



Remembrance: A biblical perspective



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One of the reasons we still read the Bible at all is its extraordinary ability to have something to say to so many of the topics that concern us today. Indeed, when we bring the questions of our generation to these familiar pages, we often see in much clearer focus what might only have been a dim reflection had we started from the other end by trying to understand the Bible and its message in some abstract theoretical way that is deeply rooted in what happened back then, and then applying it to life in today's rather different world. As we bring our own pressing questions to the Bible, we engage in a two-way process that often leads to new angles on our questions and fresh understandings of the way in which Scripture can bring its divine wisdom to bear on matters that its original authors could scarcely have imagined.

For as long as I can remember, people have been trying to identify one unifying theme that holds together all the Bible's many disparate writings. Covenant, salvation history, justification – there are leading scholars who will argue for all these and more as the essential glue that helps to make a single consistent story out of what can at times seem like a pretty random collection of books.

However, there is one significant theme that has often been overlooked in these debates – remembrance, and in particular God's way of remembering. Our memories of the past can often be destructive but Scripture outlines a pattern of remembrance that acknowledges the past in a way that is inspirational and life-giving for both the present and the future.

Selective memory

As I began to think about this topic of 'remembrance', I soon realised that I (like everyone else) bring a load of baggage to it. Memory is notoriously selective: we choose what to remember and how to remember it. Nowhere is that more obvious than in the case of the First World War, which some see as a huge disaster while others are inclined to be more generous in their estimation of its significance. We need not be surprised by that: history has a way of dividing opinion, even among those who in other respects might be on the same side.

The Bible itself bears witness to the very same phenomenon. As the historians of the book of Kings recalled and recorded Jehu's slaughter of the royal house of Israel, they left readers in little doubt that they regarded it as his finest moment (2 Kings 9.30 – 10.11). For the prophet Hosea, on the other hand, it was the sort of bloodthirsty act that should have no place among the people of God (Hosea 1.4–5). The same differences of opinion can be traced in relation to the kingdom of Judah, with the Chronicler viewing the reigns of David and Solomon as something akin to perfection while the writers of Kings not only highlighted their dark side but, in the case of Solomon, directly attributed much of the disorder that followed his reign to his inflated sense of self-importance. Like the Great War, these were all pivotal moments of history, and whichever side you were on it was impossible not to remember and reflect on it because they also shaped identity and purpose for many subsequent generations.

A significant biblical theme

Viewed from that sort of angle, the theme of remembrance, and the differing emotions that memories of the past can evoke, easily emerges as one of the key themes not just of the Old Testament, but of the entire

remembrance ... as a way of inspiring people to new possibilities grounded in God's grace

Bible. It surfaces almost on the first page, as the serpent asks the primeval pair in the Garden 'did God say?' (Genesis 3.1) – a question that at once sowed the seeds of doubt as to whether they really had a reliable memory of the divine instruction. Then once they have left the Garden, the memory of a lost but better way of being becomes embedded in biblical anthropology as a key driver of human aspirations to recover a sense of divine blessing and presence.

As the biblical narrative unfolds, the memory of undeserved divine benevolence surfaces repeatedly. Though their original contexts were quite diverse, the many festivals of Old Testament faith all came to be connected to historical events and the invocation of those events was central to their proper celebration. The festival of Tabernacles recalled the temporary dwellings of Israel in the desert (Leviticus 23.33–44), while Weeks (Pentecost) was an occasion for reflecting more precisely on the giving of the Law on Sinai (Deuteronomy 16.12) and the weekly observation of a Sabbath rest was grounded in the memory of how God also rested on the seventh day (Exodus 20.8–11). Then there was Passover, arguably the most iconic festival of all, at which the escape of their oppressed forebears from slavery in Egypt was not only remembered but re-enacted, as the people dressed up with sandals on the feet and a stick in the hand to recount the story of that pivotal experience in Egypt not only as a record of the past, but as a reminder of their ongoing identity as the people of God and an inspiration for future hope. The remembered faithfulness of God was a core element of that whole narrative (Deuteronomy 16:1–8). This pattern of remembering the past as an integral part of living in the present and imagining the future is also reflected in later festivals (Purim, recalling the events of the book of Esther, and Hanukkah marking the Maccabean revolt) and is deeply embedded in the way that faith is understood in both Old and New Testaments. We find it in the Psalms, (e.g. 105, 106, 136, 143) and even a cynic like the writer of Ecclesiastes could encourage readers to 'remember your creator' as a way of facing an otherwise pessimistic future (12.1).

A divine pattern to follow

These remembrances invariably focus on the theme of God's loving kindness and undeserved (and unsought for) generosity and grace. This comes out at pivotal moments in the narrative, and so Jeremiah can insist that God cannot simply ignore the sins of the past

(14.10) while also assuring his people in exile that divine justice would always be trumped by an unconditional love and forgiveness (31.34). Memory of the past often became a way of navigating an uncertain future. When the New Testament portrays the birth of Jesus the Messiah as the dawn of a new future, it was natural to connect that with the memory of God's covenantal interventions in the past – and so Mary and Zechariah both recognise this joyous event as a sign that God has remembered past promises (Luke 1.54,72). At the end of the gospel, the thief hanging on the cross alongside Jesus asks that he be remembered (Luke 23.42), a request that is met with the same loving generosity that runs like a golden thread through the fabric not only of the life of Jesus but of the Hebrew prophets before him.

Of course, focusing on and remembering the past can easily become an exercise in negativity – an excuse for asking who is to blame for past mistakes, or even an occasion for blaming ourselves in ways that ultimately are psychologically and spiritually destructive. Neither the prophets nor Jesus dodged the reality of past mistakes, whether on a national or a personal level. But they also understood that the past was just that, and no amount of agonising over it was going to change what had taken place. On occasion, repentance and forgiveness can certainly be appropriate, but the constant theme of the Bible is that remembering the past is not about dwelling on human shortcomings, but about divine grace and the possibility of new life.

Remembrance is invariably an invitation to a better future, though growing out of a realistic appraisal of the past. Ezekiel could openly acknowledge the dereliction into which his people had fallen while also offering a new spirit-filled future (Ezekiel 37.1–14). Jeremiah likewise acknowledged the brokenness of past misdeeds while holding out the prospect of a reimagined relationship between God and people (Jeremiah 31.31–34). Similarly, Jesus, when faced with a woman caught in the act of adultery, made little reference to what had happened in the past and instead pointed her to the possibilities of a new life (John 8.53–9.11). And when Paul wanted to encourage his readers in Corinth to have a proper appreciation of their own identity in Christ, he moved very swiftly from a recognition of the inescapable fact that in social and civic terms they were people of little consequence to the assurance that, in God's eyes, they were all of great value (1 Corinthians 1.26–29). In doing so, these and other biblical characters were following what they understood to be a divine pattern of remembrance.

Once we ask the question, we can see that God's way of remembering is a significant theme throughout the biblical literature, and whenever that theme surfaces it is invariably presented as a way of pointing forward to a surprising new future rather than an excuse for raking over the ashes of the past. At the heart of the gospel is a realism about the past, its triumphs as well as its errors, though always looking forward to that which might yet be rather than regret over what has been.

'Do this in remembrance of me'

For the Christian, this pattern of remembrance as a means of acknowledging the past in a way that is inspirational for the present and life-giving for the future comes to a clear focus in the one central sacramental narrative of the faith, namely the institution of the Lord's Supper. In the earliest written account of this, given by Paul in the early 50s (1 Corinthians 11.23–26), the instruction to 'Do this in remembrance of me' is pivotal, as also in Luke's account of the last supper (Luke 22.17–20), and while those exact words are not repeated in either Matthew or Mark's Gospels, the implication is clearly there. Why else would anyone wish to follow Jesus' instruction to share bread and wine in this way without intuitively recalling the occasion in his lifetime that was the origin of the practice?

It is, however, much more than merely a matter of remembrance. The breaking of the bread and the pouring of the wine highlight the brokenness of our world and the death – both metaphorical and literal – that is the central tragedy of the exclusion of the primeval couple from the Garden of Eden. Through its connection with Passover, it not only highlights the way in which all the world's suffering comes to a focus in the cross, but it also points forward to the possibilities of new life, based on the unending faithfulness of God the liberator. More than that, for those who know their Bible it also evokes the image of the great feast of Isaiah 25.6–10 in which God's generosity overflows in a grand vision of cosmic redemption and renewal for all. In the ensuing centuries as the Church developed a more complex Eucharistic theology, this emphasis on the sacrament as a means of grace, of laying to rest the mistakes of the past while offering new life for the future, became even more pronounced. But the essence of it was already there in the recollection of some key biblical passages.

These examples of remembrance being used as a way of inspiring people to new possibilities grounded in God's grace are by no means isolated, but represent the overall picture with which the Bible presents us. It is a bit like the old adage that those who forget the past are in danger of repeating it. The Bible never ignores past mistakes, but it never dwells on them and the overriding message is not one of regret for what we can never change, but of challenge to face up to the possibilities of what, with God's help, we can yet become.

Aspiring to a better future

One of the ironies of today's world is that while Western culture is ostensibly more permissive and laid back, in many respects it is also more judgmental than previous generations might have been. Political correctness, celebrity culture and social media have all played their part in this, which means that we know a lot more than our grandparents would have done, not only about national and international affairs but also of the personal lives and opinions of individuals. Forgiveness tends to be in short supply: we find it harder to move on from the past, because it is not so easy to escape its presence. Information about all of us is easy to find through online

search engines, and it tends to be there for a long time even if it is no longer relevant, or even current.

In May this year, the European Union Court of Justice ruled that citizens should have the right to require that personal information be removed from websites such as Google. Not surprisingly, the first applications concerned spent convictions and reports of misdemeanors committed years in the past. Most discussion centred around the technical difficulties of actually complying with this requirement, but from a Christian perspective this is not just a technological challenge: it is also a theological issue. We should never forget the past, whether as individuals or nations, but neither should we dwell there because the good news of the gospel is that we don't need to, and life can actually be different. The past is often messy, whether our own personal past or the more expansive corporate pasts of our diverse cultures in which we are all implicated whether we like it or not. But the phrase 'there has to be more to life than this' is so often repeated that it seems to be somehow embedded in the corporate psyche of humanity. It is as if we intuitively come full circle, connecting the painful memories with a better vision of what might have been, as the curse of Calvary interacts with the blessing of the Garden.

Not long before the start of the Great War, Arthur Waite invited his artist friend Pamela Colman Smith to create designs for a new set of tarot cards, and much of their inspiration came from biblical themes. In two of the cards, she drew depictions of Adam and Eve in a contrasting before-and-after characterisation. On the Lovers card they are happily enjoying the presence of God in the Garden, while on the Devil card they are chained up in a dark environment. But one thing is common to both designs, and that is the presence of the two trees, of life and of the knowledge of good and evil. The design of the Devil card is especially interesting, because it shows them with tails (after the pattern of the one who is now oppressing them). However, their tails are not the same as his. Instead, they carry symbols of the two trees, thereby depicting in graphic style where so many find themselves: oppressed by memories of the past, yet with an inbuilt recollection of and aspiration for what has been lost. The Rider Waite tarot appeared in 1910, and one of the consequences of the Great War was a huge explosion of interest in this and other esoteric spiritual tools in the decades that immediately followed the cessation of hostilities.

These designs became iconic for people whose faith had been shattered, and it is not difficult to see why, because they tap into and illustrate that archetypal tension that is endemic to what it means to be human: the simple reality that the world is messed up, but we instinctively aspire to something better. That 'something better' is what stands at the heart of the gospel: an invitation not to ignore the past (still less, to pretend that it never happened), but to share a vision of what might yet be as we remember the faithfulness of God and claim for ourselves a new future characterised by the divine attributes of justice, love and mercy (Micah 6.6–8), mediated to us through the death and resurrection of Christ celebrated in praise and worship.