

F.A.C.S. REPORT

FOUNDATION for the ADVANCEMENT of CHRISTIAN STUDIES
P.O. Box 547, Ferny Hills QLD 4055

Vol. 14, No. 11

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November, 1995

How is Your Memory?

by M. McLeod-Boyle

A. INTRODUCTION

OUR MEMORIES ARE PARTS OF our physiology that we often take for granted. It is, usually, not until we come face to face with some sort of disease such as "alzhiemers" that we realise our dependence upon memory. We become so accustomed to remembering that we take it for granted. For example, if I were to ask you to find your way around a strange town after having only a short time to peruse a map, you would find it very difficult to do so. You would be constantly racking your memory in order to try and remember which street or landmark came next. The ultimate result of such a process would be that you would end up *geographically embarrassed*.¹ If, on the other hand, I asked you to guide me from your house to your work, or from your house to your place of worship, you could do so without reference to a map or without needing to stop and think. Because of the frequency with which the routes to work and worship are travelled they become, as it were, *second nature*.

What is the difference? The answer is simple — *familiarity*. By repeating something over an extended period of time, that information is shifted from our short term, to our long term memories. It becomes seared into the mind, making that information easier to retrieve.

This phenomena is one which we all know as a reality in our lives. Yet how



many of us actively exercise our memories in order to make sure we know those things that we are required to ?

If we were to undertake a journey, wisdom would dictate that we sit down and plan our trip. This would entail studying the shortest and most direct route, along with noting any possible dangers. After detailed study we would then summarise the movements which we intend to make. The benefits of this are numerous. For instance, whilst we are driving we can pay closer attention to the road and traffic conditions because we do not have to look for that allusive street name. We are able to make decisions more quickly, which improves safety for all road users. Moreover, if we were to forget our street directory or map, the detailed study that we had engaged in would now serve to see us to our destination. Our diligence in preparation would ensure that, humanly speaking, we have the greatest possibility of arriving at our destination safely and on time.

As the redeemed people of God, however, there is a far more important journey for which we are *obliged to prepare adequately* — the journey of life. In the history of redemption God has revealed to man His will. This revelation has one purpose. It has been given to us so that we might *know God*.² As Christians, having been made alive in Christ, that revelation of God becomes much more specific. Having had our eyes opened to the truth we are required to obey those statutes that have been revealed.³

As Scripture is the place in which we find this revelation we should take particular care to continually put ourselves *in remembrance of it*.⁴ This continual reminding is necessary so that we are able to find our path along life's highway and reach our eternal destination in safety.

B. SCRIPTURES TEACHING.

SCRPTURE'S TEACHING on this matter is best shown by the citing of specific incidents. Thus, we will look at Scriptural examples that reflect how important it is to our physical and spiritual well-being to practice the art of *remembering*.

The Old Testament.

1. Historical Events:

1. A politically correct way of saying you are "lost".
2. Now this does, of course, need qualification but this definition is sufficient for our purposes.
3. All men are required to obey the Laws of God. However, there is a greater degree of responsibility upon a Christian because he is a recipient of special revelation. Rom. 2:12-16; 6:1-14; Heb 2:1-4.
4. There is both a private and a corporate response required. Heb 10:24-25

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One of the first things that we may note, particularly about the Old Testament, is the frequency with which it calls people to remember history.

Israel was continually called by the Holy Spirit to *remember* certain historical events. These events, though being diverse in nature, can be broken into three basic groups.

There were:

a. Events that recall an act of salvation, judgement, power, mercy, love, heroics etc. Consider, for example the following:

Exodus 13:3 And Moses said unto the people, *Remember this day, in which ye came out from Egypt*, out of the house of bondage; for by strength of hand the LORD brought you out from this place. (KJV)⁵

Psalms 105:5 *Remember his marvelous works that he hath done; his wonders, and the judgments of his mouth;* (KJV)

Deut 16:3 Thou shalt eat no leavened bread with it; seven days shalt thou eat unleavened bread therewith, even the bread of affliction; *for thou camest forth out of the land of Egypt* in haste: that thou mayest *remember the day when thou camest forth out of the land of Egypt* all the days of thy life. (KJV)

b. Events that recall the giving of a command or statute, as in:

Exodus 20:8 Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. (KJV)

c. Events that are recalled for the purpose of giving a statute or command. An example of this is found in:

Deut 15:15: And thou shalt *remember that thou wast a bondman* in the land of Egypt, *and the LORD thy God redeemed thee: therefore I command thee this thing to day.* (KJV)⁶

From this brief overview it is apparent that Israel was continually faced with her own history. She was challenged time and time again to remember the deeds of the Lord and thereby to remember who she was and what her mission in life was to be. She was charged to remember that she was not like the nations that were around and about her. She was Yahweh's treasured possession; the object of His love, and the Nation through whom Yahweh demonstrated His Kingship over the earth.

Why then were these challenges necessary? Simply put, they were necessary because *Israel forgot*. Israel failed to remember what Yahweh had done for her. She failed to perpetuate the knowledge of the Lord to the coming generations.⁷ Because of this failure she had to be constantly called to remember.

"The people of Israel had become a nation. They had been redeemed from slavery in Egypt. They had been given the law. They were committed to a life of obedience to God, and a religion which constantly reminded them of their dependence on God's forgiveness and mercy. But they were constantly falling down on their calling and their promises. With idol-worship, civil war, immorality, complacency, the nation needed to be recalled again to the whole point of their existence".⁸

Yahweh, therefore, challenged her in order to *evoke a response* to His covenant love. Yahweh desired of His people a pure relationship in which He would be

their God and they would be His people (Exodus 6:7). In short, Yahweh desired His people's worship.

2. A Response Desired:

Through her habit of prostituting herself to the nations, Israel became hard hearted and stiff necked. This fact is nowhere more evident than in the prophets.⁹

Because of this rebellion, the Lord, through His prophets, called Israel to *remember*. She was challenged to awake from her slumber and respond to her God. Yahweh cried out to His people continually, because He desired to lavish upon Israel His bountiful blessings. Blessings that could only be bestowed in an atmosphere of faithfulness. But, alas, He called in vain.¹⁰

Israel, on the whole, rejected God's call to renewal and therefore suffered the consequences of forgetfulness.

3. The Consequences:

We have seen God calling his people

"As the redeemed people of God, however, there is a far more important journey for which we are obliged to prepare adequately — the journey of life."

to faithfulness in order that they might respond to Him in worship. Now we must look at the *consequences* of the particular response involved.

It must be kept in mind that Moses placed before Israel "life and prosperity, and death and adversity" and all covenant relations are worked out in these terms (Deut. 30:15. NASB). Therefore, there are only two possibilities: 1. A blessing for covenant keeping, or 2. A curse for covenant breaking.

a. A Positive Response:

It is not the case that every time Yahweh called His people to remembrance

5. Scripture verses generated by "P.C. Study Bible" Ver. 2.11 (Biblesoft, 1990) KJV and NIV only. Added emphases are mine.

6. These same sentiments are expressed in Deut. 16:12; 24:18 and 22.

7. See Jeremiah 9:13ff. Esp. 14b.

8. Alec Motyer, *Lion Handbook to the Bible* (eds. D and P Alexander; England: Lion Publishing, 1973) 370.

9. See Ez. 2:1-3:15 and the opening chapters of Jeremiah.

10. Psalm 78 gives an excellent historical account of how Israel failed to heed Yahweh's call. Note the great deeds of the Lord and the constant refrain that Israel did not keep covenant with God.

that they refused to listen.¹¹ There are notable exceptions. One of those is the case of the young king, Josiah (See 2 Kings 22:1-20). He became king at the age of eight and sought to walk in a right manner before the Lord. In the course of time the book of the law was discovered and presented to the king. He read it and was horrified. In sorrow he tore his clothes. His immediate reaction was: "Go and inquire of the LORD for me . . . about what is written in this book that has been found. Great is the LORD's anger that burns against us because *our fathers have not obeyed the words of this book*; they have not acted in accordance with all that is written there concerning us."

Josiah responded to Yahweh's call by turning to Him and seeking His counsel. Josiah did not pretend that all was well (Cf Jer. 6:14; 8:11; Ez 13:10). He humbled himself before Yahweh.

Thus Yahweh's response was favourable. He said: Tell the king of Judah, who sent you to inquire of the LORD, 'This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says concerning the words you heard: Because *your heart was responsive and you humbled yourself before the LORD* when you heard what I have spoken against this place and its people, that they would become accursed and laid waste, and *because you tore your robes and wept in my presence*, I have heard you, declares the LORD. (NIV)

Here, Josiah exhibits the right attitude. Having been confronted, through the reading of the law, with the misdeeds of his fore-fathers, Josiah humbled himself. Rather than hardening his heart, as they had done, he responded to the Lord by acknowledging his guilt. As a result, he received the favour of the Lord. Whilst the Lord did not turn back His anger, He vowed to postpone it until after Josiah's life time. Josiah learnt the history lesson and was rewarded with peace.

This passage stands as a clear demonstration of the *positive consequence*, or blessing, which God is willing to pour forth on an obedient person or nation.

However, not all hearts are like Josiah's.

b. A Negative Response:

Sadly, this is by far the largest category found in the Old Testament. Time and time again Israel refused to remember and therefore experienced the wrath of God. The passages that highlight this are myriad. Therefore we shall focus upon only a few. Moreover, since we are here interested with the *consequences* of covenant disobedience we shall only focus upon this one aspect.¹²

In Leviticus 26:14-18 the consequence of covenant rebellion is clearly portrayed: "But if you will not listen to me and carry out all these commands, and if you reject my decrees and abhor my laws and fail to carry out all my commands and so violate my covenant, then I will do this to you: *I will bring upon you sudden terror, wasting diseases and fever that will destroy your sight and drain away your life . . .* If after all this you will

"Yahweh desired of His people a pure relationship in which He would be their God and they would be His people."

not listen to me, *I will punish you for your sins seven times over.*" (NIV)

Most tragic of all, we are able to look at situations where these plagues were unleashed because of rebellion. The worst case of Israel's forgetfulness must surely be found in the book of Judges. Here we see very much a cyclical movement from obedience, to disobedience, to judgement. Or, in other words, from *memory*, to *forgetfulness*, to *consequence*. This pattern is repeated throughout the book and highlighted in Judges 2:10-15, where we read: "After that whole generation had been gathered to their fathers, another generation grew up, who knew neither the LORD nor what he had done for Israel. Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD and served the Baals. They forsook the LORD, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of Egypt... In his anger against Israel the LORD handed them over to raiders who *plundered* them. He *sold them to their enemies* all around, whom *they were no longer able to resist*."

Whenever Israel went out to fight, the hand of the LORD was against them to defeat them, just as he had sworn to them. (NIV)

Likewise we read in Jeremiah 11:7-11: "From the time I brought your forefathers up from Egypt until today, I warned them again and again, saying, "Obey me." But they did not listen or pay attention; instead, they followed the stubbornness of their evil hearts. *So I brought on them all the curses of the covenant.*"¹³

Unlike Josiah, we note that in these cases there was no forgiveness sought, hence none was given. The Israelites were afflicted and oppressed continually because they failed to remember the decrees of Yahweh.

The Israelites were challenged to remember the deeds of the past as a means to steering a straight course through the present and into the future. It was through remembering that they would dwell in the shadow of the Almighty.

Sadly, for the majority, they *forgot* and thus reaped the consequences of covenant rebellion.

Now we must look to the New Testament and its challenges.

The New Testament.

4. A Greater Responsibility:

THE FIRST PRIORITY here is to establish a relationship between the Old and New Testaments. It is common to witness Christians excusing themselves for their moral failures by appealing to Israel's dismal record. Such an attitude is objectionable.

Christians, as partakers of the new covenant, can only see themselves as in a better position than Israel and, *therefore, more accountable* for their actions. This is made perfectly clear by the book of Hebrews. In 2:1-4 we read: "For this reason we must pay closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it. For if the word spoken through angels proved unalterable, and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense, *how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?* After it was at the first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard, God also bearing

11. That this was the response by most of the people most of the time is confirmed by the fact the both Israel and Judah were exiled.

12. Here disobedience to the covenant and forgetfulness are paralleled. If one forgets the covenant, then they will surely transgress it.

13. Read Deuteronomy 28 for a list of the blessings and curses. Note how the curses are multiplied.

through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard, God also bearing witness with them, both by signs and wonders and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will." This passage *clearly implies a heightening of responsibility*; not a diminishing of it.

Christians, therefore, must not only consider carefully the history of Israel¹⁴, but also the New Testament writers' many injunctions to remember who we are and the purpose for which we have been called. We are called to remember in order that we, like Israel, might respond to the knowledge of God in purity of worship. We too, must be wary of the consequences of forgetfulness.

5. The Words of Jesus:

In Matthew 16 Jesus warns the disciples of the "yeast of the pharisees". The disciples, confused by what Jesus meant, then start a discussion amongst themselves about the fact that they have no bread. Jesus responds to this by saying: "Do you still not understand? *Don't you remember* the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many basketfuls you gathered?" (Matt. 16:9, (NIV), Cf. Mark 8:18). Jesus basic contention here is that the disciples had witnessed a miracle where bread and fish were multiplied many times over. Thus, it was no problem for Jesus to create a loaf of bread. Through this scolding the disciples are challenged to remember the miracles and thereby discern that Jesus statement had nothing to do with the lack of bread. Because the disciples had forgotten what Jesus had done, His present teaching was not understood. It was only after they had been placed in remembrance of the facts that they understood Jesus teaching (v12).

In Luke's gospel we find Jesus teaching about His return. In order to make a point in regard to single-mindedness Jesus simply challenges His hearers to remember one solitary event. Says He: "Remember Lot's wife!" (Luke 17:32 (NIV)).

Again the point is fairly simple. Lot's wife turned back and was turned into a pillar of salt. Her indecisiveness brought dire consequences. Thus Jesus challenges His hearers to remember this historical example and to *learn* from it.

In addition to these challenges that Jesus lay before His disciples we also find what may be called gentle reminders. In John's gospel we find two such occurrences. In John 15:20, we read: "Remember the word that I said unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you; if they have kept my sayings, they will keep yours also." (KJV)

"We are called to remember in order that we, like Israel, might respond to the knowledge of God in purity of worship. "

John 16:4 expresses a similar sentiment: "I have told you this, so that when the time comes you will remember that I warned you" (NIV).

Jesus calls His disciples to remember certain teachings that are of a prophetic nature. In other words, Jesus has already told them of certain events that are sure to come to pass after He has ascended. These gentle reminders are given so that the disciples are not caught unaware or are tempted to become despondent. Jesus has graciously forewarned them. They know what to expect. *If they will but remember* then they will have assurance, comfort and direction.

6. The Apostles:

It was not only Jesus who called His followers to remember. The Apostles following their Master's lead did likewise.

a. Jude:

Jude is one of the smaller books in the New Testament and is quite often overlooked. Yet on the point of remembrance it has a good deal to say.

In verse 3 Jude states that he had originally intended to write with regard to "our common salvation". However, being influenced, no doubt by the Holy Spirit, he decided instead to treat the topic of "contending earnestly for the faith". So, you ask, what does contending for the faith have to do with remembering? Let us look at Jude and find out.

The book of Jude is commonly broken into five sections, thus presenting us with the following outline:

1. The salutation. (v 1, 2);
2. The purpose (v 3, 4);
3. Teaching section (v 5-23) - a. warnings from history (v 5-16) b. warnings through prophecy (v 17-23);
4. Benediction (v 24, 25).

Of interest to us is the third section, namely the verses 5 through 23. As stated above, we see that Jude is concerned with certain undesirables who have "crept" in unnoticed amongst the flock. Jude wants the congregations to "contend" against such people. How does he do this? He calls people to *remember*. In verse 5 we read: "I will therefore *put you in remembrance*, though ye once knew this, how that the Lord, having saved the people out of the land of Egypt, afterward destroyed them that believed not" (KJV).

Here Jude appeals first of all to the historic situations in which good has been corrupted by bad or where evil has infiltrated righteousness.

In effect, Jude is saying something like this:

I am writing to tell you that there are unscrupulous men who have come in amongst us and who will destroy us if they are not removed. I know you may find this hard to believe but it is true. *Just look at history*. There are those who perished in the wilderness; the unbelieving angels; Sodom and Gomorrah and the list goes on. . . .

Having established an historical precedent for his thesis, Jude then turns to the present situation. In verse 17 we read: "But, dear friends, remember what the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ foretold" (NIV). At this point Jude calls his readers to *remember* what was spoken "beforehand" by the Apostles. Again we might paraphrase Jude's argument as follows:

I have shown to you, from history, examples of what I am trying to communicate to you. Such a phenomena is possible. However, if you still doubt that this is indeed the present case, then *remember* the words spoken by the Apostles. You yourselves heard the Apostles warn

14. See Paul's comment in 1 Corinthians 10:6.

of a time when people like this would arise. . . .

Jude has successfully shown that his thesis is correct by appealing to history. It is noteworthy that the teaching section (vv 5-23) is punctuated by these two calls to remember. Jude, therefore, illustrates perfectly our need to be placed in remembrance.

b. Peter:

The second epistle of Peter is also very helpful for teaching us the importance for remembering.

Peter is aware that his time on the earth is fast drawing to a close (1:14). Hence he endeavours to ensure that the people to whom he writes are firmly established in the truth.

Peter shows the concern of a true shepherd as he is not only concerned with the present but also with the future. This is shown clearly by Peter's argument. In 2 Pet 1:12-13 he states: "Wherefore I will not be negligent to put you always in remembrance of these things, though ye know them, and be established in the present truth. Yea, I think it meet, as long as I am in this tabernacle, to stir you up by putting you in remembrance" (KJV). Of note at this point is Peter's tactic of stirring his readers up through causing them to remember. Peter wants his readers to remember the great truths that have been handed down to them. They are not "cleverly devised tales" but the factual accounts that have been passed on by eye witnesses.

From his desire for faithfulness in the present, Peter moves to his concern for the future. Thus he states in 1:15: "Moreover I will endeavour that ye may be able after my decease to have these things always in remembrance" (KJV).

Three times in the space of four verses, Peter has expressed his desire that the people remember. Peter is acutely aware of the fact that if the memory is allowed to grow dim then the people will be in danger from false prophets and wrong teaching. The only sure way to prevent this tragedy is to stir up their memories in regard to the truth.

So far Peter has expressed his desire that people should remember. Yet he has only hinted at *what* it is that they are to

recall. This becomes explicit in 3:1-2 where Peter writes: "Dear friends, this is now my second letter to you. I have written both of them as reminders to stimulate you to wholesome thinking. *I want you to recall the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets and the command given by our Lord and Saviour through your apostles*" (NIV).

Here in Peter, as in Jude, we are instructed to look back into Biblical history and learn the lessons there taught. The clear instruction given throughout the Scripture is that we must never forget the events and commands of the past. To do so is to court danger in the present and to risk eternal peril in the future.

C. SECULAR EXAMPLES.

THUS FAR WE HAVE LOOKED at the teaching of Scripture with regard to the need to remember. Whilst, for the Christian, Scripture is our rule of life and faith, we are able to see Scripture's truth repeated in the mistakes of many societies. Space does not allow for an expanded treatment at this point so two examples shall suffice.

1. Euthanasia:

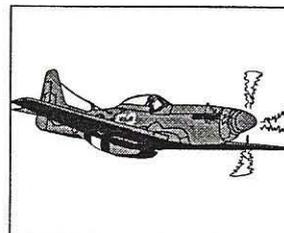
This may seem like a strange topic to introduce at this point, yet at present there is none more relevant.

During the 1930's there arose in Europe a man with a dream. He was Adolf Hitler; His dream - the Arian super-race. Hitler's programme called for the extermination of all the human beings that were of no benefit to, or had no place within, his dream. Initially, this programme of extermination was to be carried out against those whose lives were of no value. This included the mentally retarded, the insane and those dissidents who were a thorn in Hitler's side. As you know from history, the plan escalated. No longer was it only those who were institutionalised. The Jews were exterminated; Men of valour who, whilst fighting for the Kaiser, had lost limbs, also became the target. The old, the sick, the infirmed; the tiny babies whose only crime was to be the son or daughter of a Jew, were now the targets.

The extermination started against those for whom few cared. Against these a justifiable¹⁵ case could be made. With this the door was opened and a foot placed therein. Once the idea of exterminating "the worthless"¹⁶ was accepted, it became easier to broaden the scope of that term to include all who were opposed to Hitler's dream.

When these atrocities were revealed to the world there was outrage. The man in the street was disgusted. The cry for justice was heard.

This year we mark the Fiftieth anniversary of the end of World War II. *Have we forgotten ? YES!* Fifty years after the holocaust people want to start it all over again. They are even using Hitler's tactics. To gain public acceptance they start with the "justifiable" cases. The argument is put: "Surely, the terminally ill person has the right to die if he or she wants?"¹⁷ Where do we go from here? We move on to phase two — *The escalation.*



The govern-

ment now decides in the case of those who are supposedly incapable of such a decision. From here it becomes the doctors "prerogative" to determine who lives and who dies. Where are we then? We are back in Hitler's extermination camps.¹⁸ The decision on who lives and dies becomes the "subjective" resolution of a doctor or government official.

When I was a teenager there was a rock group from New Zealand called "Split enz". They released a song entitled "History Never Repeats". They were *wrong!* It does; it is, and it will continue to do so as long as we continue in forgetfulness.

2. The ANZACS

From one war atrocity to another, or so it may seem. Not quite. From one atrocity to an act of remembrance designed to stir up our memories so as to make sure that history *does not repeat itself.*

Every year on April 25 our nation stops to remember the ANZACS. We do

15. I use this term loosely. Justified only in the eyes of the depraved.

16. A term that was not defined then and which has not been defined today.

17. This is a by-product of our society which says that the individual can do anything as long as it hurts no-one else.

18. Cf the current situation in Bosnia. People are outraged at the so-called death camps; yet they will quite happily give their senile mother a lethal injection.

not come together to remember war, as some, so called, peace activists assert. We come to commemorate the great sacrifice that so many made. To say "thank you" to those who paid the ultimate sacrifice, so that we could be free. Most of all we come together to remember the carnage that war brings. By remembering we hope to learn the lessons of history so that we might avert the mistakes of the past.

Here, our national history takes the Biblical lesson well and seeks to teach us much:

At the rising of the sun, and at the going down, *we shall remember, lest we forget.*

D. CONCLUSION.

THROUGH THIS STUDY, I hope that it has become clear to Christians

that we have a moral obligation to continually put ourselves in remembrance of the Scriptures teaching. If we neglect such an important aspect as this we can only hope to repeat the mistakes of the past.

God is a God of abundant grace, who gives means to His people. One of these very unspectacular means is our ability to remember. Let us not despise it.

We must take the time to learn and *remember* what Scripture, in particular, and history, in general, has to say. If we forget either then we become vulnerable. We are easily led astray; we suffer unnecessary pain; we cause unnecessary pain; we lose our Christian joy; the peace of Christ becomes distant. When we fail to remember, then we can only forget. When we forget, we become like a ship without a rudder — tossed by every wind of doctrine. Once we have

lost our steering mechanism there is every chance of being dashed against the rocks.

In society today, on so many issues, we can see history repeating itself. Let us remember the past. Let us remember both the positive and negative aspects — the blessings and the curses. Let us remember those who have gone before us. Let us remember and learn. Let us remember, and thereby arm ourselves for the present. Let us remember, and bring the present and future into captivity for Christ.

People of God, *do not forget!* Remember, and in doing so experience the joy, peace and victory that Christ promised to all who are His.