Do You Remember?

The Spiritual Practice Of Remembering God's Faithfulness



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The other day a vivid memory caught me by surprise. While in the middle of a challenging situation, a seemingly disconnected moment from my past – standing on a street corner on a clear evening years before – flashed through my mind. It was a moment in which I learned I could trust God in the face of fear. Here is the story of that powerful memory, and how it impacted my outlook for the entire week.

The Gift Of Recollection

"O LORD, I remember Your name in the night…."
Psalm 119:55

Over the past few weeks my wife has begun to show symptoms of some neurological problem affecting her ability to do basic tasks. Though we usually approach our challenges with faith in the lead, health scares can unsettle us, disorient us, and stir up apprehensions we thought we had left far behind.

While we were in the middle of talking about our next steps, a memory – seemingly random and disconnected from our conversation – flashed through my mind. I put it aside, resolving that I would come back to it for reflection later that night.
I'll recount that memory below, but first let's take a moment to consider the *spirituality* of memory, and why practicing remembering stories of God's faithfulness can strengthen us day in and day out.
According to the Scriptures, God is a remembering God and we are to be remembering people. God remembers His covenant and His love for us (ex. Psalm 105:42; Isaiah 49:15-16), and we are to recollect God's faithfulness, stories of God's trustworthiness, and the needs of those who are destitute (ex. 1 Chronicles 16:12; Matthew 16:9-10; Galatians 2:10).

While these are just a few examples of the importance of memory for the Christian, it is clear that remembering matters to God – and is a gift to us if we'll take the time to *practice it*.

The Science Of Remembering

According to Psychology Today, *"Memory makes us. If we couldn't recall the who, what, where, and when of our everyday lives, we wouldn't be able to function. We mull over ideas in the present with our short-term (or working) memory, while we store past events and learned meanings in our long-term (episodic or semantic) memory. What's more, memory is malleable – and it tends to decay with age…."*
In other words, memory is a normal part of everyday life, and is a vital tool for processing experiences, growing emotionally, and recalibrating when results are not what we hoped. (This helps us understand why diseases like Alzheimer's, dementia, and amnesia are so devastating to one's quality of life.)

What I experienced in the moment below was what memory science calls a flashbulb memory. Flashbulb memory is named as it is because these types of memory are "vivid snapshots" of moments that "…rely on elements of personal importance, consequentiality, emotion, and surprise."
Hearing good or bad news is often associated with these types of memory. For me, the memory represented a surprising lesson I learned from God that is unshakeable from my mind. It is, thankfully and joyfully, *stuck* in my mind.

The Spiritual Practice Of Remembering

Spiritual practices that rely on remembering the faithfulness of God, like the Daily Examen, can help us tie each day's events to gratefulness – solidifying their place in our memories for the long term. By lingering in recollection of the smallest events of our day, even doing that practice multiple times a day (as I do with the examen), we are *framing our memories in the context of thankfulness* rather than letting them pass into our mental archives associated with other feelings such as anger or anxiety.
When I worship, or lead worship, I often find memories flooding my mind. A worship environment that creates space through instrumental or sacramental moments can give us time to linger on what God has done in the context of worship and communal gratefulness.

When we rehearse the memories we have of God helping us, leading us, or gifting us with a miracle, the passage in Lamentations 3:21-24 springs to life:

"This I recall to my mind, Therefore I have hope."

Memory: A Street Corner Rap Jam

Here is the memory that helped me this week, excepted from a Facebook post:

"Right after university I worked with juvenile offenders in Harrisburg, PA, to keep them out of the industrial incarceration system.
Each name is coming to mind tonight, after so many years. So many carried so much pain at so young an age.
My kids (16-18 year-olds) were black, Hispanic, and white, and all lived under one roof in this privately run, state-funded rehabilitation home in which I was one of the counselors.
One night I and a fellow staffer had a van full of 10-12 students driving through the middle of the city.

By students, I mean young men for whom our residential rehab program (a last stop shop, I called it) was their last chance to stay out of jail.
None were there by choice, most were violent offenders, most came to us with heavy addictions, most had only been with us a few months, and all were restless to get out of our program and get back to freedom.
Two of them saw a group of their friends in the street, and asked if we could stop to say hey.
I remember that moment so vividly, feeling as though my life could end that night if I stopped.
(While most days at the home were without major physical incidents, there were some nights all hell had broken loose and I found myself doing passive restraint on one of my students while he bit into my chest through three layers of shirts. In other words, it was a pretty unpredictable environment.)
I had a young wife at home, in our first year of marriage, and all my faculties told me to just keep driving.
But an overwhelming peace came over me.
I just knew it was the right thing to do.
I pulled over, and my dozen or so charges scrambled out of the van, to join these 8-10 others in the middle of the street, with me standing there. (I should note that my fellow staff member was just off the streets a few years himself, and was not a reliable support in virtually any situation.)
Anything could've happened that night.
But here's what actually did.
The group almost instinctively formed a two-layered circle. My one student who had asked us to stop was a solid rapper.
He began to throw down a beat, and his buddy joined in. Soon, all of us were caught up in a spontaneous rap jam on a dark street that lasted for at least 30 minutes.
They even made me take a turn, and I think we were all surprised that I busted a rhyme that was 80% reasonable. "You got skills, Dan Wilt," said my rapping mentor. He was being nice.
We laughed till we cried, everyone met everyone else, and my dozen students climbed back into the van.
I gripped the steering wheel more lightly than I had before.
Sure, anything could've happened that night.
Drugs could've been exchanged, some of my students could have bolted, or I could have been a cautionary tale for those working with this volatile demographic.
But in the end, none of the worst happened.
It was a night I'll never forget…."

Rehearse The Faithfulness Of God

While that memory was not directly connected to my current circumstance, I felt a sweet warmth as I recalled it. That sense of warmth was an emotional response to feeling *protected in an insecure moment*, and feeling as though I could *trust my instincts* in this new situation as I did then.
Upon reflection, I could see that it was the exact memory of God's faithfulness that I needed. Hope and trust were both refreshed in my heart.

When God gives you the gift of a memory, sit with it. Take some time to tease out the details of it as best as you can, and ask the Lord, "What do you want to teach me through this memory? Why did you bring this to mind?"

In these moments God will show you ways He was faithful to you, and was there for you, at important times in your life.

Take the time to express gratefulness for that memory, and to remind yourself and God just how ready you are to trust Him again in this new circumstance.

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Question: Did you have any memories this week that caught you off guard? What did you learn from them?
Resource: *A Well-Worn Path: 31 Reflections For The Worshipping Heart* (David C. Cook). I wrote this Kindle devotional years ago, focused on remembering the "well-worn path" God has made with us over the years.

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