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Genesis 8:1

27th Message

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DOES GOD REMEMBER ME?

SERIES: OUR STORY OF ORIGINS

After a break of twenty weeks we return to the Flood Narrative, to the story of Noah and the Flood. We left Noah and those with him in the ark “supported on the ’whelming flood.” The waters have completely overwhelmed the earth, destroying all life that is not in the ark. But these same waters are also supporting the ark in which life is preserved. The Flood is an instrument of both destruction and preservation. These two are set side-by-side in Genesis 7. But twice as much space is devoted to the entrance into the ark (7:1-16) as to the prevailing flood waters (7:17-24). It was only after everything that was entering the ark, both humans and animals, had entered that the Lord shut the door and the Flood broke upon the earth. Chapter 7 ends by noting that the waters prevailed upon the earth for 150 days, for five months.

You may have forgotten that we’ve left Noah and those with him in the ark floating on these prevailing waters for the past 140 days. Much has happened in your lives since August 22. You’ve had many other things to think about, so you could be excused for forgetting about Noah. But the big question is, Has God forgotten about Noah? Or does he still think on him and remember him?

We have all felt the anguish of wondering whether someone has forgotten about us. People feel this when they’re falling in love. Does she remember me? Does he even know my name? Is she thinking of me? Mothers feel this way when a son goes off to college. They generally don’t have to remind the daughters to call home, but sons are another matter, unless they need money or their laundry done.

The first song in *The Phantom of the Opera* is “Think of Me,” sung first by Carlotta and then by Christine:

Think of me, think of me fondly, when we’ve said goodbye.
Remember me once in a while, please promise me you’ll try.

Who has not felt that same way? We feel this way towards other people. But we also feel this way towards God. Does he remember me? Or has he forgotten? Does he even see me? We know that we’re supposed to have faith that he sees us, but sometimes it can be hard to get our heart to feel and our mind to think that.

Our service today is shaped around this idea of remembering and forgetting. Often worship does not allow such expressions. But wondering whether God sees us is an undeniable part of the Christian life, and in the past God’s people *have* given expression to such feelings.

Our prelude was a song called *Remember Me*. Although the arrangement was new, the song itself dates from 1791. It’s a hymn in seven stanzas by Thomas Haweis. The first stanza runs,

O Thou, from whom all goodness flows
I lift my heart to Thee;
In all my sorrows, conflicts, woes,
Dear Lord, remember me.

Haweis felt the tension between what he knew about God and what he felt in his heart. He knew that God is the source of all goodness, but in his heart he felt sorrows, conflicts and woes. Out of that anguish he cried, “Dear Lord, remember me.” Each of the seven stanzas ends on that cry, “Remember me!” Who has not felt the same way?

We sang *Lord Jesus, think on me*. This is a nineteenth century translation of a fourth-century Greek poem. The original begins, “Remember, O Christ.” In his rather free translation of what is a very terse poem, Allen Chatfield turned that cry into the opening line of each of nine stanzas, “Lord Jesus, think on me.” Does Jesus think on me? Is God mindful of me?

This question goes further back still, back to the Bible itself. The oldest song in our service today is from 3000 years ago, a psalm of David. Our Scripture reading was Psalm 13, in which David cries out,

How long, LORD? Will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

How long must I wrestle with my thoughts

and day after day have sorrow in my heart?...

Look on me and answer, LORD my God. (Ps 13:1-3 TNIV)

An adaptation of this psalm was then sung as our offertory:

How long O Lord, will you forget

An answer to my prayer?

No tokens of your love I see

Your face is turned away from me,

I wrestle with despair.

We have the psalmist’s permission to ask that question: How long, O Lord, will you forget me? The counterpart is to call on God to remember. I count 28 times in the Old Testament that people call on God, “Remember.” They call on him to remember various things, but often it’s simply, “Remember me!” The very first word of Psalm 132 is the cry “Remember”:

Remember, O LORD, in David’s favor,

all the hardships he endured. (Ps 132:1 ESV)

In the Latin of the Vulgate this begins with the vivid phrase *Memento Domine*, which has become the title of the psalm. *Memento Domine*: Remember, O Lord. We think of a memento as a small souvenir, a little trinket, but originally it was an appeal, “Remember.” In the Bible and in Christian poetry and hymnody that appeal is usually to God: Remember me, O Lord. *Memento!*

Let’s go back and give some thought to Noah’s situation. For 150 days he has been in the ark. The ark has no sail, no oar, no rudder. It has neither locomotion nor steering. It’s simply a very large box. Noah has no control over the ark. He can’t do anything to propel it; he can’t do anything to steer it. He is simply a passenger along with his seven family members and a lot of animals. For forty days it had

rained day and night, but the waters had continued to prevail for a total of 150 days. If Noah had looked out of the window he wouldn't have seen anything other than water, because the waters covered the mountains to a depth of fifteen cubits. There were no distinguishing features. There was nothing to tell him if the water was increasing or decreasing. Everything was blank.

What was going through Noah's mind? We can imagine various scenarios, placing ourselves in Noah's situation. Novelists and artists have done the same. Did Noah think that he was forgotten? Did he doubt God? The Lord had told him there would be rain for forty days and forty nights, but still the waters prevailed. For another forty days, and another, and nearly another! He had no road map for this. The Lord had not told him how long the Flood would last. As the forty days passed into another and another, did he cry out, "Remember me!?" The Bible doesn't tell us. One of the striking things about the Flood Narrative is that Noah never speaks. He simply does, he acts.

More importantly the Bible tells us what God did:

But God remembered Noah and all the wild animals and the livestock that were with him in the ark, and he sent a wind over the earth, and the waters receded. (Gen 8:1 TNIV)

God did two things: he remembered and he sent his Spirit-wind over the earth.

God remembered

The Flood Narrative is a very carefully constructed account. It is an elaborate chiasm reaching 16 levels of indentation. At the "X," the turning point, lies this statement that God remembered Noah and sent his Spirit-wind upon the earth. The rising and falling waters of a flood have an inherent chiastic structure. But at the center of this account lies not nature nor the passage of time, but God himself. The flood doesn't recede because nature takes its course. It doesn't recede because enough time has passed. The waters recede because God remembered.

Usually we remember something that we had formerly forgotten. We search the crevices of our mind to recall something that we know is in there somewhere. Often the lost piece of information pops back into our mind when we are no longer actively looking for it. Not so with God. He doesn't rack his brain trying to remember our name or our situation. When he remembers it means that he is about to focus his action on the object of his remembrance. Noah's name doesn't suddenly come floating back into God's mind, bidden or unbidden. Noah has been in God's thoughts all along. But when God remembers Noah it means that he now engages in action specifically directed at Noah.

What did Noah have to do to get God to pay attention to him, to act on his behalf? Nothing! There was nothing that Noah could do. Here we have a major difference from the religion of the surrounding peoples, from their conception of how gods remember. For them, their gods really did forget and they had competing interests. It was up to humans to try to get the gods to pay attention to them. They could do this by offering the right sacrifices, even to the extent of offering their first-born sons. Or they could search for just the right formula in prayer or incantation. Whether by sacrifice or by word they were seeking to manipulate the gods to pay attention to them and act for their benefit.

Sadly, many Christians approach the matter the same way. How can I get God to pay attention to me? Perhaps if I make a big enough sacrifice. Perhaps if I keep all the rules. Perhaps if I pray the right prayer. But this also is manipulation, seeking to put God in your debt. But God is no man's debtor. Are you trying to find the right formula to get God to pay attention to you?

God's memory does not work in response to our attempts to prod it. It works in accordance with his own character and purposes. God remembers because he is faithful to his purposes. He remembered Noah because of his purposes for Noah, purposes which he had expressed to him. God had told Noah that he would bring the Flood to destroy all life, but also commanded him to build an ark for the preservation of life. God told Noah that he would make a covenant with him, and that his part in the covenant was simply to enter into the ark with his family and to bring in with him representatives of all the animals. God's remembering of Noah was therefore an expression of his faithfulness to this covenant promise to Noah. God wanted Noah to live. He didn't have to be coerced into keeping him alive.

What did Noah have to do? He simply had to be faithful. Firstly, he had to be obedient. And so he built the ark and entered into it with his family and the animals. We never hear Noah speak. But we do see him act, and each time he acts he does so according to the word of the Lord. The undoubtedly long process of building the ark is covered with the statement, "Then Noah did; according to all which God commanded him, so Noah did" (6:22). His response to the Lord's command to enter the ark is summarized in a similar way: "Then Noah did according to all which the LORD commanded him" (7:5). This is elaborated with a lengthy description of the entrance into the ark in which we're told twice that Noah acted "as God had commanded him" (7:9, 16). That's the first step: Noah was obedient, doing exactly what God told him to do.

Secondly, Noah had to be patient. God had told him that the rain would last for forty days and forty nights, but he hadn't told him how long the Flood would last. Now, though the rains have stopped, the waters have continued to prevail. Noah couldn't do anything useful. He couldn't propel the ark, nor could he steer it. He couldn't do anything to extricate himself. He simply had to be patient and wait. The only thing he had to rely on was God's promise. He couldn't manipulate God in any way. He simply had to rest upon God's word and rely upon God's character: that he would be faithful to his promise.

This is not an easy thing to do. Such waiting might seem a recipe for passivity, but coming to a place of patient rest requires a lot of inner action, wrestling with our hearts which are often in a state of agitated tumult. It is easier to do something, to engage in external action. Then we feel that we have some control over the situation, that we are contributing something, that we're getting somewhere. But God calls us to trust in him, in his character, in his faithfulness to his promises and purposes.

We see this in the psalms. For example, in Psalm 13 David, who had lamented the Lord's apparent forgetfulness, brings his heart to a state of confidence in God, ending his psalm on a positive note:

**But I trust in your unfailing love;
my heart rejoices in your salvation.
I will sing the LORD's praise,
for he has been good to me. (Ps 13:5-6)**

This required a deliberate choice to allow his heart and mind to be governed by what he knew of God's purposes rather than by ap-

parent circumstances. Why could David be so sure? The Lord had chosen him as king and Samuel had anointed him as such. Therefore whenever he was chased around by Saul he had the memory of that declaration by God to fall back on. Later, when he became king, God entered into covenant with him. Therefore when he was chased out of Jerusalem by his son Absalom and again lived the life of a fugitive, he had that covenant to fall back on. Wrestling to a place of patient trust in the Lord was predicated upon his remembering God's promises and purposes. The psalter contains about fifty lament psalms. All but one of them end this way, with an expression of trust in God's purposes.

God's greatest act of remembering concerned his Son. The Father did not intervene to prevent the Son's death. Did the death of Jesus imply that God had forgotten, that he had failed to remember him? No. Jesus knew that his death was taking place under the watchful gaze of his Father. He knew that his Father saw and knew. Therefore from the cross he could address his Father, "Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). Even though he cried, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34), his final cry was "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (Luke 23:46).

What would the Father do? Jesus had been faithfully obedient to his Father in his life and ministry on earth. He had faithfully committed himself into his Father's hands in his death. Would God remember? Through the closing hours of Friday the heavens waited. Throughout Saturday, the seventh day and hence a day of rest, the earth was still. Then on the Sunday morning, at the birth of a new week, God gave his answer. He had remembered! The resurrection is the greatest of all God's acts of remembrance. How could he forget his Son?

And now this Son is at the Father's side, remembering us to him. He does think on us. He knows our name, as we sang, "My name is graven on his hands, My name is written on his heart."¹ So now when we sing, "Lord Jesus, think on me," we know that he does think on us and remembers us to his Father.

God remembered Noah and all the animals that were with him in the ark. It was his purpose that they be in the ark. He had commanded Noah that he build the ark so they be kept alive. Noah had been faithful to God and God had been faithful to his promises. What did God do when he remembered Noah?

God Sent His Spirit

God caused his *ruah* to pass over the earth. All English versions translate this as "wind," though HCSB alone offers "spirit" as a marginal alternative. But this is the same *ruah* that was hovering over the waters at the beginning prior to the first creation (1:2). In that case all English versions render the word as "Spirit" because it's the *ruah-eloahim*, the Spirit of God. With the Flood God has undone creation, restoring the earth to a blank state covered by water. The only difference is that now there is a box filled with life floating on the waters, supported by the 'whelming flood. Just as God sent his *ruah* Spirit-wind to accomplish the first creation, so now he sends his *ruah* Spirit-wind to accomplish a new creation. The result is that the waters recede. They recede not because nature is running its course, nor because enough time has passed. They recede specifically because God causes his Spirit-wind to pass over the waters. And that happens because God remembers, because he is faithful to his covenant promises to Noah.

Centuries later the people of Israel found themselves in harsh servitude in Egypt.

The Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out, and their cry for help because of their slavery went up to God. God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob. So God looked on the Israelites and was concerned about them. (Exod 2:23-25)

God remembered, and what he remembered was his covenant with Abraham. He had purposes for Abraham's descendants. So when he remembered his covenant, he acted to further those purposes: that they be his people, that he be their God, and that he dwell with them. The final verse can be translated "God saw...and God knew" (ESV). God sees and God knows. What comfort we should find in those words. But Israel did not find comfort. In the short run their situation got worse, and so they grumbled. Even after Pharaoh finally let the people go their situation got worse: they were backed up against the sea with Pharaoh and his armies pressing down on them. And so they grumbled again. There was nothing they could do to help their situation. Moses called them to simply watch and wait to see what God would do:

"Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the LORD will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. The LORD will fight for you; you need only to be still." (Exod 14:13-14)

Easier said than done! With Pharaoh and his armies closing in, how easy to think that God has forgotten. How difficult to be still and watch. But having remembered his covenant, God wasn't going to forget his people. He again sent his spirit-wind. Acting in obedience to God's command,

Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and all that night the LORD drove the sea back with a strong east wind and turned it into dry land. (Exod 14:21)

Now for the third time God's spirit-wind blew across the waters to drive back the watery chaos.

God called Israel to a life of faith. A life of faithful obedience to his word. And a life of faithful patient reliance on his promises, trusting that he would remember. He gave them memorials to assist their memory: Passover to remember the exodus from Egypt, memorial stones from the Jordan to remember the entrance into the land. But Israel kept forgetting who the Lord was and what he had done. Israel had no memory of God's memory!

We, too, are called to a life of faith. This calls for faithful obedience to the Lord. And it calls for patient watching when we don't understand what is going on. In those time we still our hearts by remembering who God is, what he has done, and what he is up to. We rely not on the strength of our faith, but on the faithfulness of God.

Just as God saw the Israelites and knew, so he sees us and knows. We are to take comfort in that fact. Twenty years ago I was greatly encouraged by this passage, written by Philip Doddridge in his book, *The Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul* (1745):

Can you, even when your natural spirits are weak and low, and you are not in any frame of mind for the ardors and ecstasies of devotion, nevertheless find a pleasing rest, a calm repose of heart, in the thought that God is near you? That He sees the secret feelings of your soul while you are, as it were, laboring up the hill,

and casting a longing eye toward Him, though you cannot say you enjoy any tangible communications from Him?²

It struck me so much at the time because I knew what it was like to labor up the hill, wondering whether God was remembering me. That turned out to be a formative time in my life, wrestling with my heart, and coming to a greater understanding of what God is really trying to do in the lives of his people.

God does remember us because he remembers his covenant purposes. So that begs the question of what those purposes are. What is God really up to? What has he promised to do? He has not promised to give us an easy life, to give us health, wealth and prosperity. He has not promised to give us a life free from pain and suffering. So if you're looking for those things as evidence that God remembers you, you're looking for the wrong things. What are God's purposes to which he will be faithful? His purposes remain the same as they were for Israel: to take us as his people, to be our God, and to dwell with us. His purposes are to remake us as human beings, fit for his eternal presence, bathed in his glory. His purposes are to remake us into his image in Christ Jesus. He has promised to be with us, whether we are sensible of that presence or not.

Does God remember me? Yes, he does. But do I remember that God remembers me? That's another matter. We waver in our unbelief, driven too often by our senses, by our felt experiences of the presence or absence of God, looking for evidences which God has never promised.

The words "But God remembered" are among the most important words in the Bible. He remembered as Noah floated atop the waters of the Flood, sending his spirit-wind to work a new creation. He remembered as Israel languished in slavery, sending his spirit-wind to bring them through the waters into freedom. He remembered David as he wrestled his heart to a state of quiet confidence in God's covenant purposes. He remembered Jesus as he lay in the grave, bringing him through death into new life. And he remembers us. Baptism represents this: he remembered us as we passed through the waters of death into new life, enlivened by his Spirit. Communion is a memorial, wherein we remember that God remembered. And at the end of our lives as we face physical death God will again remember, bringing us through death into new life, because that's his purpose for us.

There is nothing that we can do to get God to pay more attention to us. He remembers us not because we make the right sacrifices or offer the right prayers. He remembers us because he remembers his purposes. He has placed us into Christ. He has caused his Spirit to pass over us, giving us life. He has made us his children. How can a father forget his children? God remembers us. Let us remember that God remembers.

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, who remembers our name before his Father; the love of God, who remembers his covenant; and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, whom God has sent into us to accomplish his purposes, be with us now and forevermore. Amen.

1. Charitie Bancroft, *Before the Throne of God Above* (1863).

2. Philip Doddridge, *The Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul* (1745), quoted in David Lyle Jeffrey, *A Burning and a Shining Light: English Spirituality in the Age of Wesley* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 183.