

# The Essential Memory



IT IS APPARENT from the Old Testament that remembering the great acts of God is essential to the spiritual well-being of God's children. In fact, God is very directive about this.

*The Passover.* On the night before the Exodus, when God instituted the Passover rite as a perpetual ceremony in Israel, he instructed Moses as follows: "And when your children say to you, 'What do you mean by this service?' you shall say, 'It is the sacrifice of the LORD's Passover, for he passed over the houses of the people of Israel in Egypt, when he struck the Egyptians but spared our houses'" (Exodus 12:26, 27). Passover was meant to bring about heartening spiritual memory and reflection.

*The Law.* Later, after God thundered the Ten Commandments from Sinai and charged Israel with the *Shema* and specific instructions to "teach them diligently to your children" (Deuteronomy 6:7ff.), Moses went on to say:

When your son asks you in time to come, "What is the meaning of the testimonies and the statutes and the rules that the LORD our God has commanded you?" then you shall say to your son, "We were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt. And the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. And the LORD showed signs and wonders, great and grievous, against Egypt and against Pharaoh and all his household, before our eyes. And he brought us out from there, that he might bring us in and give us the land that he swore to give to our fathers." (Deuteronomy 6:20–23)

Again we see the value of memory and reflection.

*Crossing the Jordan.* The most notable example of God's concern for his people's memory was at the crossing of the Jordan, when he instructed the priests of Israel to take twelve stones from the Jordan and pile them in Gilgal in the promised land. His subsequent instructions were explicit: "When your children ask in time to come, 'What do those stones mean to you?' then you shall tell them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off before the ark of the covenant of the LORD. When it passed over the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. So these stones shall be to the people of Israel a memorial forever" (Joshua 4:6, 7). The Israelites were to look on the stones and remember that they did not get across the Jordan through their own ability. It was all the work of God. And realizing this, they were to conduct all of life accordingly, whether warfare, business, or family life.

Why all this emphasis on remembering? Because God's children have always tended to forget the wonderful things he has done. The seventy-two verses of Psalm 78 mourn Israel's tendency to forget God's faithfulness. Verses 10, 11 sum it up.

They did not keep God's covenant  
but refused to walk according to his law.  
They forgot his works  
and the wonders that he had shown them.

We present-day children of God confirm our sad continuity with the children of old by our forgetfulness of things that were once so vivid and vital to our faith and way of life.

But the emphasis here in 2 Timothy 2 is altogether positive! Those who remember what God has done, those who cultivate the memory of God's great works on their behalf, will live to God's glory. The Apostle Peter did just this when he remembered how God preserved Noah and delivered Lot and concluded with the resounding statement of confidence that if this is so, "then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials" (2 Peter 2:9). "If God did it for them, he will do it for us!" How important theological memory is.

This matter of remembering was on Paul's mind as he wrote his second letter to Timothy. Immediately after the greeting, he heartened Timothy by calling to memory the faith of their forefathers (1:3), his and Timothy's own deep friendship (1:4), Timothy's rich spiritual heritage (1:5), the day of Timothy's call and gifting for ministry (1:6, 7; cf. 3:14, 15), and lastly the pattern of sound teaching he had given Timothy (1:13). Remember, remember, remember, remember.

## Remember the Gospel (v. 8a)

Beginning with verse 8, Paul again takes up the emphasis on godly memory by urging upon Timothy the grand essential memory—"Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel." This is the first and foremost of three successive memories essential to standing tall and suffering for Christ. They are: 1) the gospel (v. 8a); 2) the gospel's power (vv. 8b-10); and 3) a trustworthy saying (vv. 11-13)—all essential memories to being the man God wants him to be.

The command to "remember Jesus Christ" calls for the remembrance of two things: First, he was "risen from the dead," and, second, he was "the offspring of David." These dual remembrances correspond to his two names "Jesus" and "Christ." "Jesus" (his human name given him at his birth) matches "risen from the dead." "Christ" (which means "Messiah") matches "descended from David." Interestingly, in the rest of 2 Timothy Paul uses the term "Christ Jesus," but here he says "Jesus Christ" to correspond to the order of his emphases.

*Remember his resurrection.* The initial emphasis is on Christ's resurrection, "Remember Jesus . . . risen from the dead." The tense of "risen from the dead" is the Greek perfect, which means he was raised and still is raised. The reason to remember the resurrection is that Jesus' resurrection proved the gospel message. Paul had said, "And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain" (1 Corinthians 15:14). But he *had* been raised, as Paul so vigorously argues in that same chapter (cf. vv. 3-8). This resurrection substantiated the gospel.

Jesus' resurrection demonstrated the gospel's power. The good news of the gospel itself brings about the power for resurrection—*spiritual* resurrection—as Paul proclaimed to the Romans: "We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life" (6:4). He later explained this to the Ephesians as well when he spoke of "the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 1:19b, 20). All those who have been born again have experienced this resurrection power.

Furthermore, ultimately Jesus' resurrection means power for *bodily* resurrections—"But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive" (1 Corinthians 15:20-22). Memory of Jesus' resurrection therefore engenders a perpetual Easter season in the lives of his children. It invites spiritual resurrections when through the good news people believe and are born again. And it instills hope of a glorious bodily resurrection for all who believe—eternal Easter! "Remember Jesus . . . risen from the dead."

*Remember his messiahship.* The parallel emphasis is on remembering our Savior's messiahship. The title "Christ" always means "Messiah." So the sense here is, "Remember . . . Christ [Messiah] . . . the offspring of David." Jesus Christ fulfilled the Davidic covenant, the promise first made to King David in 2 Samuel 7:12ff. and repeatedly reiterated throughout the Old Testament: A descendant of David would reign forever.

Significantly it was after his resurrection, on the road to Emmaus, that Jesus explained, "'Was it not necessary that the Christ [Messiah] should suffer these things and enter into his glory?' And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself" (Luke 24:26, 27). Memory of Jesus' messiahship invites the believer to see Jesus as the culmination of God's plan of salvation and to bow before him as King.

*"My gospel."* It is important for us to realize that these two things—Jesus Christ's resurrection and his messiahship—make up the essential gospel. Paul says, "Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, *as preached in my gospel*" (v. 8). Certainly there are other elements in the gospel (Christ's atoning death, imputed righteousness that comes by faith alone through Christ alone, forgiveness of sins, eternal life, and so on), but this is shorthand for the whole thing. "Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel."

Paul makes this essentiality clear in two other places in the New Testament. Notice the occurrences of the signature words and motifs (the gospel, Christ, descendant of David, resurrection) in Romans 1:1–4:

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Note the similarities in 1 Corinthians 15:1–4:

Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.

This is the good news: Jesus Christ is the predicted, long-awaited Messiah, and he has been raised from the dead and ever lives. This is the gospel. Everything else in the gospel is implicit in and flows from these two supreme realities. As Messiah, he fulfills the cascade of Old Testament messianic prophecy and the gospel and is King of kings and Lord of lords. As resurrected Lord, all authority in Heaven and earth is his (cf. Matthew 28:18). He is victor. He is all-powerful. It is this good news that Paul himself clings to as his death approaches. This is the theological reality from which he takes strength.

We must keep before us that Paul's command "remember" is a continuous command. Timothy is to "remember [and keep on remembering] Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David." Other recollections are important, but this is *the* essential memory. This gospel memory, constantly replayed, will enable him to stand and suffer with Paul. Jesus Christ is the resurrected, living Messiah. He is everything we need for life and salvation.

This is the theological memory that we must constantly set before us in all of its Scriptural dimensions. Jesus Christ did not come out of nowhere. He is the fulfillment of everything the Scriptures

pointed to concerning the Messiah. Jesus Christ was resurrected and remains so. He lives! He is all-powerful! Keep on remembering this.

## Remember the Gospel's Power (vv. 8b–10)

The theological grounds for suffering were more than theory for Paul. His own present experience bore witness to the reality of the resurrection and the availability of power to stand and suffer. So Paul had a right to affirm the gospel's power in suffering: "my gospel, for which I am suffering, bound with chains as a criminal. But the word of God is not bound!" (vv. 8b, 9) Paul's circumstances were humiliating and personally repugnant to him because he was considered to be a criminal. The word translated "criminal" is a strong one, a technical term used for violent people—murderers, thieves, traitors who were punished by torture.<sup>1</sup>

Nero had just burned Rome (A.D. 64) and blamed the Christians, of whom Paul was a leader.<sup>2</sup> Thus Paul was chained and treated like criminal scum. All this for the gospel.

But there was no hint of self-pity in Paul. Rather, there was confident power: "But the word of God is not bound!" A famous picture in the convent library in Erfurt, Germany, depicts young Martin Luther poring over a copy of Scripture in the morning light. The dawn steals through the open lattice, illuminating the Bible and his eager face. A broken chain hangs from the Bible.<sup>3</sup> Such has been the experience of the church, even in darkest times.

The unchained Word here in 2 Timothy is the gospel. God's Word ("my gospel") had not been and was not then chained.<sup>4</sup> Paul was speaking from experience. During his first Roman imprisonment, he wrote to the Philippians:

I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear. (Philippians 1:12–14)

In fact, in Paul's present imprisonment the Lord had stood by his side and had given him the strength to proclaim the message before the Roman court, as he reports in 2 Timothy 4:16, 17.

Paul was powerfully stating the absolute freedom of the Word of God. And it is so today. In the 1930s Stalin ordered a purge of all Bibles and all believers. In Stavropol, Russia, this order was carried out with a vengeance. Thousands of Bibles were confiscated, and multitudes of believers were sent to the gulags where many died for being "enemies of the state."

After the fall of Communism, the missionary organization CoMission sent a team to Stavropol. (The city's history was not known to them at that time.) When the team experienced difficulty getting Bibles shipped from Moscow, someone mentioned a warehouse outside of town where confiscated Bibles had been stored since Stalin's day. After prayer, one member got up the courage to go to the warehouse and ask the officials if the Bibles were still there. They were! They then asked if the Bibles could be removed and distributed again to the people of Stavropol. The answer was yes. A truck was obtained, and several Russian people helped load the Bibles.

One of the helpers was a young man—a skeptical, hostile, agnostic collegian who had come only for the day's wages. As they were loading Bibles, the young man disappeared. They found him in a corner of the warehouse, weeping. He had slipped away, hoping to quietly take a Bible for himself. What he found shook him to the core. The inside page of the Bible he picked up had the handwritten signature of his own grandmother! It had been her personal Bible. He had stolen the very Bible that had belonged to his grandmother—a woman persecuted for her faith all her life. His grandmother had no doubt prayed for him and for her city.<sup>5</sup>

God's Word can no more be chained than God himself.

Thus Paul declares that God gives us the power to suffer: "Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory" (v. 10). The unutterable, unstoppable power of the Word means that it will prevail with "the elect" so that they will be saved and brought to "eternal glory." The mighty, effectual Word gives us a reason to "endure"—and Paul does. And Timothy will likewise stand tall as he wields the unchained Word.

## Remember the Trustworthy Saying (vv. 11–13)

Paul concludes this long admonishment to stand and suffer with him (which began in 1:4) with an easy-to-remember poem. Each stanza begins with an "if" that describes the believer's actions and is followed by a responding phrase that gives Christ's response.<sup>6</sup>

*First stanza (conversion):* "If we have died with him, we will also live with him" (v. 11b). This is a poetic reference to the exalted teaching of Romans 6 where Paul uses baptismal imagery to describe conversion as dying and rising with Christ. Romans 6:8 is almost identical with this stanza: "Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him." In both Romans and here "we will also live with him" has primarily to do with the present.<sup>7</sup> Jesus Christ's resurrection gives us resurrection life right now. And, of course, resurrection is also still coming!

*Second stanza (perseverance):* "If we endure, we will also reign with him" (v. 12a). This plainly addresses Paul's main concern. "Endure" is the word he uses to describe himself in verse 10: "Therefore I endure everything." It means to hold your ground, particularly during affliction, and it involves suffering.<sup>8</sup>

The reward for this amazes us—because it goes beyond being with him to *reigning* with him! This is not a "pie-in-the-sky" reward. Jesus was specific about this in the parable of the minas, where he has the master say, "Well done, good servant! Because you have been faithful in a very little, you shall have authority over ten cities" (Luke 19:17). Coregency speaks of privileged intimacy. Those who endure will be his coreigning viceroys and confidants. What joy! The eternal reward goes beyond eternal rest to eternal responsibility as Christ's coregents, teaming with him on vast new enterprises.<sup>9</sup>

*Third stanza (apostasy):* "If we deny him, he also will deny us" (v. 12b). Paul here references Jesus' well-known saying, "So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 10:32, 33). To disown or deny has a wide range of meanings in the New Testament, from temporary disowning (like Peter did to Jesus) to full-blown apostasy. Here it represents apostasy 1) because Christ denies those who do it, 2) because of the close similarity with Jesus' saying, and 3) because the fourth stanza refers to temporary unfaithfulness.<sup>10</sup>

This is an ominous declaration for the likes of Hymenaeus and Philetus, who will be mentioned in verses 17, 18. The warning is in the future tense: "If we [will] deny him, he also will deny us." The terror that will unfold in final judgment is a reciprocal, eternal disownment. The stakes were high for Timothy, and they remain equally high today.

*Fourth stanza (faithlessness).* The final stanza comes as a surprise, a magnificent reversal: "If we are faithless, he remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself" (v. 13). Whereas the preceding stanza was a warning, this is a *promise*, as are the first two stanzas. It departs from the future tense, returning to the present tense of the first two stanzas.<sup>11</sup> If we lapse into unfaithfulness, he remains faithful, as Jesus did during the temporary denial by Peter (cf. Peter's restoration in John 21:15–19). What comfort to Timothy (who probably wavered and fell into unfaithfulness at times). And what a balm to us who are often faithless Christians.

Why is God like this? The magnificent coda tells us—"for he cannot deny himself." His faithfulness is rooted deep within his graciousness as the covenantal God who always acts in conformity to his nature.

What God is, he always is. No man is always himself, but God is always himself—he cannot be untrue to his own nature.

As the saintly Samuel Rutherford, who spent years in an Aberdeen prison, wrote, “Often and often, I have in my folly torn up my copy of God’s covenant with me; but, blessed be His name, He keeps it in heaven safe; and He stands by it always.”<sup>12</sup>

Timothy (and all of like flesh and aspiration) can find courage from these wonderful “hang in there” lines.

This is all so beautiful. These memories are essential for standing and suffering. The first is most essential. *Remember the gospel*: “Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel” (v. 8). Remember that he is the Messiah who fulfills all the promises of salvation. And remember that he is resurrected, that he is living today. This is the essential gospel. Hang on to it, and keep on remembering it.

Next, *remember the gospel’s power* in Paul’s life: “my gospel, for which I am suffering, bound with chains as a criminal. But the word of God is not bound!” (vv. 8b, 9). As Luther said, “The body they may kill, God’s truth abideth still: His kingdom is forever.”

This gospel also gives us the power to suffer: “Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory” (v. 10). Then comes a poem to seal this to our souls:

If we have died with him, we will also live with him;  
if we endure, we will also reign with him;  
If we deny him, he also will deny us;  
if we are faithless, he remains faithful—  
for he cannot deny himself. (vv. 11–13)