

“HISTORY LESSON” (Part 1)
Psalm 57, I Peter 1:13-21, Acts 7:1-16
July 20 & 21, 2024

“Haddon Robinson observed that the Old and New Testaments were full of history and peppered with the word ‘remember.’ He wrote: ‘Unfortunately, many of us ignore history. We have not read the minutes of the previous meetings. Graham Wallas, in [the magazine,] *Our Social Heritage*, imagines what would happen if every human being instantly lost all knowledge and all habits acquired from previous generations and, at the same time, retained every power of the mind except memory. The result would wipe out civilization and culture and threaten the annihilation of the human race.’

“Robinson goes on to quote Hendrik Rookmaaker, the Christian art critic, who warned his students: ‘You cannot begin as though there was nothing before you. There have been many who have struggled before you. Learn from them; be humble. You stand on the shoulders of those others, and you can maybe take their ideas a little further; that is all. Then one day, someone will go beyond you; only be sure that you take your ideas and your work deeper into the Christian way of seeing reality.’”¹

If we were to think about what we would lose if we were to let history go unremembered, it would be astounding. There would be no more national celebrations or holidays, for the past events would no longer have significance. We’d not need to have law enforcement officers, because no one would remember the laws that were passed; everyone would do what was right in their own eyes. We would not need people to govern over us, for each day would bring a new “adventure” and no one would need to account for anything that happened yesterday. We would hardly have any religions, since all of them are based upon the previous writings of a person long ago. The only religion would be the worship of the self, each day glorifying and lifting up our own lives and living for the moment since nothing in the past would matter. We would have no need for any rules guiding our lives, since all of them have been handed down to us from the past. We would be responding each day to the things going on as if it was the first time it occurred. It would indeed lead to the end of our nation, if not the end of the world.

¹ (Robert J. Morgan, *Stories, Illustrations & Quotes*, [Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2000] pg. 436-437)

In his book, *The Life of Reason*, written in 1905, philosopher George Santayana made a comment that has stuck with us over time. The statement has been repeated in a variety of ways since then, but it says, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” When we cannot remember the past, we go on to make the same mistakes and have the same failures over and over because we never learn from the past errors and mistakes of those who lived before us. We would be about reinventing the wheel, and all other technology, but there would never be the “old ways” to reflect upon and rely upon to help us cope with and guide us through problems or difficult situations. We learn from our mistakes of the past, and if we don’t remember the past, we are destined to make the same mistakes over and over again, suffering the same consequences over and over again.

If we fail to remember the past, we miss out on so much that has already happened. We miss out on the hope another person received when they went through the hardships that took them to their knees. Listening to them share their past experiences helps us endure our own struggles and trials. And we miss out on the great victories that have occurred as people stood strong in the face of evil to overcome the wicked and bring out the righteous. We also miss out on the wisdom we acquire as we live our lives together. Without remembering our past, we are left only to our “right now,” with all the unreliable and tenuous emotions and passions and feelings guiding our actions. Without remembering our past, we sacrifice all of the knowledge gained from other generations, and we are left with no way to have hope in anything beyond our own strength and our own wisdom.

Today we see that King David relied upon the past to guide his future. When the struggles and pressures of life confronted him, he turned to the lessons he learned in his life, as well as of those who had lived before him. David knew what God had done to guide the nation of Israel over the millennia before him. He had heard the accounts of how God had not only guided the people of Israel, but blessed them and multiplied them, even when they were enslaved in captivity. David had learned how God could be trusted to rescue those who put their faith in Him. God loved His people, and when the enemy advanced upon Israel, God was able to rescue them from destruction. David had also learned to remain

faithful to the Lord God, because God never left or abandoned His people when they diligently sought after Him. David knew that his life depended upon faith in God. So as he remembered the past, he was encouraged and strengthened to continue to live in a way that pleased God.

Psalm 57 is a marvelous opportunity to remember the faithfulness of the Lord our God, so that as we face our own enemies, those who would strive to capture us, or even annihilate us, we can stand strong, knowing that God will protect us and use us in a mighty way to tell others about the work of the Lord through Jesus Christ as we put our hope and trust in Him. And like David, we, too, can praise God for His great love for us, His protection for us, and His blessings given to us.

With David, we can call out to God, *“Have mercy on me, my God, have mercy on me, for **in You** I take refuge. I will take refuge in the shadow of Your wings until the disaster has passed”* (Ps. 57:1). Had David not remembered all of God’s guidance and protection for those who earnestly sought after God, he would have not had had anything to lean upon during his seasons of anguish and turmoil. Yet, David remembered the past and grew strong in his resolve to follow the Lord God Almighty, and he was able to live in a way that brought honor and glory to God. Even though he faltered from time to time, David was a man after God’s own heart, and God blessed him abundantly.

Remembering the past gives us the insight we need to be confident that God is for us, and *“when God is for us, who can be against us?”* (Romans 8:31). Remembering the past gives us courage to stand strong in our own faith, knowing that when we are with God, He will always provide a way for us - be it in the desert, or in the middle of the sea, or standing all alone before a crowd of angry people who want to put you to death. Remembering the past gives us examples of other faithful people who lived for the Lord God, even if they faced hungry lions, or fiery furnaces, or huge armies, or angry governmental officials. *“Whether we live or die, we will belong to the Lord,”* Paul tells us in Romans 14:8, and God will care for us, both in this life, and in the life to come. God loves us and cares about us and delights when we trust in Him to use us as His servants.

In our Epistle Lesson today we hear the Apostle **Peter** gives us the encouragement to keep living

for the Lord as we remember all that God has done for us. Because God has been so good to us, we are to love Him and serve Him and be obedient to Him so that we can live holy lives by following His commands. Remembering all that God has called us to be and do, we can become the living examples of faithful servants of the Lord as we live out all of God's ways.

Peter calls us to live here in this world as foreigners, knowing that this is not our forever home; He reminds us that we belong to God, so our forever home is with Him in heaven. And since this is not our home, we must realize that we are only visiting here in order to persuade others to also claim their eternal home through Jesus Christ.

Peter calls us to remember that *“it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake. Through Him you believe in God, who raised Him from the dead and glorified Him, and so your faith and hope are in God”* (I Pet. 1:18-21).

As we remember what God has done for us in the past, we are able to claim Jesus as our Savior and live our lives in honor and praise to Him for all He has done to bring Salvation to us. As we remember the past goodness and mercy of God, we can find our sins forgiven and our lives redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ as we submit our lives to Him, our Savior. Then, as we remember the faithfulness of those who lived before us, we can be encouraged to live like them, in order to be faithful servants of the Lord Jesus in our own day.

That is exactly what we have in our lesson from Acts 7 today. Listen to the account of Stephen's faith shared with the Sanhedrin. Stephen begins to account for his faith by giving a history lesson to the Jewish leaders. Listen to these words of Acts 7:1-16. (READ Acts 7:1-16)

Please remember that there were those who argued with Stephen, but they were unable to *“stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke”* (Acts 6:10). They had somehow become offended by the great wonders and signs that Stephen had done through the power of the Holy Spirit

among the people (Acts 6:8). And when they were unable to prove themselves better than him, they convinced others to spread lies among the people about Stephen. They said that he was doing so much to destroy the Jewish traditions and that he was trying to change the customs that Moses had handed down to them as Jews. These false witnesses and co-conspirators riled up the people against Stephen because they did not approve of him speaking of Jesus being the promised Messiah. Their envy and jealousy drove them to take Stephen out.

But as we heard last week, when Stephen stood before them, “*his face was like the face of an angel*” (Acts 6:15), radiating the glory of heaven. He was a living witness in the likeness of Moses after he had seen the glory of God on Mount Sinai and each time he went into the Tent of Meeting at the Tabernacle (Exodus 34:29-35). The radiance of heaven shown out from his face, and everyone notices it. Stephen’s face was shining just like Moses’ face had shone, for the Holy Spirit was in Him.

So as he stands before the Sanhedrin, Stephen begins to present his defense against the charges of blasphemy and heresy. He takes them back to the Scriptural accounts of Abraham and reminds them of his obedience to God’s call in his life. Abraham heard God instruct him to leave his homeland, and to go to a place where God would direct him to settle down and create a nation for God through his descendants.

Now this was important, because to that point Abraham did not have any children through which to leave a lasting legacy. God called him to go to the land of Canaan, and said He would make Abraham’s descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as populous as the grains of sand on the seashore (Genesis 22:17). Though Abraham did not know how God would accomplish this, he trusted that God would be faithful to fulfilling His word.

So Abraham took his wife and all that he had to Canaan, and it was there that God gave him his son Isaac through Sarah. Abraham followed God’s command and had Isaac circumcised on the eighth day after he was born. The act of circumcision would be a distinguishing character for all Jewish men. Abraham was faithful to God and was counted as righteous because he obeyed God.

Stephen goes on to tell the leaders that Isaac then followed his father's example and was faithful to the Lord God. God granted him children and Isaac became the father of Jacob and Esau. Jacob followed in his father's footsteps and sought to follow the Lord God in all his ways, too. And God blessed Jacob with 12 sons who would become the patriarchs of the people of Israel. All the people of Israel would trace their ancestry to one of these sons of Jacob.

But God told Abraham about the enslavement of his descendants that would take place in a "*country not their own*" (Acts 7:6). But after four hundred years, they would be set free to go back to the land God would give to Abraham, and they would worship Him there after God punished the ones who enslaved and mistreated the people of Israel. Stephen was referring to Jerusalem, right where he was serving the people, and where he was now being questioned about his faithfulness to the Lord God.

Stephen goes on to remind the leaders of the Sanhedrin how God then supplied a way to save His people before a terrible plague occurred. Joseph, the youngest of Jacob's children at the time, was envied by his older brothers, so the brothers devised a plan to get rid of him. They sold him into slavery, and he ended up in Egypt. Yet, through it all, God protected Joseph, and then used him as the one to save the whole family of Jacob from starvation and death (Genesis 37-48). Joseph eventually becomes second in all of Egypt, and brings his family to him to save them from the 7 years of famine. But this led to the whole enslavement of the people of Israel by a Pharaoh who did not know Joseph.

The history lesson Stephen gave accounted for the faithfulness of God to the people as they diligently sought to follow Him and be obedient to His commands. None of them were perfect; they all made mistakes, but they kept remembering the past and recalled God's forgiveness and grace given when remorse and repentance were made.

As he invited the members of the Sanhedrin to remember their history, Stephen was stating that this was the faith that he also believed. Remember that Stephen was of Greek origin, and he was one of the 7 Greek men chosen to lead the ministry of caring for the needs of the poor in Jerusalem. The Apostles had laid their hands on him and had prayed over him, and the Holy Spirit was moving and

working in him. He was a diligent disciple of Jesus Christ, doing marvelous works in Jerusalem among the people. He believed that Jesus was the fulfillment of God's promise and lived and taught the same to the people, so that they could accept Jesus as their Savior and find eternal life through Him.

Stephen remembered the ways that God worked among His people, and saw that God was in the process of reaching out beyond just the Jews with the opportunity for salvation. Stephen learned the accounts of the forefathers in the faith, and humbled himself to learn from them and to build upon their faithfulness to do even more in his day. He was willing to use the past as an avenue to build up and improve the future, not only for himself, but for all those who would trust in Jesus Christ as Savior and Messiah.

The important thing for us today is to see that Stephen knew the history of the faith. He had learned the accounts of those who had lived before him, and he used their situation to remain strong in his faith, even in the face of false accusations. He was able to not only remember, but tell others about the events that had led him to faith in Jesus Christ. He had history to supply him with the courage to stand up against the lies being told about him. He had courage to stay true to his faith. And he trusted that God would use him in a mighty way to witness the truth of Jesus to all the leaders of the Sanhedrin.

It is therefore vital for us to know our own history, to learn about those who have endeavored in faith before us, so that we might use their witness to encourage us to stand strong in Jesus Christ. We are not the first ones to believe in Jesus, so we need to humble ourselves and learn from the saints who have lived before us, so that we don't make the same mistakes over and over, but rather to do our part of building up the body of Christ here in our world today.

Let me give you a great example of what I'm talking about. "Washington Gladden was a New England pastor who grew very discouraged with the apparent fruitlessness of his work. One day, downhearted, he climbed up to the church belfry to think. From his high perch, it seemed tempting to jump off, and had he been an unconverted man, he might have considered it, so low were his spirits.

"Instead, he poured out his heart to God, [whom he trusted with all his heart. He remembered

whose he was, and that God was always with him through Jesus, and that He would never desert him or forsake him.] And from that experience [he] wrote out a prayer which later became a powerful hymn:

O Master, let me walk with Thee In lowly paths of service free;

*Tell me Thy secret; help me bear The strain of toil, the fret of care.*²

The knowledge of the past gives us the encouragement we need to keep going, despite the hopelessness surrounding us. As we learn and remember the accounts of the faithful people who trusted in God's call in their lives, we can be encouraged to persevere in our own faith journey. As we remember the hope that we have in Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, we can become bold witnesses to the people around us, trusting that God can use even us to be the messengers of His Gospel to the world. As we remember all that Jesus has done for us to forgive us and redeem us, we can rejoice each day in the fulfillment of God's promises to love us, bless us, guide us, and use us as His servants in our world today.

There are so many right around us that need to hear the hope we have in Jesus Christ. So many have never heard the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. As we live our faith before them, they will have the chance to claim Jesus for themselves, and find the hope and life that only Jesus gives.

Let's pray: Father, thank You for the ability to remember the past. Thank You for all that You have done for us here in this world. Thank You for Your faithfulness throughout all the generations that have lived on this earth. Thank You for the bold faith of those who have followed and trusted in You to be their God. Thank You for sending Your Son, Jesus, to us so that we might have faith in Him as our Savior. Give us the courage to learn how He lived among us, to learn His commands, and to learn to be His friend as we obey His commands and follow Him. Father, we thank You for sending Your Holy Spirit to us so that He might live and work in us. May He give us the courage to learn and remember the past so that we might share with those around us of the love of Jesus for each one of us. Help us to remember, so that we might live for You, in the Name of our Savior, Jesus Christ we pray. AMEN.

² (Robert J. Morgan, *Stories, Illustrations & Quotes*, [Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2000] pg. 290-291)