

The Essential Art of Forgetting

Memory is a wonderful thing. If one of our friends has been endowed with the natural gift for recalling a face, remembering a name, or memorizing a poem, we say he has a good memory. And we almost envy the gift! Some people have remarkable memories. Henry Halley (writer of *Halley's Bible Handbook*) learned the entire New Testament word-for-word by memory.

The Bible tells us to remember. We are to remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy. We should remember our Creator in the days of our youth. We are told to remember our Savior's death by observing the communion service "in remembrance of me".

The ability to remember is very valuable, but the power to forget is just as important! As a preacher of the Good News, I am concerned not only about teaching people the importance of *remembering*, but also about how to *forget*! Some readers will probably smile and say, "Well, no one has to teach me how to forget; I'm pretty good at that already!"

It's true that you might forget where you laid your glasses, or the name of someone you met last week. But I wonder if any of us is as good at forgetting as we think we are? If you are forgetting your wife's birthday, for example, you are forgetting a date that you ought to remember. But at the same time, you might be remembering some things that you ought to forget.

Biblical forgetfulness means putting our past behind us. It means letting go. On the one hand, a Christian may become discouraged when he reviews his past failures, unfaithfulness, deadness, and weakness toward temptation. He may become melancholy and depressed. On the other hand, a Christian, when contemplating the difficulties he has surmounted, the verses he has memorized, and the goals he has accomplished, may become self-satisfied. He may begin to feel that the prize is now secure from his own efforts, and cease running the race diligently. Rather than spending our time in pondering our gloomy past, or dwelling on our accomplishments and becoming puffed up with arrogance, we need to keep our eyes steadily on the prize. We need to run the Christian race as though we had just begun it.

Those who fail to remember significant things should try to improve their memories. But what causes the most problems in this world and in the church: the things which have been forgotten that should have been remembered, or the things which have been remembered that should have been forgotten? You know the answer! More trouble comes from things remembered that really should have been forgotten!

There are some things that we must learn to forget. The happiest people in life are those who learned the essential art of forgetting. Paul, in Philippians 3:13-14, explains that he learned to forget the things which are behind, and to look forward to what lay ahead. Paul was persecuted at Antioch, stoned at Lystra, whipped at Philippi, and bound with chains at Jerusalem. Before his conversion, Paul arrested followers of Jesus Christ and helped throw them into prison. He made havoc of the church (Acts 8:3). Paul had a lot to forget. He had much from his past to put behind him. But he says, "*I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God (that is, the call heavenward) in Christ Jesus*" (Philippians 3:14).

1. We Must Forget Our Past Sins

The Bible clearly teaches that all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God. All of us have sins to forget. We all are prone to the sins of pride and worry and suspicion and wrong desires.

The ninth chapter of Acts describes Paul's journey to Damascus. He had in his pocket a warrant for the death of Christian people. He was defiant at the very mention of the name of Jesus Christ. His heart was black with sin. But at noon-day on the road to Damascus, a great light shone around him, and a voice called to him: "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?" It was there that Paul met the Savior. Paul surrendered his life to Christ, and was later baptized into the Christian faith; he became a part of the family of God. The Apostle Paul laid his sins on Jesus that day, and from that time on, he knew he could forget them! He later says, "Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered" (Romans 4:7).

Most of us are troubled at times by thoughts that perhaps our sins have not been completely forgiven. But our Lord says (in essence): *I have put your sins behind my back. I have drowned them in the depths of the sea. I will remember them against you no more.* When the Lord pardons our sins, the Scripture makes it clear that He not only forgives; He also forgets. "I will remember their sin no more" (Jeremiah 31:34).

As Christians, there is just one way for us to forget our sins, and that is to confess them, and set out to forsake them! And if our sins have involved injury to the character or property of others, we are to make restitution whenever it is possible.

- if you sold merchandise to a friend at an inflated price
- if you haven't spoken kindly to a brother in the church
- if you've stolen tools at the place where you work

For the sake of your soul, and for the sake of honesty before God—get those things confessed and made right!

It doesn't need to take long to make things right. A false statement can be confessed and acknowledged to those who were offended. The path toward healing injured feelings can begin with an honest apology. Stolen items can be returned or paid for. If you can say about any particular sin—"I'm penitent;" "I'm ready to apologize;" "I'm determined to forsake that sin"—then acknowledge it, confess it to the appropriate party, forsake it, and forget it! You can face the future, knowing that the forgiveness of God has cleansed your soul, and go about your duties with the freedom of a forgiven person. One *Bible Helps* distributor used to say, "When the Devil confronts me about my past, I remind him of his future!"

2. We Must Forget Our Foolish Mistakes

All of us make mistakes. That's why they put erasers on pencils and "delete" keys on digital devices. When referring to foolish mistakes, I'm not talking now about sins, nor discussing violations of the laws of God. I'm speaking rather about innocent blunders.

All of us make human errors. You can never improve your situation by sitting down and moping over past mistakes.

- the student who failed to take algebra in high school, and then learns that she needs it to enter nurses' training
- the farmer who planted the wrong crops last summer, and the harvest is not especially good
- the merchant who bought the wrong stock of goods, and now they sit around becoming dusty and shopworn

These aren't sins; they are innocent blunders.

It doesn't do any good to dwell on past mistakes. It doesn't help to say, "If only I had taken the left road instead of the right; if only I had invested money here instead of putting it there; if only I had studied harder when I was in school, and finished when I was young." It's no use to whine and mope, and drag old skeletons out of their closets. We must learn from our mistakes, and try not to make the same mistakes again, and move on to higher achievements, and then forget the old failures.

Never let your past mistakes paralyze your hope for the future. Never say, "I tried so often, and every time I failed; it's no use trying anymore. I'm ready to admit defeat and give up." Our text says, "Forgetting the things that are behind . . . I press on toward the mark."

3. We Must Forget Our Deep Sorrows

Sooner or later the experience of sorrow will come to every one of us. The Bible says, "Man that is born of a woman is of few days, and [they are] full of trouble" (Job 14:1). No human heart is without its dark days. No human being completely escapes tears and sorrows. There's not one home where the family circle has never been broken by death. All of us experience times when the shadows fall.

As we journey through life, we must learn to commit our sorrows into the hands of God, and not brood over them. We must acknowledge that God rules even in our sadness, so that eventually we will emerge refined, stronger and better persons because sorrow has come into our lives.

Our 24-year-old daughter was diagnosed with a brain tumor, and then suffered for more than 8 years. She eventually died at the age of 32. Those days were very difficult. But we learned some major lessons:

- we sense more compassion for others who suffer
- we are more aware of the brevity of life
- we have a greater longing for our heavenly home

After describing some strange circumstances in his life, Thomas Hardy wrote, "Human beings are the mere playthings of fate and chance." In other words, he says that fate and chance play with our

lives, just like a child plays with his toys. But the Bible teaches that things happen, not by fate or chance, but by divine control (Joshua 1:9, Ephesians 1:10-12).

Fanny Crosby (the hymn-writer who wrote songs like “Blessed Assurance, Jesus is Mine;” “Rescue the Perishing;” and “Safe in the Arms of Jesus”) was blind because the doctor made a blunder when she was only a few weeks old. He applied a bandage to her eyes with a medication that caused her blindness. Often the doctor regretted his mistake. But Fanny Crosby said many years after the doctor’s death, “If I could only meet that doctor now, I would say, ‘Thank you, over and over again—for making me blind.’” She repeatedly said, “Although it may have been a blunder on the doctor’s part, it was not a mistake on God’s part.” She said further, “I truly believe it was God’s intention that I should live my days on earth in physical darkness, so as to be better prepared to sing God’s praises, and to incite others to do the same.” That’s the Christian attitude toward hard places.

We need to believe in the providences of God, whether we can understand them or not. And when heartaches come and bitter tears fall, and we sit by the bedside of a little child, and hold a fevered hand, and even should we need to follow a little white casket out into the cemetery—we can turn away from these experiences, and after a time of weeping, look up into the face of God, and say, “We know that all things work together for good, and for the spiritual welfare of those who love God.”

4. We Must Forget the Offenses of Others

None of us will go through life without being wounded (Luke 17:1). This life is a battle ground, and there are bound to be some injuries. Some people hurt us unintentionally. Others inflict wounds on purpose. Sometimes even people in the church make cutting remarks that hurt. What shall we do with all the slights and insults and injuries that come our way in life? The answer is that we must learn to forgive and forget them, and put them behind us.

If our critics are right, and we have done wrong, then we must confess our sin, repent of our wrongdoing, and purpose to learn from the experience. But if the criticism is not valid, then move on and forget it!

Too often we are easily insulted and offended, and sometimes are even inclined to fight back! If we harbor resentment toward others, we not only sin against God and others, but we poison our own souls. I’ve seen people so embittered by constantly dwelling on the wrongs others have done to them that they made complete shipwreck of their lives. Not only does nursing a grudge affect us, it can affect our loved ones.

There’s a rather interesting sidelight in the book of Genesis related to the matter of forgetting. Joseph was the lad whose brothers sold him to the Ishmaelite traders because of their jealousy over the coat of many colors. Joseph later became a powerful ruler in Egypt. He married, and a son was born to him. The Bible says that he named the little boy “Manasseh,” a Hebrew word meaning, “God has made me forget.”

There were some bitter memories for Joseph to bury. Joseph's own brothers had thrown him into a pit. They sold him into slavery. Down in Egypt he was slandered by Potiphar's wife and imprisoned. There were old scores in Joseph's life that cried out for revenge! There was cause for hatred. There were injured feelings. But Joseph, in choosing a name for his son, declared, "God has made me forget!"

Joseph realized that his relationship with God was much more important than brooding over the injuries of the past. Joseph was human. He was tempted to remember the past, just as we are. But he took his past to God. When he named his son, he took the little child up into his arms, and looked into his eyes, and said: "Lord, make my life as innocent and sweet and clean as the life of this precious little boy!" That's the kind of person God can use!

When his brothers later came down to Egypt for grain, Joseph had a prime opportunity to exact revenge, especially upon the brother who devised the scheme to sell him to the Ishmaelites. But instead, Joseph said to them: "Come near to me . . . I am Joseph your brother . . . now therefore be not grieved nor angry with yourselves that you sold me [here]; for God did send me before you to preserve life" (Genesis 45:4-5).

Wasn't that a beautiful spirit?

Joseph was determined to forgive, forget, and let go of his past hurts. And so it should be with us! No person is the master of his own spirit until he can say with a clear conscience, "There is not a soul within this community (nor within the walls of this church) that I have a disposition to hate!" Life is too short to let a wrong spirit spoil our relationship with God and rob us of spiritual power!

My advice is simply this: **remember to forget!** You can remember to forget by reversing the process of remembering to remember. To remember something, we must revive the image and hold it in our minds, and then revive the image again, until it finally sticks there for good. To forget something, you must reverse that process. When the image of something that ought to be forgotten arises, turn your mind from it and do something else.

Before we can forget offenses in a healthy way, we must walk the path of forgiveness. Forgiving involves a decision to let go of resentment and pay the cost of the offense with no claim to revenge. Jesus commands us to forgive (Matthew 18:21-22). He says we are to love our enemies and pray for those who would spitefully use us (Matthew 5:44).

Forgiving does not mean excusing or ignoring sin. True love will not try to make sin anything less than what it is. Love takes no part in enabling sin to continue. Rather, loving forgiveness involves extending an attitude of grace, just as God has extended to us.

To forgive is not necessarily to forget entirely. Sometimes there are reminders that we can't control, and scars that may last a lifetime. But the forgiving person will choose not to dwell on the offense or continue to bring the matter up. True forgiveness breaks the bondage of bitterness that could otherwise result by freeing the forgiver's mind and actions from being controlled by the memory of the offense.

Forgiving and letting go may not change the offender. But it will bring you peace, and joy, and spiritual healing. The process can be long and painful. But it is vital to prevent a root of bitterness from springing up in our hearts (Hebrews 12:15).

Graham Staines, an Australian, began ministering in Orissa, India in 1965. He and his wife, Glades, were married in the 1980s. Together they ministered to leprosy patients and evangelized the tribal people in the area. One evening in January of 1999, 58-year-old Graham and their two boys, aged 10 and 7 at the time, were in a village for an evangelism campaign. They were sleeping in an old Willys station wagon outside the local church building. During the night, they were attacked by a mob numbering more than one hundred. The mob blocked the doors of the station wagon, poured gasoline on it, and set it on fire. Despite their cries for help and attempts to escape, Graham and his two sons were burnt alive.

Graham's wife, Glades, was determined to continue the work. She sang the song, "Because He Lives," at the funeral of her husband and two sons, and announced her forgiveness of those who had murdered her family. Glades said she had forgiven the killers and held no bitterness, because forgiveness brings healing and the land needed healing from hatred and violence. Because of this act of mercy on the part of the Staines family, Christ was proclaimed on the front pages of the newspapers of India. Many came to Christ from families who had rejected the Gospel for years.

As you consider what's really important in life, think about how the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of Christ's glory and grace.

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