

Use It Or Lose It

Remembering the Works of Our Father

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As I think most of us find, time flies, does it not? I know that might make me sound a little old, but so be it. I think I am really thriving in my extremely late mid-twenties. As every month passes, let alone every year, it certainly feels like time moves faster and faster, and of course as each bit of time passes, I find myself shocked at how much has actually happened, as I am sure we all do.

Just the other day, my wife, Sam and I caught ourselves forgetting what day in the count of Pentecost it was. You know, shame on us, and we were shocked to find that we only had a couple of weeks left. We were talking after that point and eventually, Sam told me it is been almost three and a half years, I think, since my first sermonette, and we are always talking about how hard it is to believe that as of tomorrow now, we will be married six years.

Now, as any married couple can most likely relate, memory loss is not a new phenomenon. Getting teased for memory, or lack thereof, is pretty common, especially when it comes to discussing plans that apparently have already been made that you apparently have already agreed to. But while we can tease each other and go back and forth about memory and plans, we all deal with various degrees of memory issues, and there is really no escaping it. So I think it is worth the time to evaluate just a few aspects of how our memory could affect our walk with God.

I am sure most of us are familiar with muscle atrophy. As we grow older, our muscle mass slowly deteriorates, and while it becomes harder to build or maintain, it can deteriorate even faster if we live an inactive lifestyle. We could also say we must "use it or lose it." If we do not use a muscle or exercise it over time, that muscle will dwindle and become weak. And of course, the same principle applies to our minds and is actually very similarly called cognitive atrophy.

Personally, I tend to think along the lines of critical thinking or maybe emotional stability when I think about mental strength or flexibility, but memory is a massive part of how we function and flows through all of those things. We choose what to do in the morning based on our memories of our established routines. We go to work because we remember that we have a job. And what we do in our jobs is based on skills which are memories of knowledge we have gained combined with practicing and our ability to use them, and the list, of course, can go on and on and on.

If we spend the largest portion of our day at work, then it makes sense that most of our mental strength is exercise practicing those skills necessary for our job, but just as we use up energy when we use our muscles quite a bit, we use up energy when we use our minds a lot. So it makes sense that things happening at home with our friends or even in our faith can fall to the wayside if we are letting ourselves be drained or distracted by our other daily tasks.

It is important, though, to consider that these functions are not mistakes or glitches. God designed our bodies and our minds to operate efficiently and effectively, to be able to operate in this world under the guidelines He has given us as He works to prepare us to be a part of His Family. Our perceived downside, however, is that atrophy is a lack of usage is really not the only cause of difficulty that we are faced with.

According to an article by psychologist Kendra Cherry aptly named "Reasons Why People Forget," she gives four separate primary reasons of why we struggle to maintain memories or maybe can't make them in the first place. Those four reasons are forgetting by decay, forgetting by interference, forgetting by failure to store, and motivated forgetting. And which I would like to briefly explain all those.

So the first one, *forgetting by decay*, is very similar to the way we described as cognitive atrophy, notably describing a difficulty to retrieve information. And I am sure we have all had something that is just on the tip of our tongue, but we just cannot quite find it. Quoting from the article, "One explanation for this retrieval failure is known as decay theory. This theory suggests that each time you form a new memory, a trace is created. Over time, if the

memory trace is not retrieved or practiced, it may begin to fade and disappear. However, research shows that even memories not regularly rehearsed can be stable in long-term memory."

And while God made our minds wonderfully, He did not make them to have limitless storage. And while we can stretch and flex our memories, our minds do their best to be efficient and not waste space. Thus, when we care about something, we must use it or we may lose it.

Now *forgetting caused by interference*, the second reason listed, is a result of our brains doing their best to be as efficient as possible in the actual gaining of new memories, in the sense that conflicting memories interfere with each other. She states that there are two basic types of interference: proactive interference and retroactive interference. Quoting again, "Proactive interference is an old memory that makes it harder or impossible to remember new information, and retroactive interference is new information that disrupts your ability to recall previously learned information."

An easy example of this is to think of your garage or door code. You memorize one, you decide to change it for whatever reason. In order to remember your new code, you have to kind of rehearse it in your mind, and then as you keep using it, you begin to forget or even cannot remember your old code because it is completely unnecessary to remember to do so.

Now the third, *forgetting caused by failure to store* has to do with how difficult it can be to remember every small detail of something over time. Kendra gives an example of an experiment where people were asked to choose the correct U.S. penny from a set of drawings. "Although familiar with pennies, people often miss key details. This happens because only essential details distinguishing pennies from other coins are stored in our long-term memory. Identifying a penny does not require knowing all of its features. As a result, many details are not committed to memory."

And if anything (to repeat myself again here), this is an amazing example of how efficiently our minds are designed to function. If we were constantly overloaded with the tiniest of details in every facet of our memories, we would likely struggle to function normally as it would become harder and harder to remember everything. At least everything that is necessary.

And finally, something I think a lot of us are relatively aware of is *motivated forgetting*. Of course, none of us like pain. If you do, seek help, please. But whether we intend to do it consciously or we do it unconsciously as a defense mechanism, we often work to forget memories that are a result of traumatic or at least extremely difficult situations.

Quoting one more time: "The two most basic forms of motivated forgetting are suppression, a conscious form of forgetting, and repression, an unconscious form of forgetting." Reading further down, "Forgetting painful memories and traumas may help people cope better. While these events might not entirely be forgotten, forgetting the vivid details can help blunt the difficult emotions that are attached to these memories and make them easier to live with."

There is so much that we could unpack here, but of course, while these are the main theories that she lists, there are also many influences that affect our memories and our brain functions. These range from various substances to situations, and the author lists alcohol, depression, lack of sleep, medications, stress, and age among those influences which a lot of us have experienced.

Now the reason why I spent so much time going over just the things that affect our memory is because I want to make the case that we do actually have a lot going against us when it comes to retaining all of our memories. A lot of us make jokes—myself—about being forgetful all the time. But it is a serious obstacle that we do have to put a lot of active effort into. And when it comes to our spiritual walk, one of the most dangerous things we can do is forget the presence and power of God, yet we do it all the time.

Whether it is for one of the reasons I just mentioned or something else entirely, we do not safeguard our memories and our minds as well as we should. Memory, of course, though, is not something new that people have to deal with either. It has been something that mankind has had to work with from the beginning, and as I think we all know, the Israelites have a known condition of what I will call Spiritual Alzheimer's, so much so that Moses

really had to drive the point home of remembering God and what He did for His people through the Exodus and their journey through the wilderness before they crossed the Jordan.

So if you would turn with me for our first set of scriptures to Deuteronomy chapter 8. This is where Moses is admonishing the people to remember God and what He did for them, as well as warnings if they let themselves forget, and I think this on its own punches pretty hard. We will be reading verses 11 through 19.

Deuteronomy 8:11-19 "Beware that you do not forget the Lord your God by not keeping His commandments, His judgments, and His statutes which I command you today, lest—when you have eaten and are full, and have built beautiful houses and dwell in them; and when your herds and your flocks multiply, and your silver and your gold are multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied; when your heart is lifted up and you forget the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage; who led you through that great and terrible wilderness in which were fiery serpents and scorpions and thirsty land where there was no water; who brought water for you out of the flinty rock; who fed you in the wilderness with manna, which your fathers did not know, that He might humble you and that He might test you, to do you good in the end—then you say in your heart, 'My power and the might of my hand have gained me this wealth.' And you shall remember the Lord your God, for it is He who gives you power to get wealth, that He may establish His covenant which He swore to your fathers, as it is this day. Then it shall be, if you by any means forget the Lord your God, and follow other gods, and serve them and worship them, I testify against you this day that you shall surely perish."

Now I think it is pretty easy to read this and just think, how could these idiots forget any of that? They literally were guided by a pillar of fire at night and a cloud of smoke by day and watched all of these miracles happen. But it is, of course, always easiest to have perspective on someone else's situation

than it is on our own. And of course I think we often forget that as spiritual Israel, we are also very much susceptible to that Spiritual Alzheimer's in our own walks.

But despite Israel's rebellion and lack of faith, they were still held in the hand of God, if you will. In fact, the concept of being held in the hand of God has been on my mind for quite some time and is actually what inspired the sermonette. And well, the idea came back to me to the surprise of probably no one, through a golfer. I was scrolling through Instagram reels a while back, and a video from this random church group came up and it showed Scotty Scheffler, the currently ranked number one golfer in the world, talking about his faith.

Now Scotty is extremely public about his faith and constantly talks about how he golfs to glorify God. I do not know exactly how he does that, but he says he does. Now, long story short, at the very least, I believe them to be genuine, or at least as genuine as I believe someone could be without personally knowing them. And it is hard for most, at least, not to like him as well as he consistently talks about golf not being the most important thing in his life, which if you have ever seen any athlete at the top of their game, their sport is their idol, and often nothing else matters to them.

If I remember correctly, and sorry if I have said this before, but on his way to win the 2024 Masters tournament, he said in a press conference he would leave the course and withdraw if his wife were to go into labor, even if he was in the lead. And of course, in Scotty fashion, he won the tournament, and then his wife went into labor shortly after. But the sentiment was at least interesting to hear, especially as it was before the tournament begun.

Now coming back to that reel I mentioned, Scotty mentioned that as a child, and I am paraphrasing here, that he understood his relationship with his God as needing to hold on tightly and never let go, always holding on even tighter as time went on. But as he grew up, I guess he said, he began to realize he could simply let go because God carried him in all of his weight, and he was putting too much pressure on himself.

I found this interesting because of course, on one hand, God carries us through everything. He explicitly tells us to put our worries and stresses on

Him, for our strength is not in ourselves, but in God, just as Moses reminded the Israelites. But at the same time, I have seen this film before. How many times do we hear Christians of this world say that they can do nothing in their walk? Only God can, so they just let go and let Jesus take the wheel. Do we consider how much influence this can have on us?

We heard just last week about lies and twisting of the truth from Craig [Sablich], and we are certainly not invincible to these things. We cannot earn our salvation, but clearly there is a reason God insists on our involvement in our relationship with Him. Our nature, when influenced by Satan, will find any reason to take God's mercy and generosity and twist it for our own selfish gain.

Obviously the hand of God is mighty and powerful, and nothing can overtake Him, as we are told in John chapter 10, but James 4:8 explicitly tells us, "draw near to God, and He will draw near to you." And to draw towards something, of course, is an action with *active effort*. Again, we cannot earn our salvation and no one can take us from Him. But if we were designed to need to exercise our minds and we were told to draw near to Him, to have a relationship with God, to be a friend of Christ, we cannot simply let go.

If we do, we put ourselves at risk of forgetting our true Almighty and falling short. The fun part is, the biggest way we keep ourselves from forgetting God's presence and power is extremely simple. We just remind ourselves of it while putting every effort into our relationship with Him and following His commands, but authentically and intentionally. We, of course, do not just take one lesson or experience and remember it for the rest of our lives and never have to revisit it. Otherwise, I guess, what is the point of trials?

And as we know, we are creatures of habit, and this is a habit that we must establish and reinforce. And one of those best ways to exercise those memories in this capacity is to praise God. And as we have seen with Richard [Ritenbaugh] going through the Psalms, the Psalms give us great direction and examples of doing so. So if you would, let us turn to a psalm of praise, Psalm chapter 105. (I was listening.)

Psalm 105:1-6 Give thanks to the Lord! Call upon His name; make known His deeds among the peoples! Sing to Him, sing psalms to Him; talk of all His glorious works! Glory in His holy name; let the hearts of those rejoice who seek the Lord! Seek the Lord in His strength; seek His face forevermore! Remember His marvelous works which He has done, His wonders, and the judgments of His mouth, O seed of Abraham His servant, you children of Jacob, His chosen ones!

That is us. And we do this, by the way, we just did it. When we sing our hymns here at church, it is not just a tradition, it is a command, as we read, and it is a command that largely benefits us. We already have the direction and guidance, we just have to follow it.

For if we become slack in our minds, if we let cognitive atrophy set in, we let ourselves become at risk, not just of stepping out, but *jumping out of the hand of God*. And obviously, I could sum up this whole message by saying we just need to pray and study every single day, you are good. But of course, that would not drive the point home. The more knowledge we are armed with of how we function, how we were created, the more we can be on guard to not just let ourselves slip into the pitfalls of where Satan can and wants to take advantage of us.

He cannot take us out of the hand of God, but we can drift out of it, and that is not all on Satan. That is on us.

So to close, if you would turn with me to Luke chapter 8. I just want one verse here. I want just verse 15 in the Parable of the Sower here. Luke 8:15.

Luke 8:15 "But the ones that fell on the good ground are those who, having heard the word with a noble and good heart, keep it and bear fruit with patience."

Brethren, we do not forget those we are closest to: our spouses, our families, our loved ones. We need to ask ourselves, is God always on that list? May we strive to never forget the strength and presence of our Father. May we

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forever keep His Word in truth, and may we never forget that all glory belongs to Him!