

QUESTION 24: “WHAT IS COMMUNION?” **(Deuteronomy 4:9-10a)**

11.10.19

INTRODUCTION

I love history. I love reading it; I love visiting it. The Battle of the Alamo has so much more meaning now because I have actually visited the Alamo. My family’s home country of Norway was occupied by Hitler’s German armies from 1940 until 1945. That fact means so much more because I have actually been in Norway and visited a memorial museum in Televaag, Norway dedicated to remembering those years of occupation.

Keeping the past alive — that is the idea of memorials. The dictionary defines a memorial as: “an object which serves as a focus for the memory or the commemoration of something, usually an influential, deceased person or an historical event.” In Biblical terms, a memorial is an object or activity intended to help God’s people identify with God’s historic words or deeds.

We live in a nation with a great history — a history kept alive by the many memorials which we can find in our country. Our nation’s capitol by itself contains some of the greatest memorials we know. In that one place, we can observe memorials to individuals — the Washington Monument, the Lincoln Memorial — to our national efforts in conflicts — the World War II Memorial, the Vietnam Memorial (also known as “The Wall”) — to the memories contained by all the markers in Arlington National Cemetery — including, of course, the gravesite of President John F. Kennedy.

Many of us even mark our lives by “I remember where I was” when we heard about historical or life-changing events that we actually lived through: I remember where I was when President Kennedy was assassinated; I remember where I was when Neil Armstrong first set foot upon the moon; I remember where I was when the space shuttle Challenger exploded in flight; and, like many of us, I remember where I was on 9/11.

You know, a huge part of history is one, you would think simple and obvious, thing: remembering. But the human race has an amazing capacity to forget, to lose sight of the past, even the greatest or most profoundly dark moments in our collective history. As proof, we have this: In the quiet remains of the Nazi death camp Auschwitz, they have memory books — books where visitors can sign their names and leave a comment, a thought of reflection, if they desire. One of the earliest memory books contains a stark two-word entry: “Never forget.” It seems incomprehensible that horrors such as the events of the Holocaust — the concentration camps, the death camps, the crematoriums, the emaciated bodies of victims stacked up like cars in a junk yard, even the names: Auschwitz, Bergen-Belson, Dachau, Treblinka, Sachsenhausen — could ever escape our memories. How could that much planned and designed slaughter of innocent human beings by other supposedly civilized human beings ever be forgotten? But the fact remains: The deaths of millions of people is fading from memory; we are forgetting. To some degree that’s understandable; we will celebrate the end of World War II next year — in May for the European war, in September for the Asian war, both now a full 75 years after the fact. But even as monumental an event as World War II, not to mention some of its worst horrors, is fading from our memories as the years pass and the witnesses to those moments pass as well. Yet in a recent poll in Great Britain, one in twenty people (5%) do not believe the Holocaust ever really happened. And, in a New York Times poll from April 2018, these sobering results were revealed:

- 31% of Americans and 41% of millennials (ages 18-34) believe that 2 million Jews or fewer died in the Holocaust; actually, over 6 million Jewish men, women and children were murdered, often in the cruelest of ways, over the course of Holocaust history.
- 41% of Americans and 66% of millennials do not know what Auschwitz was; actually, it was the best known of the Nazi death camps (located in south-central Poland) where possibly as many as 2.5 million people lost their lives.

Despite our best intentions, no matter what the event, forgetting happens: Memories fade, schedules get busier and more pressing, what’s happening today seems to be far more important than what happened yesterday, and life moves on — and past goes away.

But that is not just unique to contemporary society. Some 3,500 years ago, as the nation of Israel prepared at long last to enter the Promised Land of Canaan, the same thing — forgetting — was a huge concern, both to the God who led them and to the leaders he had appointed. So, as Moses is sharing his final words to them (virtually the entire text of the book of Deuteronomy), he told them this:

TEXT

“[B]e careful(1), and watch yourselves closely(2) so that you do not forget(3) the things your eyes have seen or let them fade from your heart(4) as long as you live. Teach them(5) to your children and to their children after them. Remember the day you stood before the Lord” — Moses, Deuteronomy 4:9-10a.

ANALYSIS (KJV)

- 1) “[T]ake heed to thyself”: SHAMAR (shaw-mar[^]) — to watch, to keep, to preserve, to guard, to be careful, to watch over, to watch carefully over, to be on one’s guard, to pay close attention to, to pay regard to or attach oneself to. The idea is to be intentional.
- 2) “[K]eep thy soul diligently”: (1) NEPHESH (neh[^]-flesh) — breath, the inner being with its thoughts and emotions, part of a person’s composite whole. (2) M(e)OD (meh-ode[^]) — diligently, especially exceedingly. Intense intentionality.
- 3) “[F]orget”: SHAKACH (shaw-kakh[^]) — from a root meaning to mislay, to be oblivious of, from want of memory for attention, thus to cause to forget.
- 4) “[L]est they depart from thy heart”: (1) SUWR (soor) — to turn away, to go away, to desert, to quit, to keep far away, to stop, to take away, to remove, to be removed, to make depart. (2) LEBAB (lay-bawb[^]) — heart, mind, inner person, the entire disposition of the inner person that God can discern, the place where the rational, thinking process occurs that allows a person to know God’s blessings, to plan for the future, to communicate, and to understand God’s message.
- 5) “[T]each them . . . Specially the day”: YADA (yaw-dah[^]) — to know, to learn, to perceive, to discern, to experience, to confess, to consider, to know how, to be skillful, to be made known, to make to know.

So, with the flavoring of the Hebrew, this section of Moses’ words might read like this: “Ever so carefully, with great and specific intention of purpose, take heed to yourselves, watch over yourselves, keep an eye on your soul, every one of you, with the most intense intentionality, so that you do not forget, that is, that you do not mislay or somehow quit paying attention to your memories lest you become oblivious to them and forget all the things that your eyes have seen, and thus let their impact fade away from your heart and your mind and your soul as long as you continue to live. Do not let these memories depart from your heart; do not in any way, shape or

form desert them, but intensely, intentionally teach those memories to your children and to your children's children. Make those memories impact them as much as it did you to be standing before God yourself.”

Now, to help them remember, to engage them far deeper than simply with words to try and remember, God directed that memorials be made. There are two reasons that God directed memorials to be made:

- 1) To celebrate/acknowledge what God has done (making a present memory of a past event), and
- 2) To pass on the story of what God has done to the next generation — (giving a past event both a present AND a future life).

But we need to remember that, with God, it's not about religion, nor is it simply about history and tradition for its own sake; it's most fundamentally about relationship. So, with that in mind, there are likewise two relational reasons that God directed memorials to be made. To phrase it in a more personal sense:

- 1) To celebrate that I can place my faith in God today because of his faithfulness as shown in the history of yesterday, and
- 2) To celebrate that I can place my faith in God for all my tomorrows because of his faithfulness as shown and proven in the history of yesterday.

We find different memorials scattered throughout the OT:

- 1) A festival memorial commemorating an event: When God established the Passover and the accompanying Feast of Unleavened Bread he had Moses tell them: ***“Obey these instructions as a lasting ordinance for you and your descendants. When you enter the land that the Lord will give you as he promised, observe this ceremony. And when your children ask you, ‘What does this ceremony mean to you?’ then tell them, ‘It is the Passover sacrifice to the Lord, who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt and spared our homes when he struck down the Egyptians’”*** — Moses, Exodus 12:24-27a.
- 2) A memorial commemorating God's striking down the firstborn of Egypt: When Israelites obediently followed God's instructions to paint the sides and tops of the door frames of the houses with the blood from the sacrificed year-old sheep or goats where they celebrate that initial meal of unleavened bread, he passed over their homes while striking down all the first born in Egypt — ***from the firstborn of Pharaoh, who sat on the throne, to the firstborn of the prisoner, who was in the dungeon, and the firstborn of all the livestock as well . . . there was not a house without someone dead*** — Exodus 12:29b, 30b. In response to that, Moses was instructed to tell Israel: ***“After the Lord brings you into the land of the Canaanites and gives it to you, as he promised on oath to you and your ancestors, you are to give over to the Lord the first offspring of every womb. All the firstborn males of your livestock belong to the Lord. . . . Redeem every firstborn among your sons. In days to come, when your son asks you, ‘What does this mean?’ say to him, ‘With a mighty hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. When Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us go, the Lord killed the firstborn of both people and animals in Egypt. This is why I sacrifice to the Lord the first male offspring of every womb and redeem each of my firstborn sons. And it will be like a sign on your hand and a symbol on your forehead that the Lord brought us out of Egypt with his mighty hand’”*** — Moses, Exodus 13:11-12, 13b-16.

- 3) Viewing God's commands themselves as a memorial: *"Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds; tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Teach them to your children, talking about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates, so that your days and the days of your children may be many in the land the Lord swore to give your ancestors, as many as the days that the heavens are above the earth" — Moses, Deuteronomy 11:18-21.*
- 4) A memorial commemorating God's power in bringing Israel to the Promised Land: *When the whole nation had finished crossing the Jordan, the Lord said to Joshua, "Choose twelve men from among the people, one from each tribe, and tell them to take up twelve stones from the middle of the Jordan, from right where the priests are standing, and carry them over with you and put them down at the place where you stay tonight." So Joshua called together the twelve men he had appointed from the Israelites, one from each tribe, and said to them, "Go over before the ark of the Lord your God into the middle of the Jordan. Each of you is to take up a stone on his shoulder, according to the number of the tribes of the Israelites, to serve as a sign among you. In the future, when your children ask you, 'What do these stones mean?' tell them that the flow of the Jordan [River] was cut off before the ark of the covenant of the Lord. When it crossed the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. These stones are to be a memorial to the people of Israel forever." So the Israelites did as Joshua commanded them. They took twelve stones from the middle of the Jordan, according to the number of the tribes of the Israelites, as the Lord had told Joshua; and they carried them over with them to their camp, where they put them down. Joshua set up the twelve stones that had been in the middle of the Jordan at the spot where the priests who carried the ark of the covenant had stood. And they are there to this day. . . . And Joshua set up at Gilgal the twelve stones they had taken out of the Jordan. He said to the Israelites, "In the future when your descendants ask their parents, 'What do these stones mean?' tell them, 'Israel crossed the Jordan on dry ground.' For the Lord your God dried up the Jordan before you until you had crossed over. The Lord your God did to the Jordan what he had done to the Red Sea when he dried it up before us until we had crossed over. He did this so that all the peoples of the earth might know that the hand of the Lord is powerful and so that you might always fear the Lord your God" — Joshua 4:1-9, 20-24.*

When God's commands to memorialize, whether his commands or his moments in Israelite history, were ignored, it set the nation up for some spiritually really dark times; the OT book of Judges tells us that: *After Joshua had dismissed the Israelites, they went to take possession of the land, each to their own [tribal] inheritance. The people served the Lord throughout the lifetime of Joshua and of the elders who outlived him and who had seen all the great things the Lord had done for Israel. . . . After that whole generation had been gathered to their ancestors [the generation of Joshua and his elders], another generation grew up who knew neither the Lord nor what he had done for Israel — Judges 2:6-7, 10.*

What had happened? The nation of Israel had neglected the memorials to all that God had done — in this case, not even teaching and passing on from one generation to the next all the great history of how God had been with his people and all the things he had done on their behalf. In so doing, they did not pass on the facts of God's goodness, mercy, grace, passion and power. They didn't even pass on the fact that Jehovah God was the one and only God of heaven and earth.

Essentially, the older generation “shut up”; they didn’t tell their kids even the basic idea that God even existed. That would make would happened next make perfect sense: *[T]he Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord . . . They forsook the Lord, the God of their ancestors, who had brought them out of Egypt. They followed and worshiped various gods of the peoples around them. They aroused the Lord’s anger — Judges 2:11a, 12.* How could they not? They had been left clueless. With no memorials to hold their attention, with no one telling the incredible moments of how God had shown himself over the course of their national life, to keep them mindful and aware and connected to God’s story, they fell away. People don’t follow strangers — and the nation of Israel had reduced God to being a stranger to their very own kids.

BOTTOM LINE: Living faith requires living history — and living history requires somebody to keep it alive.

That brings us to today, and our celebration of communion — a NT memorial, a commemoration designed to help us remember. Do you recall what Christ said in answering a scribe’s question about the “greatest” commandment? He quoted from Moses’ own words from Deuteronomy, enriching it as only he could: *“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength” — Jesus Christ, Mark 12:30 (quoting Deuteronomy 6:5).* What’s he saying? Love the Lord your God with all your heart — emotionally, with all your soul — spiritually, with all your mind — mentally, and with all your strength — physically. We are called to love the Lord our God with the whole person, our whole being responding to the love he has completely shown and given to us.

And that’s what our celebration, our commemoration, of communion does — it engages the whole person to remind us, to cause us to remember, the incredible sacrifice for our sins that Jesus Christ took upon himself. As we proceed through this memorial this morning, take note of the different ways it engages us:

- Before anything else happens, we will go to prayer, seeking God’s forgiveness for our sins, making sure we are appropriately worthy of receiving this unique memorial. Repentance is absolutely necessary before participating in this memorial, and it reminds us of the incredible grace — undeserved favor — that God has shown us in giving us his Son. This engages us spiritually.
- We will be watching the communion elements come our way as they are distributed in turn by our elders.
- We will be listening as each of the elements and their place in the service is explained.
- We will be holding the two elements — the cracker and the juice — in our hands.
- We will be eating and drinking the elements, personally taking these elements into our physical lives even as we note how they represent Christ’s work in our spiritual lives. It is a time of worship (acknowledging what God has done), witness (testifying by our participation what God has done), edification (strengthening us both individually and as a body, giving us opportunity to heal broken relationships, forgive past offenses and repent of past offenses against somebody else in the body), and service (seeking to serve others as Jesus Christ served us).

That’s most basically what communion is — a memorial that we can grasp, that we can experience, with virtually every part of our being. It’s an opportunity to make history come alive, to help our faith be alive — and a memorial that we can explain to our kids, to our next generation, to make the story of communion come alive to them, so that they can experience it

and eventually pass it on to their friends, and to their next generation. A memorial so we don't forget. And we use two simple elements to help define this memorial:

- 1) The bread (matzoh bread): The bread represents the body of Jesus Christ, completely given for us. He gave it so completely that he left his place in heaven to personally deliver himself for us.
- 2) The wine (grape juice): The wine/grape juice represents the blood that was shed as Christ's body was torn open and bled for us.

Now, there are no biblical directions as to how we proceed to actually physically "do" communion. Therefore we will look to do it in different ways just to keep things fresh and interesting, realizing that sometimes different methods create different impacts. And it is the impact of communion that is the most important thing.

And, before we go any further, one additional part of this week's question: What determines how often we celebrate communion? The fact is, the Bible contains no directions on "how often" we are to celebrate communion, very much leaving that decision up to a church's leadership and the wishes of the body. It appears that the early church celebrated communion every time they shared meals together — which was often. However, it is not clear whether that was daily, weekly or on some other kind of schedule. It is far more important that we understand what communion is, that we understand how important it is, and that it causes growth in our relationship with Christ and with each other. As a leadership, we have chosen to mark communion on a quarterly basis (with minor interruptions for floods and so on), partly because we don't want communion to become somehow a checklist item on our religious "to-do" list. We want it to be celebrated with freshness and excitement; it is not something we ever want to get used to or take for granted.

But before we begin, one final point: Why do we do this? Several reasons:

- 1) We do it because Jesus Christ himself commanded it, that we are to "do this" in remembrance of him, very much why God established the OT memorials for his people to be constantly in remembrance of all he had done for them.
- 2) It is an act of worshiping what Christ specifically did on our behalf on the cross:
 - a) ***Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" — Paul, Philippians 2:5-8 (NASB).***
 - b) I love how Max Lucado summarizes this whole idea of what Jesus did for us: *He chose the nails*. Think about that: Jesus Christ rightly existed in heaven. But at a moment in time, he CHOSE the nails — for us. In a musical celebration of this phenomenal truth, the song *When I Remember* says this: *When I remember what you've done, when I remember the shedding of your blood, I can't help but worship you, I can't help but worship you, I can't help but worship you for all you've done!*
 - c) ***God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God — Paul, II Corinthians 5:21.***
- 3) Like the OT memorials, we do this to pass along our faith to the next generation. It is the one commonality that linked the OT memorials together: "When your children ask." This is also why we do this. This is our future — our future pastors, elders, deacons,

deaconesses, teachers, youth workers and so on. That's who's standing right now. Take a look. We want them to know the faith we embrace, to know the Savior that embraces us. Don't wait for their questions; initiate the conversation. Make sure they know what Jesus did for them. He died for them as much as he died for us.

We practice an "open" communion, that is, that anyone who is a believer in the congregation may take communion regardless of church affiliation or membership. The only requirement for participation is being a believer, being someone who has in fact surrendered their life in a conscious, deliberate act of faith of their own choosing to God through the Lord Jesus Christ.

A huge part of taking part in communion is confession and repentance, becoming "clean" before the Lord. This part of the service will be the congregation praying silently, asking forgiveness of sins before the actual sacrament begins. This will also include the necessary opportunity for people to seek forgiveness from one to another; as Jesus said: ***Forgive, and you will be forgiven — Jesus Christ, Luke 6:37b***

Each element will be distributed separately. The congregation will be asked to hold each element until the entire church body has been served; at that point, the pastor will direct them when to partake of the element.

What Christ was about to do on the cross was foretold by the prophet Isaiah some 700 years before the actual events, when through the power and grace of God it was revealed:

He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem. Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all — Isaiah 53:3-6. Let's pray!