

A Bad Memory

In the name of him who loved us and gave himself for us, dear friends in Christ: It is said that an elephant never forgets. I'm sure you've heard the expression. Anyway, I did a little research on where it came from. Apparently, it stems from reports that elephants are able to remember people – especially people who were cruel to them or harmed them in some way – for periods of thirty years or more. Perhaps you've heard some of the anecdotal stories of elephants that unexpectedly go berserk and attempt to stomp to death a visitor to a zoo or circus when it recognizes some person as an old nemesis, someone who long ago tormented the beast and who for his own part has probably forgotten all about it. But the elephant remembers, and all of a sudden it's pay back time. Interestingly enough, however, the expression about elephants not forgetting is actually a cleaned up and more politically correct version of a much older Arab proverb that says: *Neither a camel nor a woman ever forgets an injury.* (Personally, I can't imagine how the Arabs ever came up with a thought like that.)

... So I'll stick with elephants—creatures that, if the expression is true, I sometimes find myself envying. I can't tell you how often I find myself at the bottom of the basement steps thinking, "I know I came down here to get something; but now that I'm here I can't remember what it is." Does that ever happen to you? It happens fairly often when I go to the grocery or hardware store too. I go in to get just one or two things, and then once I'm in there, for the life of me I can't remember what they are; and then, since I'm there feeling foolish, I usually end up buying something that I don't need.

I guess I have a bad memory – at least in the short term – which is no doubt a sign that I'm getting older. It's like they say: the memory is the second thing to go. (I know, you want to know what the first thing is—and I'd love to tell you; but I can't because I don't remember.) Anyway, I'm willing to bet that I'm not the only one whose memory slips up now and then; but you know, that's not always a bad thing. There are some things in life that are better forgotten. We've all had unhappy experiences, we've seen unpleasant images, have had people hurt or insult us – and these sorts of things if we retain them in the forefront of our minds can affect us adversely. They bring you down, depress you, and make you resentful and bitter. So, it's best to suppress such memories and try to strike them from your thoughts – which admittedly is a whole lot easier to say than to do. And so it's here that a natural tendency toward forgetfulness can be extremely helpful. Or, say it another way, having a bad memory is an effective way to deal with bad memories.

And probably by now you're wondering where I'm headed with all this. Once again, I'd like to tell you, but I forgot. No wait. It's in today's Old Testament lesson. There we hear the people of Zion (that is, Jerusalem) complaining that the Lord God has a bad memory and that he had forgotten them. The statement is remarkable for at least two reasons: one, because of its sheer audacity. I mean, we're talking about the all knowing, all wise, eternal God here. Entertaining the very thought that it might be possible for him to forget something or someone only betrays the lack of understanding of the person who is thinking it. "God forgot" is a phrase that simply does not compute.

But the second reason the statement is so remarkable is that Isaiah wrote this complaint of the people somewhere on the order of one hundred and fifty years before the events transpired that caused them to say it. So, it's prophetic. Isaiah is not writing what he's hearing people say, but rather what they will be saying in the future long after he's dead. And writing it down as a prophecy to be fulfilled highlights even more how foolish it is to say that God forgot. If he already has access to what hasn't happened yet, how much more must he be aware of the past and present?

So too, when the time comes that the people actually do say that God forgot them in fulfillment of the prophecy, it will only underscore the truth that it's not God who has a bad memory, but rather the people of God themselves. Not only will they be making the outlandish accusation against God and his infinite knowledge, but by doing it they'll be proving that they didn't even remember that he told them they would.

And that is the point: God doesn't forget his people. It's God's people who forget God and his Word. Frequently. Consistently. It's one of the most repeated themes in the history of Israel. You see it again and again as you read the Bible. The Lord does something spectacular to save his people, like sending a mighty deliverer, a Moses, Joshua, Gideon, or Samson. And then there's a revival of faithfulness to God, sacrifices are offered, and promises are made; and everything goes well for a while. Then you turn to the next chapter and it says, "But the people did evil in the sight of the Lord. They turned away from him to follow after the gods and idols of the nations." And you sit there scratching your head wondering how they could be so stupid.

How does it happen? Well actually it's a whole lot easier than you might think. You see, no person of faith wakes up in the morning and says, "Gee, today I think I'll forget all about the Lord." No, it happens gradually and incrementally over time. And it especially happens when there's an extended period of peace and prosperity – after all, the Lord is the guy we turn to when we're in trouble. We don't think we need him so much when times are good. And of course, when times *are* good, we have other things to occupy ourselves with, namely our wealth and the stuff and entertainments that wealth can buy. In a modern American context, it might take the form of boat for fishing or skiing. You say to yourself, well, I'll only be using it a few weekends a year. I won't miss out that much on what's going on at the church. But then you add a camper for some extended trips, maybe a time share in Florida to get away a few times during the winter months; and then there are all those sports weekends the kids are involved in. And too, since you're away so much you need a few weekends to catch up on the yard work and what not that's been piling up. And of course, at the same time your personal devotional life is suffering. There's not much time for prayer or Scripture reading, and more and more you notice that you're not getting much out of it anyway. And boy, have you noticed how long the pastor's sermons are getting? I wish he'd just get to the point and be done with it. Step it up, I've got places to go and things to do. And I'm getting sick and tired of the way everyone makes me feel guilty about not showing up more often. Well, nuts to them. I don't need any of that to be a good Christian.

And so it goes. Before too long, the Lord is crowded out of a person's life altogether. A preoccupation with all the things of the world trumps devotion to the One who graciously provides all the things of the world. And God is forgotten. And incidentally, you can scale that up or down according to income level and substitute just about anything you want for boats, campers, time shares, and sports. It all ends up the

same way: people fall victim to their bad memories and forget the Lord. That's what happened to the nation of Israel over and over again.

And in response, the Lord would withdraw his hand of blessing and protection for a period of time. He'd send a drought or a marauding enemy army or some other such thing to put the squeeze on his people and make them wake up and realize that their priorities were out of whack. Usually this had the desired outcome. The people would realize they'd been neglecting the Lord and his Word, repent of their sins, and cry out for help. And the Lord, abounding in grace in mercy, would come to their aid.

Unfortunately, over the long haul, it didn't get any better. You might think that with this cycle playing itself out over and over again, eventually God's people would get it into their heads that if they just stayed faithful, they wouldn't have to go through the hardships associated with the times they forgot the Lord. I mean, how many times does it take to learn the lesson? The answer, for people with bad memories, is always one more time. So the Lord decided to do something different. He decided to give his people one great big hardship that they'd never forget. It's the bad memory that we call the Babylonian Captivity. Through the prophet Isaiah the Lord foretold a time when a powerful nation from the east would arise and destroy their nation completely – literally wipe it off the map. For more than fifty years God's people would be cast out of their inheritance, strangers and captives in a foreign land, and other people would be brought in to dwell in the land they once called home. It would be so bad that it would appear to them that the situation was completely irreversible. Who ever heard of an entire nation once deliberately destroyed, depopulated, and resettled by foreigners coming back into existence—with its original inhabitants and their descendants—after over fifty years? Inconceivable. Hopeless. And that would lead the people to say, "Well, that's it then. This time we messed up so badly that the Lord decided to revoke his promises to us. This time there's no going back—there's no "back" to go to. The Lord really has forgotten us."

To which Isaiah responds in advance, "Not possible. Even if it were possible for a mother to forget her own nursing child," he says, (which would be understood not to be possible, for even if the baby forgets to cry the mother has built-in reminders that tell her it's time to feed the baby)—*but even if it were possible, still* the Lord says, "I will not forget you." That's what the Lord is saying throughout today's Old Testament lesson. He's talking about how he's going to bring his people out of their captivity and reestablish them in the land that he promised them as an inheritance – which, of course he did through a miraculous chain of events exactly as he promised he would. He did it to prove to his people that there is never a time that it's too late for them to cry out to him, never a sin so great that it would cause him to forget them.

He says, "I can't forget you. I have a built-in reminder: your names are written on the palms of my hands." The idea is that most work is done with the hands. So, whatever it is that God is doing, whatever he puts his hands to and has his attention on, there you are in front of his eyes. And so, he's doing whatever it is for you.

And I mean *for you* because the promises he made to his people Israel are the same ones he makes to us in the Church of Jesus Christ, which is the new Israel of God's chosen people. This is great comfort for us in life's hard times. When there's illness or injury or death in the family, when you lose a job, or there's no insurance to pay for medical costs; or just in general as we look at the state of world affairs, what with

the uncertain economic future, fuel prices going through the roof, terrorism on the rise, unstable nations trying to develop nuclear weapons, and all kinds of dire threats about the deteriorating environment – any of these things and all of them together can make us wonder if the Lord hasn't forgotten us.

Or here in congregations like ours, we see declining membership, less participation among some of the members, and it's getting harder and harder to keep going and paying the bills. In a broader context we have a sense that Christian devotion is declining in our country, that immorality is on the rise, and that fewer people are seeking the truth. For goodness sake, these days most people deny that there even is such a thing as truth. It's tempting to compare what's going on now with some supposed good old days in the past and wonder if maybe God hasn't forgotten us.

Or in our lives personally: we sometimes sense the dryness, we feel we're consistently losing the battle of temptation and sin, there's a lack of peace and joy in the Gospel, there's no desire to pray – and perhaps an uneasy sense that it doesn't do any good anyway. Or maybe we're loaded with guilt; we wonder if that last time we went too far – crossed the point of no return, disappointed the Lord Jesus for the last time, and that now he's had it. He's struck our names from the Book of Life. He's forgotten us.

No, it's not possible. The Lord doesn't have a bad memory. He won't forget you. He can't. You are engraved on the palms of his hands. Everything he does, he does for you and for your salvation. When he works – and he's always working – he can't take his eyes off you. And the amazing thing is that even though he doesn't have a bad memory, there are some things that he does forget. Namely, he forgets your sin. Because right next to your name in the palm of his hand he sees the nail scars by which he carried your sins and erased them from the record with his death on the cross.

And that of course is our guarantee that we will never be forgotten – and why it's the one thing we ought always to remember from now until the time when all the sorrows, sins, and hardships of this life will be nothing but a bad memory. God give us the grace to remain faithful. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!