

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #71: THE GOOD(?) OLD DAYS

By John Temples

I want to talk to you about something every one of us possesses: a past. Your past is time gone by, the old days, the sum total of your life history and experiences up to this moment. For some of us, the past is brief (children); for others, it covers a lot of ground.

The Bible records a scenario many of us can identify with: When Joseph brought his family down to Egypt, he introduced his father Jacob to Pharaoh. Genesis 47:8 says, “Pharaoh said to Jacob, ‘How old are you?’ And Jacob said to Pharaoh, ‘The days of the years of my pilgrimage are one hundred and thirty years; few and evil have been the days of the years of my life, and they have not attained to the days of the years of the life of my fathers in the days of their pilgrimage.’” Here is John Temples’ paraphrase: “I’m as old as dirt, but I’m not as old as my ancestors--they were older than dirt!”

GOD WANTS US TO PONDER OUR PAST

We know He does, because He gave us memory--the fantastic ability to recall and contemplate the past. God wanted the Jews to remember their past. The word “remember” occurs 135 times in the Old Testament, 14 time in Deuteronomy alone. Some references:

- “And remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and that the Lord your God brought you out from there by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm” (Deuteronomy 5:15).
- “Remember and do not forget how you provoked the Lord your God to wrath in the wilderness. From the day that you departed from the land of Egypt until you came to this place, you have been rebellious against the Lord” (Deuteronomy 9:7).

- “Remember the days of old, consider the years of many generations. Ask your father, and he will show you; your elders, and they will tell you” (Deuteronomy 32:7).

For us who live under the New Testament, there is great value and significance in remembering our spiritual condition before we were Christians saved by the blood of Christ:

- “But God be thanked that though you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered. And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness” (Romans 6:17).
- “Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God” (1 Corinthians 6:9-11).
- “For we have spent enough of our past lifetime in doing the will of the Gentiles –when we walked in licentiousness, lusts, drunkenness, revelries, drinking parties, and abominable idolatries” (1 Peter 4:3).

Our past is so significant that God will enable us to remember it even after death. When the rich man pleaded to Abraham from Hades for relief, Abraham told him, “Son remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things. But now he is comforted and you are tormented” (Luke 16:25). After their deaths, the early martyrs remembered the circumstances of their demise: “When He opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the testimony which they held. And they cried with a loud voice, saying, ‘How long, O Lord, holy and true, until You judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?’ Then a white robe was given to each of them; and it was said to them that they should rest a little while longer, until both the number of their fellow servants and their brethren, who would be killed as they were, was completed” (Revelation 6:9-11).

So...we have this great, God-given ability to contemplate our past. But unfortunately, many of us misuse this gift. How? Here are some ways:

Some of us deny the past. We are ashamed of it; we block it out; we refuse to acknowledge that we were even there. Some people even reconstruct their past--they lie on job resumes, misrepresent their ethnic background, or print phony diplomas. There's a big issue in our country right now with people "rewriting" history.

Still others ignore the past. The past can teach us much. We could avoid a lot of mistakes if we would learn from the past; yet many refuse to do so. In a 1948 speech in the House of Commons, Winston Churchill said, "Those who fail to learn from the past are doomed to repeat it."

And some people idolize or sanitize the past--they have selective memory. A sure sign of this is constantly referring to "the good old days." The Israelites did this in the wilderness: "So the children of Israel also wept again and said: 'Who will give us meat to eat? We remember the fish which we ate freely in Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; but now our whole being is dried up; there is nothing at all except this manna before our eyes'" (Numbers 11:4-5). No wonder God had to command them to remember their slavery, and even give them festivals and feasts to commemorate their deliverance from Egypt. Here in south Florida, I have seen signs in stores and barber shops, saying "There will be an extra charge for putting up with you telling me how much cheaper and better things were up north." The "good old days" might have been good in some ways, but we make a big mistake when we sanitize them and remember only the things we liked in the past. You know, when it comes down to it, in "the good old days" we were lost sinners!

Some of us are paralyzed by the past. We let memories of our past failures hold us back. This is particularly true if we had a wicked or sordid past; we can't forgive ourselves, even if God has. Have you ever heard these? "Son, we've always lived here, and you should, too." "Our family has always been poor, there's no way we'll ever be better off," etc., etc.

Perhaps worst of all, some people try to live in the past. I enjoy nostalgia just as much as anyone. I would rather listen to oldies than modern music. But it's one thing to enjoy memories of the past, and another thing actually trying to live in it. I'm talking about 60-year-old men trying to look like 20-year-olds, and 80ish men with ponytails.

THE APOSTLE PAUL'S PAST

We know more about Paul's past than any of the other apostles. He grew up as a Jew, a strict Pharisee, an educated man, zealous for the law of Moses, a persecutor of the church. One day, Christ appeared to him to convince him of His divine reality, and Paul's life was forever changed. He obeyed the gospel and went on to become the greatest apostle. But he never forgot where he came from. How did Paul deal with his past?

He didn't deny it; in fact, he often acknowledged it. In Galatians 1:13, he admitted, "I persecuted the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it." He also said, "Indeed, I myself thought I must do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. This I also did in Jerusalem, and many of the saints I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. And I punished them often in every synagogue and compelled them to blaspheme; and being exceedingly enraged against them, I persecuted them even to foreign cities" (Acts 26:9-11).

Paul was not proud of his past, but he never tried to deny it, repudiate it, or rewrite it. He said he was chief of sinners (1 Timothy 1:15). He told the Philippians, "If anyone thinks he may have confidence in the flesh, I more so. Circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless. But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. But indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ" (Phil. 3:4-8).

While acknowledging his past, Paul did not let it keep him from doing right and moving on. In Philippians 3:13-14, he said, “Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”

Paul looked for and saw the hand of God in his past. “And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has enabled me, because he counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry” (1 Timothy 1:12). (The Lord saw something in me worth saving.) The next verse says, “I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man; but I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief.”

Paul shows us that there is a right and a wrong use of the past. If we deny our past, or ignore it, or sanitize it, or let it hold us back, that is a wrong use of the past. If we let the past teach us--if we learn from our mistakes--that is a right use of the past. If we ponder the past to discover God at work in our lives, that is a right use of the past. If we let the past remind us of the difference between our enslavement in sin and our freedom in Christ, that is a good use of the past.

Paul learned from the past, but he lived joyfully in the present looking to the future. Someone has wisely observed, “You cannot change the past; you can only change your view of the past.” May we learn from this. May we be like the Psalmist, who prayed in Psalms 90:12, “So teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.” --John Temples