

D oGenesis 1-11

God Remembers

Chapter 8:1; 9:1-17

November 19, 2006

Most of you probably don't remember Jim Marshall, but Jim "wrong-way" Marshall was a member of the "Purple People Eaters," a famed and fearsome defensive squad on the Minnesota Vikings football team. In a game played on October 25th, 1964 Marshall scooped up a fumble and started racing towards the end zone for a touchdown.

Unfortunately, he couldn't remember which way to run so he started racing towards the other team's goal line. He rumbled for 66 yards and then jubilantly tossed the football into the stands. Because he was in the wrong end zone, Marshall had just scored a safety (which means two points for the other team) – the longest safety in the history of pro football.

Generally speaking, memory is a good thing. And generally speaking, it's bad to forget. Of course this applies to more important things than a football game. For instance, advanced cases of alcoholism sometimes lead to Korsakov's syndrome, a profound and permanent loss of memory due to neuron destruction. Huge blocks of a person's memory are wiped out. The neuroscientist Oliver Sachs quotes one of his patients saying, "You have to begin to lose your memory, if only in bits and pieces, to realize that memory is what makes our lives. Life without memory is no life at all ... Our memory is our coherence, our reason, our feeling, even our action. Without it, we are nothing."¹

"Life without memory is not life at all." Remember that quote as we explore this story. From a literary viewpoint, Genesis 6-9 forms an inverted V-shape story. Everything in the story flows into or flows out of the point of the V. (If you don't believe me, check the sermon notes upstairs). The tip of the inverted V, in other words, the emotional, spiritual and literary center-point of this story is found in chapter 8 verse 1 - "But God remembered Noah..." These four words form the turning-point of this story. What does it mean that God remembers?

Notice that it doesn't say that "God forgot about Noah." This is the way of atheism or agnosticism: God is irrelevant; God is absent; God doesn't give a rip about you or this planet or the cosmos. Perhaps God has Korsakov's syndrome. Nor does it say "Noah remembered God." That would be the way of religion – a system of life that puts all the pressure on us. It's up to us to stay close to God.

Either of these two options force us to live as spiritual orphans. Spiritual orphans are people whose actions, beliefs, feelings, attitudes convey a deep lack of trust or unawareness of God's fatherly love and care. If God forgets, or if all the pressure is on us, we're all spiritual orphans. We don't live with radical and heartfelt and peaceful trust

¹ Quoted in a review of *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*, New York Review of Books, February, 16, 1984.

and rest that God is our Heavenly Father who cares for us. It sounds too simplistic or too unsophisticated or too good to be true. Perhaps we've learned this lesson from past abuse or wounding: I am on my own. We feel much more comfortable lowering our expectations, playing it safe with God's love and he the daring call to follow Jesus. I cannot trust anyone else – not really, not deeply – because they always let me down. And that also means that I can't trust God to meet the deepest needs and longings of my heart. I live as a spiritual orphan.

But that's not the good news we have in this story. "But God remembered Noah." So what does it mean that God remembers? It's an important phrase in the Bible.

- We see it again in Genesis 9:16 when God says, "Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth." God will remember us.
- God remembers again in Genesis 30:22 – "Then God remembered Rachel; he listened to her and opened her womb."
- The next book of the Bible tells the story of God's people groaning in their slavery and then it says that God "heard their groaning and remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. So God looked on them and was concerned about them" (Exodus 2:24-25).

Actually, the phrase "God remembers" occurs 73 times in the Bible. Does this mean that God has short-term memory problems? Not at all. Every time God remembers it means that ***God will act for someone according to God's covenant promises.*** When God remembers He will do something good for that person. When he remembers God will surprise, stun, overwhelm, and lavish a person or a group of people with unexpected and undeserved goodness and grace. So, for instance, as soon as God remembered Noah the flood waters started to subside (see 8:3-5). As soon as God remembered the rainbow, he blessed the earth. As soon as God remembered Rachael she became pregnant. As soon as God remembered his people in slavery, God started their journey of redemption. When God remembers its not just mental activity; it's redemption activity. God does something. God blesses.

And God acts in goodness according to His covenant. What does that mean? Again, this word is so central to the entire story of the Bible. A covenant means that I'm committed to you through thick and thin. It's based on a promise to care for you, to be there for you, to not ditch you or forsake you. Marriage is the best human model for a covenant with God. So in the Bible God comes to a specific group of people (the Jews) and says, "I want to be your God and I want you to be my people – forever. I will love you and provide for you and you will respond with love and obedience. Do we have a covenant?" They weren't the best or prettiest or strongest or coolest people on the face of the earth. As a matter of fact, they were tiny and insignificant and awkward and stubborn, but God approached them anyway and said, "Do we have a covenant? Do we have a marriage?" And they said, "Yes, praise the Lord!" and then they said "Yes, but can I still sleep around?" and then they said "No way!" and then they said "Yes" and then they said "Yes, but can I keep my other lovers" and then they said "Get lost and leave me alone, God." You get the picture. Our end of the covenant is very fickle; but God's end of the

covenant remains steadfast and faithful. It's like a flame that keeps burning. Or God is like the Energizer bunny: He just keeps going and going and going.

The first time the word covenant is mentioned in the Bible is found in Genesis 6:18 when God tells Noah, "But I will establish my covenant with you, and you will enter the ark – you and your sons and your wife and your sons' wives with you." Notice a few things about covenants.

- (1) First, a covenant is God's doing not ours. God says, "**I** will establish *my* covenant with you." It wasn't our idea. God initiates the covenant with us because, quite frankly, we're not a bit interested in establishing a covenant with God. We're actively fleeing a covenant with God.
- (2) Notice also that a covenant is always two-sided. God does want something from us. Last week we talked about Noah's obedience. Noah did something for God and with God - because the covenant is never about just us. By bringing us into a covenant with Him, God wants to pour goodness out of us into the world. Due to his covenant with Noah, Noah becomes a blessing to his family and even to all of creation. Note the detail in 8:9 – "He reached out his hand and took the dove and brought it back to himself in the ark." It's a touching detail about our calling as God's covenant people: we were made to bless the earth.
- (3) A covenant is all about love. The flood came as an act of cleansing. Remember in chapter 6 it said (in verse 5) "The Lord God saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time." (See also verse 12). We were all a mess. We were like spoiled clay in the potter hands. We were like moldy bagels in the bread drawer. We're like a football team that goes 0-16 – you have to blot out the coaching staff and start fresh. God had to cleanse the earth so in verse 7 God said, "I will blot out mankind from the face of the earth." Now the flood comes, the cleansing waters flow, God performs the act of judgment and cleansing, and what is the final result? Look at 8:21 – God says, "Never again will I curse the ground because of man, even though every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood." The flood didn't improve us. That's the way punishment works: it's necessary, it wakes us up, it prevents evil from getting worse, it erects a roadblock and stop signs, but it doesn't change our heart. By themselves judgment and fear and guilt don't produce permanent change in our heart. Some of you experienced all kinds of punishment and pressure and guilt while you were growing up – much of it from church or a religious institution – but it didn't change you. It may have prevented you from doing bad things, but it didn't transform your heart. It didn't work by itself, because real life change comes through something deeper: it's called love. Love changes us. That's what the covenant is all about. God keeps saying, "I love you. I want you. I'm here for you." And we keep running away and saying, "No, it can't possibly be that easy. It doesn't work that way in my world, God. You just don't understand, God." And God says, "No, really, I want a covenant with you! And I want to love you forever."

Of course for the Christian you can't understand the covenant without Jesus and the cross. His death was not only an example; it was also a substitution. He died for us, in

our place, because of our debt, to set us free. And before he died, eh gave his disciples bread and wine and he said, “This is the bread, this is the cup of the new covenant.” Not a brand new, just the fulfillment and completion of the older covenant.

Because of the New Covenant, we have been grafted into the story and the love of the Covenant-making God and God says, “I will love you forever.” This can sound very abstract so let me give you a picture of covenant love in action. On Valentine’s Day in 1948 Robertson McQuilkin proposed to his sweetheart Muriel and they married in August the same year. For the next three decades, they raised six children and served God together. The first sign that their lives were about to change appeared in 1978. Muriel loved to tell stories, but one day she started repeating a story she had just finished a few minutes earlier. In 1981 doctors urged Robertson to consider the possibility of Alzheimer’s disease. From that point on Robertson watched helplessly as his fun, creative, loving wife slowly faded away. By 1990, Robertson knew he needed to make a decision about his career. The school needed him 100 percent, and Muriel needed him 100 percent. Robertson chose to resign. “People think it must be so difficult,” he said, “but actually even on the emotional side I didn’t look back with any regrets at all. I enjoyed the new life.” On Valentine’s Day in 1995 Muriel suddenly woke up from her mental fog, smiled, and spoke for the first time in months: “Love...love...love.” Those were the last words Muriel ever said aloud. Robertson continued to love his wife, but when their 50th anniversary passed in 1999, she had lost all ability to function on her own. Muriel died on September 19, 2003. In a letter to friends, Robertson wrote, “For 55 years Muriel was flesh of my flesh, bone of my bone. So it’s like a ripping of my flesh and deeper – my very bones,” Robertson says. “But there is also profound gratitude. For ten years I’ve delighted in recalling happy memories. I still do. No regrets. I’m grateful.” That, my friends, is a picture of God’s covenant love for us. And he loves us not as a chore but because it brings him delight.

When God remembers it means that ***God will act for someone according to His covenant promises.*** We heard the covenant again in our Bible reading. Notice the same themes about the covenant that we saw earlier:

- (1) God establishes the covenant, not us. See verse 9 – “I now establish my covenant with you.” The Hebrew word for establish literally means to make or erect. God is building it like a contractor. God does it.
- (2) Second, Noah and his family will be a source of blessing. Read verses 10-11. This wasn’t just for Noah and his little tribe of people. Notice also verse 12 (“a covenant for all generations to come.”). That’s exactly what we’re trying to be about at Three Village Church. We want your life, your time, your gifts and your money, to be about something that will last for “all generations to come.” I find that an awesome privilege. God not only blesses the earth and me and my family and this church, but God allows us to be a part of the earth-wide and cosmos-wide plan to bless all of creation. That’s why you were created in the first place – to be blessed by God so that you could be the blessing of God to others. And this means that if you haven’t found what it means to be blessed by God to be a blessing, if you have another plan for your life, your will never be fulfilled, it may be comfortable but you will always be bored and you’ll get to the end of your life

and you and everyone around you will say, “We just feel sad and empty for him because he missed it. He missed what he could have been; instead, he just coasted through life without making an impact.” God doesn’t want that for you. God made you for so much more. Does your heart long for it? Does your heart hunger for it? I hope so.

- (3) And then there’s one more thing in chapter 9. Notice verse 12. “This is the sign of the covenant I am making between you and me.” We are sign-making creatures. For instance, I have a sign of my love for my wife – it’s called a wedding ring. In Minnesota we have a sign for warmth and friendship – we call it a Norwegian hug and it goes like this (demonstrate standing as far apart as possible and shaking hands without getting too close to the other person). When I moved to Long Island I met all these crazy Italians and Greeks and they started kissing me as a sign of love and friendship. We need signs of love and friendship, signs of the covenant. So God gives us signs. This sign is very specific – notice it in verses 13 and 16. Now did you notice something odd about this sign? Who is the sign for? It’s not for us – it’s not a memory aid for us – it’s a sign for God. “Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the covenant.” It’s for God. Does that mean that God has Korsakov’s syndrome or Alzheimer’s? No, God’s memory is just fine. So what does it mean? To be honest (and I’m not supposed to tell you this), I don’t know what it means. I just know that God said it and that he likes it that way. God likes painting rainbows in the sky and then lavishing us with love.

This isn’t the first time this happens in the Bible. In the book of Exodus, in a story called the Passover, God was setting his people free from years of slavery. God remembered and he was going to act. So he told his people to sprinkle blood on the doorposts so that God would pass over that house. The blood was a sign for them but it was also a sign for God. “And when I see the blood, I will pass over you” (see Exodus 12:13). The sign is also for God. When God sees the sign, God remembers the covenant, God remembers His “I’ll love you forever,” and then God acts in mercy and deliverance to save his people.

Now let me apply this to the Lord’s Supper. I’ve always thought that the bread and the wine (it’s not real wine but it should be), are for us. They are reminders for us. They help us, like a wedding ring or a rubber band around our finger so we don’t forget God. So we tell God, “I’m trying so hard to remember you God. Next time I’ll try even harder.” So we look at the bread and wine and we try hard to remember. That puts all the pressure on you. You get it together. You remember. You don’t forget. You try harder.

But what if the bread and wine are for God? What if God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit is here right now? And what if just like the rainbow, and the blood on the door on the first Passover, the bread and the wine are for God and not just us. So every time God sees the bread and wine he remembers the new covenant in Jesus, he remembers that Jesus died for your sins, he remembers the power of the Holy Spirit that is available to you, he remembers how much he loves you, he remembers the original calling and

destiny that he had for your life (something so rich and grand and noble that it would take your breath away)? So no matter how forgetful or unfaithful you have been this past week, the bread and the wine work. We don't make them work; God does. God remembers and acts according to his covenant promises.

It means that God remembers me because he remembers me in Jesus. That's the Gospel. It means that I'm no longer a spiritual orphan. Remember: we have a side to this covenant as well. It's called faith. By faith we say "yes" to God's covenant promises. By faith we turn from our self-sufficiency and grab on to God's promises in Jesus. By faith we open our hearts to the New Covenant of Jesus. So allow God, the God of covenant and everlasting love, the God of the New Covenant of bread and wine, the God of the broken body and His own shed blood, let Him love you this morning. Let him remember you this morning. Let him remember his covenant and act on your behalf this morning.

Appendix

Genesis 8:1 as the center of the story

Genesis 6-9 → Summary #1

- Transitional introduction (6:9-10)
- Violence in creation (6:11-12)
- First divine speech: resolve to destroy (6:13-22)
- Second divine speech: “enter ark” (7:1-10)
- Beginning of flood (7:11-16)
- The rising flood (7:17-24)
- God remembers**

Noah

- The receding flood (8:1-5)
- Drying of the earth (8:6-14)
- Third divine speech: “leave ark” (8:15-19)
- God’s resolve to preserve order (8:20-22)
- Fourth divine speech: covenant (9:1-17)
- Transitional conclusion (9:18-19)

Genesis 7-8 → Summary #2

- 7 days of waiting for flood (7:4)
- 7 days of waiting for flood (7:10)
- 40 days of flood (7:17a)
- 150 days of water triumphing (7:24)
- 150 days of water waning (8:3)
- 40 days of waiting (8:6)
- 7 days of waiting (8:10)
- 7 days of waiting (8:12)