight to know that the most prominent leaders of the movement would be marked for elimination.

He knew his death was going to be painful, but Peter could speak of it confidently and think of it as the ascension of his soul to heaven. He says literally that he will soon put off the tent of his body. For Christians, death is striking camp and moving on! [Lucas, 69] Christians need to be talking about death with the same confidence and sangfroid. So you know that French term? It literally means “cold blood.” It suggests imperturbability or self-possession especially in the face of what others would find fearful if not terrifying. Unbelievers need to hear us talking about death with *sangfroid*.

- v.15 The question is: what was the effort Peter says he will make so that after his death these believers will be able to recollect his counsel, warnings, and instruction? Some say that he is referring to this letter, the letter we know as 2 Peter. That would be an odd way of referring to what he is writing at the moment. After all, he says “he will make every effort,” not “he is making every effort.” Others have argued that Peter is referring to what we know as the Gospel of Mark, Peter’s Gospel, perhaps then already either in the planning stages or being written. [Green, 89-91]

Now there can be little doubt what Peter was after in these four verses. He says that he intends *to remind* them, to stir them up by way of *reminder*, so that when he is gone they will be able at any time *to recollect* these things. All three words are versions of the same Greek word. Peter wants them and us to *remember!* These people already knew what Peter was telling them. They knew of God's grace and they knew of their responsibility to live worthy of that grace. They knew that. *But knowing something and remembering something are two very different things.* To have the truth as an active presence and power in one's mind and heart is not the same thing as being able to answer a question regarding that truth if one happens to be asked! It is another thing altogether to remember day by day precisely *how you are to live and why!*

Something that never fails to amaze me is the phenomenal memory that the Lord has given to some people. Abraham Lincoln is said to have had an extraordinarily retentive memory, able to recall names and faces from years past to the amazement of his friends, to recite long passages from Burns, Byron, or Shakespeare, and, after writing a speech, immediately repeat it word for word without consulting the text. [Guelzo, *Abraham Lincoln: Redeemer President*, 84] Charles Spurgeon, the celebrated Calvinistic Baptist preacher of 19th century London, is said to have had a virtually photographic memory. By the way, if you have never read anything by Spurgeon don't delay. He is both valuable and delightful at the same time. You may be surprised to know that today, almost a century and a half after his death, there is more material in print from Spurgeon than from any other Christian author living or dead. Anyway, because of his phenomenal memory Spurgeon could prepare his famous sermons in a fraction of the time it takes mere mortal preachers. He prepared his Sunday evening message Sunday afternoon. He could do that because he was always reading and remembered everything he read! He had an immense congregation but could remember everyone's name and the name of his or her pet! I struggle to remember names; always have.

Spurgeon had scant notes before him when he preached his sermons but could remember everything he intended to say and say it eloquently. With only a single page of notes, it is calculated, he would preach 140 words a minute for 40 minutes, and yet the content was deep and sound and his oratory was at the time considered by many some of the most eloquent and beautiful of any Christian preacher of any time or place. I have longed wished that I could do that, but I know my memory too well. I would forget half of what I intended to say and would remember only some of how I intended to say it. The greatest preachers, as a rule, have had powerful memories. Spurgeon could also recollect what he had read in books, often years later, and make use of those recollections in sermons without ever checking the citation! He could reproduce a citation nearly word for word years after having read it in a book or article. The best I can do is to remember that someone said something useful about the subject and then spend an hour trying, often without success, to remember who it was who said it, what it was precisely that he said, and where the saying could be found.

A powerful memory is also characteristic of great scholars and great writers. In Alister McGrath's fine biography of C.S. Lewis, he draws attention to Lewis' prodigious memory as a feature of his terrific giftedness as a scholar.

“One of Lewis’s abilities must be noted here, for it is of obvious relevance to his gifts as a writer: his formidable memory. Lewis’s mastery of the Renaissance skill of the *ars memorativa* unquestionably contributed to the success of his Oxford lectures, enabling him to recite quotes from memory. Kenneth Tynan (1927-1980), an “angry young man” of the 1960s, whom Lewis tutored in the 1940s, recalls Lewis playing a memory game with him. Tynan would read aloud a line he had arbitrarily chosen from a book he had selected from Lewis’s library. Lewis would then identify the work in question, and set the line in its proper context. Lewis, it seems, could remember texts primarily because he had absorbed their deep inner logic. His diaries bear witness to this habit of reading an astonishing number of texts; his personal library contains annotations indicating when a book was first read, and then read again...” (166)

It is not difficult to see how a powerful memory would, in effect, make you smarter and a more effective thinker, speaker, or writer. You would remember *what was valuable* to remember *when it was valuable* to remember it. Of course, Lewis *cultivated* his memory as well, as did many people who had powerful memories. We might expect them not to need to work at remembering, but it was precisely because they could remember so much so well that they cared to furnish their minds with the most valuable memories. Lewis, for example, read many times the books he considered most valuable. No wonder he absorbed the deep inner logic of a book. He had read it again and again. He read not only many more books than you or I read – one reconnaissance of his diary noted in a single year two hundred books mentioned that he had read in that twelve-month span – but read the best ones twice, thrice, sometimes ten or twenty times. Spurgeon is said to have read *Pilgrim’s Progress* 50 times and Alexander Whyte commented that in that one way he had surpassed Spurgeon!

But, the sad fact is that most of us have not been gifted with photographic memories and are inclined to forget most of what we have read or learned. But what is true of the recollection of other things – algebra, important dates in history, the names of people we met last week (or, for that matter, this morning), how to replace a faucet, and so on – is also true of the truth of God and the important experiences of our Christian lives. Thomas Brooks, the 17th century Puritan, put his finger on the problem.

“Most men’s memories, especially in the great concernments of their souls, are like a sieve...where the good corn and fine flour goes through, but the light chaff and coarse bran remain behind; or like a strainer, where the sweet liquor is strained out, but the dregs left behind; or like a grate that lets the pure water run away, but if there be any straws, sticks, mud, or filth, that it holds, as it were, with iron hands.” [*Works*, I, 288]

Is this not so? Is it not the case with you, as it is with me, that we forget the things we wish we would always remember and remember the things we wish we could forget? The reality of sin, that deep perversion of our nature, is demonstrated in the matter of memory and forgetfulness as surely as in any other dimension of our mental or spiritual life. For example, we know everything we need to know in order to resist every temptation we ever face, there are arguments based on that knowledge that would prevail to convince us not to succumb, but at the moment of crisis we have forgotten those arguments. There are things that we have always known, things we have read, and things we have heard that would inspire us not to succumb, would make us glad, even

proud not to succumb. They do us no good because they are not present to our minds at the critical time. In *The Pilgrim's Progress* Part II, we learn something we were not told in Part I. The battle between Christian and Apollyon in the Valley of Humiliation – one of the most perilous episodes in Christian's pilgrimage from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City – was waged just beyond "Forgetful Green," which John Bunyan tells his readers was "the most dangerous place in all these parts." It is Bunyan's way of saying what Peter says here: you must *remember* if you would live the Christian life faithfully and successfully.

You would expect a man like Bunyan – biblically-minded and biblically informed as he was to a remarkable degree – to make a point of that in his allegorical description of the Christian life because in the Bible *remembering* and *forgetting* are not merely natural tendencies or occasional occurrences. *They are spiritual states and remembering is an evangelical duty*, a grace, an obedience to be cultivated. Again and again in the Bible *to forget is to sin against the truth* and to remember is an act of faith and obedience. Why, after all, did Israel fail to remain faithful to the Lord? It is a question that every interested reader of the Bible asks himself or herself sooner or later. After all that God had done for her; after all he had shown her of his grace and power, how could she have so easily betrayed him for the idols of the very nations they had once defeated by the power of God? Well, says Asaph, the author of Psalm 78:

"The men of Ephraim...did not keep God's covenant and refused to live by his law. They *forgot* what he had done, the wonders he had shown them." [vv. 9-11]

And what is the remedy for that? The same author has the answer:

"I will utter...things from of old – what we have heard and known, what our fathers have told us. We will not hide them from their children; we will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord, his power, and the wonders he has done...so the next generation would know them, even the children yet to be born, and they in turn would tell their children. Then they would put their trust in God and *would not forget* his deeds but would keep his commands." [vv. 2-7]

Asaph, who also wrote Psalm 77, says a similar thing in that hymn:

"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." [vv. 10-11]

Asaph is speaking, as Peter is here, of remembering as an act of the will; as a practice of the Christian life; as an exercise; as a discipline. No doubt we are to remember in this way the Lord's particular blessing in our lives, particular experiences of his provision or his rebuke and punishment or his encouragement. We are to write them down, in our journal or our Bible so that we have a record and read the record again and again. And we are to recollect them in conversation with others and in that way fix them in memory. Such are to become part of your family's lore as you tell the stories of God's faithfulness to you to your children. The remembrance of such things can be a powerful spur to faithfulness and to greater effort in prayer, obedience, and service.

I've told some of you before that when Florence and I went to Scotland in 1975 we thought that virtually any job that Florence might get in Aberdeen would be sufficient to cover our living expenses since I had saved the money we needed for my tuition at the university and some other one-time costs. As it happened that was not true, though we didn't learn that until later. We would have faced a financial crisis long before we were ready to leave Scotland. But the second Sunday we were there, we met a fellow in church who taught piano in the Aberdeen public schools. He told Florence of an opening for a violinist and arranged for her to interview for the position. She got the job, it paid what was for us a more than adequate wage, and she was able to do for those three years exactly what she had trained to do and most enjoyed doing. We couldn't have asked for anything better. Through the three years she taught in Aberdeen schools there was not another opening for a violinist. God provided richly for us before we knew we had a need! I have often thought of that and taken encouragement from it whenever money seemed to be in short supply. The Lord will provide! I know that in part because I remember him doing so! If I worry about his provision it is invariably because *I have forgotten how he has provided in the past.*

But Peter is not talking first and foremost about God's work and blessing in our individual lives, important as it is for us to remember that. He is asking us to remember those things of which he has just reminded his readers: the fundamental facts of our salvation and the life that God has given those who trust in his Son, Jesus Christ; of the salvation that lies behind us in the work of Christ and that lies ahead of us in the kingdom of heaven.

I am presently in an email conversation with a Christian man in Taiwan, mathematician and an economist. He found our website, has read some of the sermons, and contacted me with some questions. Most recently he asked the question every Christian asks from time to time.

“Christians, I find, including myself, tend to move into unbelief or little faith when we do not “see” the vindication of [our] faith. We doubt in one way or another: doubt whether God is true, whether I am a true believer, or whether I am pleasing to the Lord. I wish the Lord would “rend the heaven and come down” and vindicate my faith, but He rarely does so, at least nowadays. We need to live by faith, not by sight.”

But, he continues, doesn't the Lord promise his followers vindication in this life? Didn't Jesus promise us the hundredfold return if we are faithful in serving him? This man wants what every Christian wants, to feel, to experience the power of his or her life in Christ. We want to live in the full assurance of faith. *We want to see it work and work powerfully!* We want to know the Lord's presence, the joy of our salvation, and to see the fruit of the Spirit welling up within us in such quantity and quality that no one can doubt that the Holy Spirit is at work. Well, to be sure, I think the Lord does vindicate our faith in this life, he does reward his servants. Not necessarily in houses and fields as the Lord put it in Mark 10:30, a way of speaking never meant to be taken literally as the rest of the Bible makes clear, but in other ways. In many other ways both great and small. However, the principle part of the answer to that man's question – a question often asked and answered in the Bible itself – is that God *has already vindicated* our faith in the great acts of our redemption and our salvation. In the ancient church Israel was taken back time and time again to the exodus from Egypt, the mighty acts of redemption by which she had been delivered from bondage and brought at last safely into the Promised Land. *This* was what they

were to remember; *this* was the vindication of their faith: the mighty acts of God by which they had been delivered from slavery and established as a people in their own land.

And for us it is the same. It is the incarnation, the ministry, the miracles, the crucifixion, and supremely the resurrection of Jesus Christ that is the vindication of our faith as Christians. It is, as Peter put it in v. 1: “the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ.” Look, it would be easy enough for an unbeliever to think that it was a mere coincidence that Florence got that teaching job when she got it; that it was not God’s gift or God’s doing. Such things happen. After all, someone was going to get that violin teaching job. *But no one can say that about the resurrection of the Son of God. That was no coincidence!* Nor were the Savior’s miracles, nor was his marvelous teaching that lays open the nature and meaning and hope of human life. *Nobody ever spoke as he did or taught what he did. Nobody ever changed the world with a few sentences, as Jesus Christ did.* The fact is, our faith lies behind us in a series of fabulous events that have forever changed the world. More than that, salvation as a human experience is an artifact of human life: the sudden transformation of human lives – the new birth or what we may call “definitive sanctification” – the witness of the Holy Spirit in human hearts, the conviction that people come to have and cannot escape of the truth of God’s Word, of the historical fact of Christ’s life and work, of the reality of the sinfulness of man and the grace and mercy of God, of the reality of the world to come, and so on.

In the very next paragraph Peter is going to recollect the transfiguration of the Lord Jesus, an event of which he was but one of three witnesses. It left its indelible mark on him, as no doubt it would have on anyone. He had heard the voice of God! He had seen the glory of God! Thereafter, of course, he had his ups and downs, no doubt he had his periods of spiritual discouragement when, so it seemed, the Lord was doing little to vindicate Peter’s faith in him. Now he was near to a cruel death by crucifixion; not the way anyone wanted to die. But he had witnessed the transfiguration of the Lord Christ on that mountain top in Galilee years ago! He had seen the risen Christ. He had witnessed his ascension to heaven and had seen the angels and heard them speak about the Lord’s return. Astonishing vindication indeed. But then Peter will go on to say that there is something “more sure” even than those dramatic and unforgettable events. *The Word of God itself!* That Word that contains not only the record of God’s work in the world but its explanation and its application to human lives and hearts.

Like it or not, this is the fundamental reality of living by Christian faith. The fact is there will never be in our daily experience, or, at least there will rarely be in our daily experience, sufficient vindication of our faith to sustain deep love for God and neighbor, hunger and thirst for righteousness, patience in trial, and growth in real godliness. You remember only too well how at certain times in your life you were wonderfully impressed with the love of God or the evil of sin or a desire to be more godly. You wanted the strength of that feeling and conviction to last forever, but you also know only too well how quickly you forgot those powerful convictions, how easily they faded from your active memory; how quickly you fell back into thinking and living as you did before. This experience of forgetting is so endemic to human life that it is true of the life of nations as well. Remember how we came together as Americans at 9-11. And how quickly that sense of unity was forgotten. There is a lesson here and Peter is teaching it to us.

The nature of our life in this world, with the flesh warring against the Spirit, with the discouragement of being still a bond slave to sin, with our numerous spiritual and moral failures, with the darkness of the world around us, and with the weaknesses of the church of which we are a part, I say all of that means that day by day and throughout each day there will not be overwhelming evidence of the presence of God, the truth of God's Word and our Christian faith, and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. *That* is what it means in practice to live by faith. Much as we may wish it were so, the history of Christian living in the world and its description by the wisest and most biblically astute observers of that Christian life suggest that it is not. Christian experience can never be an adequate foundation for Christian godliness and fruitfulness. Sin and death are proved much more dramatically in this world than grace and eternal life!

That foundation of that godly life has always been – it was even in apostolic Christianity when miracles were still being performed and the apostles were alive – the great events of salvation history and the revelation of God's will provided us in Holy Scripture. The reason I know that I should live a Christian life, the reason I want to live such a life, and the reason I continue to believe and to desire holy things as a Christian is because Jesus Christ died on the cross for my sins and rose from the dead for my justification! The reason I want to live a distinctly Christian life is because it is *that life* that is described and commended in Holy Scripture. But it is just those great events and just the teaching of the Word of God that we tend to forget; not forget as if we cannot recall them but forget in the sense that they recede from an active presence in our minds. That is precisely what concerned Peter. There is a great difference between knowing a fact and living under the impression of that fact, of living according to that fact, of living in the conscious awareness of it. There is a great difference between possessing the truth in the sense that you can call it to mind if prompted and having that same truth exercising a living influence upon your thinking and your behavior. There is a great difference between, for example, knowing that Christ has risen from the dead, and feeling the force of that fact in your heart. Jesus made a point of distinguishing between knowing and doing in just this sense. He told his disciples:

“If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.”

He was saying, was he not, that you can know *about* something without really knowing that thing in the true sense, without knowing in the way that produces behavior consistent with what you know. This is Peter's point as well. Virtually every great truth of God's Word is capable, if it is remembered and so put to use, of transforming life, your life and mine, in every good way. What the Bible says about the human being – who and what you are – what it says about what your life is for – what is the purpose of your existence – what it says about your sin and Christ's redemption – how you were ruined by sin and how Christ delivered you – what it says about the future – about heaven and hell – and so on, there is enough in that teaching to enable and inspire you to live high above the ground, to live your life in love and joy, to endure your sufferings with patience and goodwill, to overcome your temptations with a ready will, and to serve God faithfully and usefully in this world. I say, it is all there: you have only to remember the truth and put it to work. But we all know how easy it is to forget the truth rather than remember it; how easy it is to let the truth recede into the back of our mind instead of keeping it front and center, where it exercises control of our thoughts, words, and deeds.

So it was that Peter saw it as his job to *remind* us of the truth, so it was that the great calling of the Christian ministry has always been to *remind God's people* of all this glorious truth, so it has been the great calling of parents to *remind their children* of the same truth, and so it has been and is today the great calling of Christians to *remind themselves* of this truth, again and again and again. Never to let us forget, always to remind us *in order that we will recall it*, recall it so as to live by it, recall it so as to put it to use, recall it so as to make it a living power in our daily lives.

John Fieldler wanted to die. He did not want to continue living. Why? Because he *remembered* that to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord. That's how powerful truth can be: it can make you ready, even happy to die, as it did John and as it did Peter long before him, even though Peter new he was going to die in the cruelest possible way! And there are a hundred truths just like that which, if remembered and put to use, will have the same powerful and holy outcome in your life and mine every day.