

This is the second of our talks about living in the past, the present and the future. And we begin this morning by asking, in what sense should we **live in the past**?

*Well, certainly not* in bewailing – and mourning over – still less, moaning over - what we regard as better and happier days long since gone – as did some of the Jews at the laying of the foundation of the second Temple in the days of Ezra, 3.12. Not that it is always a bad thing to recall better days of course. It often does us good to encourage ourselves by reviewing what God has wrought in the past. We could certainly do worse than join the prophet Habakkuk in looking back on God's past working – and join him in his prayer, 'Do again in our times the great deeds you used to do' – as the Good News Bible paraphrases Habakkuk 3.2.

Nor does living in the past mean resting – certainly not smugly glorying – in what we *have been* and *have accomplished and attained* in the past – which is what Paul had particularly in mind in Philippians 3 when he wrote, 'forgetting those things which are behind'.

Nor does living in the past mean *living a life of regret over past failures* which we cannot now rectify. Yes – I am disappointed that over the last 44 years I have loved God so little and sinned so much. Memories of the things which stain my past certainly serve to keep me from thinking too highly of myself but I can't change them now and I do myself no good in dwelling unduly on them.

Nor does living in the past mean resisting *all and every* kind of change – for we must always be careful to distinguish what the Bible actually says – which will never change – from our own human ideas, applications and traditions. I recall hearing a tape of an elder of a church in Brighton, England tell of a young girl who asked her mother - a sister in the church where he is in fellowship as I recall - why she always cut the ends of the joint of meat before she cooked it – and put those pieces on top of the joint. Her mother admitted that she didn't really know – she thought that perhaps this made the juices flow better but in truth she did it because her mother always had. Soon after, Gran paid a visit and, as you have probably guessed, the girl was quick to ask her why she did it. Rather taken aback at her grand-daughter's question, Gran said, "Your mother doesn't still do that, does she? I always did it when she was young because my old oven was too small to get a big joint into it!"

And – yes – it is all too possible for us to perpetuate extra-biblical practices which once made very good sense but which are no longer really relevant – though, I add, with no little feeling, we should avoid changing things just for the sake of change. Let me simply repeat that we always need to distinguish what scripture says from the way we have applied it and done things in the past.

And, living in the past certainly doesn't mean nursing grievances and brooding over past upsets and what we regard as wrongs done to us. In most cases by far it is best to follow the procedure outlined by our Lord in chapter 18 and to sort it out with the person we believe is guilty of having injured us.

In what sense then *should* we live in the past?

Well, first, it is certainly healthy to *remember what we were* – and would be – apart from God's saving grace – and to be grateful. I guess we could all do with a dose of Eph. 2 - '*Remember* that you were once Gentiles in the flesh – without Christ, hope or God', v.11. The man who said those words *never* forgot what *he* had been – he made many references to it in his preaching and later letters. Indeed, it was towards the end of his life that he wrote, 'I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has appointed me to His service, who was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a violent, insolent man', 1 Tim. 1. Paul never forgot what he had been and done. Note that 'I thank Christ Jesus our Lord'. Don't forget to do it!

But I ask again - In what sense *should* we live in the past? Well, it is always a good thing to *learn from past mistakes* - whether our own or of somebody else. One nineteenth century German philosopher wrote, 'What experience and history teach is this – that nations and governments have never learned anything from history, or acted upon any lessons they might have drawn from it'.<sup>1</sup> Alas, as individual Christians we often fare no better than 'nations and governments' and perform no better than such notable Bible characters as Abraham - who more than once left the land to which he had been called by God - and ended up half-lying about his relationship to his wife Sarah - and Samson who more than once revealed secrets to foreign women.<sup>2</sup>

The mistakes of many Bible characters have much to teach us. In the context of 'the day when the Son of Man is revealed', Jesus told His disciples, 'Remember Lot's wife'. I read some time ago of a father who was in the habit of recounting Bible stories to his young son. One day, he told his boy how 'A man named Lot was warned by an angel from God to take his wife and his daughters and flee out of the city of Sodom. His wife looked back and was turned to a pillar of salt but, thanks to the angel, Lot and his daughters escaped with their lives". His lad looked totally

puzzled. 'Is there something you don't understand?', Dad asked. 'Yes', his son replied, 'Whatever happened to the flea?' Think about it! Yes, we are meant to learn from past mistakes - whether our own or those of others.

But, in particular, it is important that we remember *the difficult times and trials* through which the Lord has brought us to date – and to go *forward in the confidence* that the One who proved Himself faithful yesterday is still the same today – and will still be the same tomorrow – and indeed forever.

### **What then, I ask, about the Lord's proven ability to preserve and protect me?**

I do well to take a leaf out of David's book – about to face the great Philistine champion - one Goliath of Gath. King Saul regarded the young volunteer's offer to tackle the seasoned warrior as wholly unrealistic - 'Saul said to David, "You are not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him; for you are a youth, and he a man of war *from his youth*". Listen carefully to young David's response - 'Your servant used to keep his father's sheep, and when a lion or a bear came and took a lamb out of the flock, I went out after it and struck it, and delivered the lamb from its mouth; and when it arose against me, I caught it by its beard, and struck and killed it. Your servant has killed both lion and bear; and this uncircumcised Philistine will be like one of them, seeing he has defied the armies of the living God. Moreover David said, The Lord who delivered me out of the paw of the lion, and out of the paw of the bear, he will deliver me out of the hand ('paw' – same word) of this Philistine', 1 Sam. 17.34-37'.

Did you note that -'The Lord who delivered me ... will deliver me!' David may not have proved Saul's armour - and preferred to go down into the valley without it - but he *had* proved the living God - and had no intention of going down into that valley without Him. Nor should we underestimate David's exploits when defending his father's flock. He later wrote of a lion 'greedy of his prey', Psa. 17.12 – he didn't get that out of a nature book - he learnt all about it at first hand - he'd met more than one! And David was careful to give all the glory to God, freely acknowledging that, just as '*I ... delivered (the lamb) out of his mouth*', v.35, so '*the Lord ... delivered me out of his paw*'. And David was totally convinced that, what God had done in the wilderness of Judah, he could – and would – do in the valley of Elah!

This is the reasoning of faith. What God has done before, He is able to do again. We naturally compare Paul's confidence, expressed in 2 Cor. 1. 9-10, where, looking back to a time in Asia that he had seen himself as a condemned man under sentence of death – on the verge of despair – he wrote, 'We trust not in ourselves, but in God which raises the dead: who *delivered* us from so great a death, and *does deliver*: in whom we trust that he *will yet deliver* us'. And this confidence held firm to the very end of his days - for he wrote immediately preceding his parting greetings in the last of his epistles which have come down to us, '*I was delivered* out of the mouth of the lion. And the Lord *shall deliver* me from every evil work', 2 Tim. 4.17-18.

Oh, I have so much to learn from David and Paul. My own past experiences of God's preserving care should sustain and buttress my faith both in the present and for the future. Yes ... but does it?

### **And what, I ask, not only about the occasions when the Lord has proved His ability to preserve and to protect me, but to provide for me?**

Do I ever doubt His ability to meet my every need? Then let me recall *the past occasions* when He did just that and provided for me – often in the most remarkable of ways. And this is where my reading comes in - for, as I read, Jesus taught His disciples to do just that - 'Do you not understand, neither remember ...?', Matt. 16.9. <sup>3</sup> That's the word I need to underline - 'remember'.

The Lord and the disciples had crossed the Sea of Galilee – and they had now reached the side of the lake, Matt. 16.5, but the disciples had forgotten to bring any bread with them, v.5. - well actually they did have one loaf, Mark 8.14 - but that was so inadequate as not to merit mention when they discussed the meaning of His saying about the leaven - 'they reasoned with one another because they had no bread', Mark 8.16. In some ways it was a strange oversight on their part given that they had recently been handing out bread to a crowd who otherwise would have had 'nothing to eat' and would have gone hungry on their journey, Mark 8.2-3. But then that's life!

We know, of course, that when Jesus spoke of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees (and, leaning on Mark's account, the Herodians) He was referring to their teaching, Matt. 16.12 - using leaven as an object lesson to illustrate the insidious effect of that teaching - its tendency to spread and corrupt everything and everyone. The three Jewish parties were very different and, I guess, if we wanted to distinguish the effect of their teachings, we would attribute hypocrisy to the Pharisees, unbelief and scepticism to the Sadducees and worldliness and self-gratification to the Herodians. But in the context they had made common cause against Jesus - testing Him by demanding a sign from heaven.

This was nothing new - they had asked exactly the same before, 12.38. The twist behind their qualifier 'from heaven' probably lay in an ancient Jewish superstition that, though demons and false gods could perform signs on

earth, only God could perform signs out of heaven - such as - they held - the miraculous provision of manna, the arresting of the sun, the control of thunder and rain in the days of Samuel and the shutting and opening of heaven in the days of Elijah. The so-called letter of Jeremiah - a Jewish apocryphal book, says of the gods of Babylon, 'Neither can they shew signs in the heavens among the heathen'. In truth, there was no shortage of miraculous signs to accredit the claims of Jesus - but, as He pointed out to them, they were wilfully blind to these 'signs of the times', 16.3 - determined to reject Him and His message.<sup>4</sup>

But, in our passage, the Lord had to contend not only with the hostility of unbelieving Jews but with the painfully slow understanding of His own disciples - who entirely misunderstood His meaning. To them the word 'leaven' naturally suggested bread - and it was a short step in their minds to their failure to bring an adequate food supply with them. And so they concluded that Jesus was directing His remark at their negligence - that He was getting at them because they would now have to rely on the likes of the Pharisees, Sadducees and Herodians for something to eat. Such a construction was sad for several reasons - not least that they should have known Him better than to believe He could ever have been so petty and small minded.

You can sense our Lord's disappointment in His response - according to Mark's account, firing a barrage of no less than nine rapid questions, Mark 8.17-21 - including 'Do you not remember? When I broke the 5 loaves for the 5,000 - how many baskets full of fragments did you take up? When the 7 loaves to the 4,000 - how many baskets full did you take up?'

His concern was not that they had forgotten bread but that they had forgotten how He had sustained them and others on previous occasions. Their past experiences should have screamed out at them that a shortage of bread was no problem whatever to Him - that their literal interpretation of the word 'leaven' simply couldn't be right. And so He is compelled to jog their memories - pointing out, in effect, that One who had miraculously multiplied first 5 and then 7 loaves to feed first 5,000 and then 4,000 men - and filled first 12 and then 7 baskets with the remaining fragments, could surely satisfy the appetite of 13 men from one loaf. Indeed, even applying the smaller of the two ratios - of 7 loaves to 4,000 - one loaf would have fed 570 men - and there would have been enough fragments left over to fill a large basket. And there weren't 570 of them!

I love to note that before feeding the 4,000 in chapter 15, it was the One who Himself had once experienced very real pangs of hunger when He had fasted in the wilderness, Matt. 4.2, who told His disciples, 'I have compassion on the multitude because they have now remained with me three days and have nothing to eat, and I am not willing to send them away without food (the word 'fasted' in 4.2)', Matt. 15.32.

Yes - He took them to task for their 'forgetfulness' - but not the forgetfulness of v.5 - for the forgetfulness of vv.9-10. His concern lay not in the food which they failed to provide in the present but in the food He had successfully provided in the past!

But first Jesus traces their difficulty to its root cause - to the weakness of their faith - 'Oh, you of little faith', Matt. 16.8. And He rebukes them, not because they have brought little bread in their boat but because they have little faith in their heart. Alright - they may not have brought sufficient food with them - but they had the All-Sufficient One with them - who had more than once proved His ability to meet some tremendous needs.

According to Mark's gospel, He had asked an identical question before both of the miraculous feedings - namely, 'How many loaves have you?', Mark 6.38; 8.5. Now, again according to Mark's account, He wants to know 'How many baskets full of fragments did you take?', 8.19, 20. That is, He wants them to remember that He had not only provided sufficient food for large multitudes but that there had been enough and to spare - that many baskets had been filled with fragments - not, I hardly need say, with crumbs - being an entirely different word from that used by the Syrophenian/Canaanite woman in Matt. 15.27, 'the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their master's table'.

Again, according to Mark, they were able to quickly tell Him the number of baskets which they had filled on each occasion - namely 12 and 7. So, when prompted, they could recall the precise details of both incidents - they had after all been participants - had been personally involved - but, alas, the spiritual lesson of the past had been completely lost on them. Hence the Lord's question, 'Do you not yet understand?', v.9.<sup>5</sup>

Mark tells us that Jesus added, 'Having eyes, do you not see? And having ears, do you not hear?', Mark 8. 18. That is, they possessed the organs and wherewithal necessary to learn but they did not use them. I find it hard to believe that it is coincidence that this incident is sandwiched in Mark's gospel between two miracles - where men were brought to Jesus, where Jesus took them aside in each case, used both His spittle and His touch, and - more to the point - where He opened the ears of the one man, 7.35, and the eyes of the other, 8.23-25. 'Having eyes, do you not see? And having ears, do you not hear?'

Matthew closes his account of the incident by assuring his readers that he and his fellow-disciples finally got the point - coming to understand that Jesus had spoken - not about leaven which is found in bread - but about the pervasive teaching of the Pharisees and the Sadducees, 16.12.

My future is unknown to me. For all I know, I may soon be facing bigger changes than I expect - than I have programmed in for the next few months and years - disappointments, troubles, crises, even calamities - failing health, sudden and unexpected bereavement, fresh family problems, set backs in assembly life. I have no way of knowing. My doom and gloom list is endless - and I could so easily scan it with considerable apprehension and anxiety. But I know that, in considering my unknown future, the Lord wants me to take account of how He has proved Himself on my behalf many times in the past. For we all have our own special - personal - unique - history - and few, if any, of us haven't been through circumstances in which the hand of God has been evident and in which God has proved Himself both to and for us.

I have at home a set of old volumes entitled 'The Lord's dealings with George Muller' - the 'orphanage man' from Bristol, UK. They make fascinating - and encouraging - reading - and I can tell you that 'The Lord's dealings with Malcolm' - if they were ever to be written - would make nothing like as exciting reading - but I can tell you too they are no less real. So why, when new emergencies arise, do I wring my hands and call out, 'Whatever am I going to do? However am I going to cope?' - why do I insist on facing each fresh problem or crisis as if it was the very first I had ever faced - as if it was insurmountable - just as if the Lord had never met my need before? Why - oh why? This morning the Lord wants each of us to recall our past blessings, past deliverances and past provision and, with these in mind, to trust Him fully both for present and for the future. 'I'll praise Him for all that is past and trust Him for all that's to come'.

With an eye to the name 'Eben-ezer' - but nothing to do with Dicken's Scrooge, I will ask the prophet Samuel to close our morning session for us 'Hitherto (Thus far) has the Lord helped us!', 1 Sam. 7.12.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> G.W.F Hegel.

<sup>2</sup> Remember Lot's wife – 'A father was telling Bible stories to his young son. He said, "The man named Lot was warned to take his wife and flee out of the city, but his wife looked back and was turned to salt." His son looked puzzled. "Do you have a question", dad asked. "Yes, Dad", the boy replied, "What happened to the flea?"

<sup>3</sup> The two incidents followed the same general pattern : (1) Both occurred in a desert place. (2) In both instances there were many people - 'about 5,000 men ... about 4, 000 men'. (3) On both occasions our Lord was with His disciples, presumably the Twelve. (4) In both cases there was an inadequate supply of food on hand. (5) On both occasions, the Lord 'had compassion. (6) Both times the people were commanded to be seated - to recline. (7) On both occasions He gave thanks, broke and handed out through the disciples. (8) Both times "they did eat, and were filled". (9) In each instance there was more than enough food for all after the multiplication of the loaves and fish, and leftover portions were gathered up. (10) On both occasions, He then sent away the crowd.

There are, however, a number of notable dissimilarities in the two miracles.

A. *Mark 6:30–44 (5000)*

B. *Mark 8:1–9 (4000)*

A. 1. The multitude had been with the Lord one day.

B. 1. The multitude had been with the Lord three days.

A. 2. The disciples were instructed to go and see what supplies were available.

B. 2. The disciples knew, when they were asked, what supplies were available.

A. 3. Five loaves and two fish were on hand.

B. 3. Seven loaves and a few fish were on hand.

A. 4. The multitude was told to sit "upon the green grass."

B. 4. The multitude was told to sit "on the ground."

(In Mark 8, the people were instructed to be seated "on the ground," literally "on the soil". In the earlier miracle they were commanded to sit down "upon the green grass", Mark 6:39. The five thousand were fed in the springtime, for it was near the time of the Passover Feast (John 6:4). But here, later in the summer when in the desert place the mountaintop the grass would have been burned away, the four thousand were obliged to sit down on hard bare soil. In different season of year.)

A. 5. The Lord blessed the loaves.

B. 5. The Lord gave thanks for the loaves and later blessed the fish.

A. 6. Twelve baskets of fragments remained.

B. 6. Seven baskets of fragments remained.

A. 7. Five thousand men were fed, plus women and children.

B. 7. Four thousand men were fed, plus women and children.

We are no different from them. Few of us have not known circumstances in which the hand of God has met our necessities, be they related to redemption, His keeping power, or the needs of the soul. Yet when new emergencies arise we ask ourselves, "What shall I do?" while apparently forgetting experiences of the past in which the Lord helped and sustained us.

Was there a smaller blessing (7 baskets not 12) because the disciples had kept back 1 of their 8 loaves? (Cf Mark 8.5 with v. 14.) No – the baskets were significantly larger.

Twelve baskets were filled with leftovers after the feeding of the five thousand, seven baskets after the four thousand. But the baskets were not alike. In Mark 6:43 the word translated baskets indicates hand-baskets of stout wicker-work. The word in Mark 8.8 indicates much larger baskets - hampers or creels that could hold a large number of fish. This latter is the word employed in the account of Paul's having been let down from the wall of Damascus in a basket, Acts 9.25. The five thousand were fed at sundown of the one day that they were with Christ. Having traveled only a short distance, they carried lunch baskets to hold their modest supplies. The four thousand had been with the Lord Jesus for three days and some of them had come from far away, Mark 8. 2–3. Thus the baskets they had with them were hampers suitable for the circumstance. The food which was leftover, after all had eaten to the full, was sufficient to sustain them on their return journey. (The disciples didn't take it - hence only 'one loaf'.)

At the conclusion of Christ's Galilean ministry five thousand were fed. At the termination of His service among the Gentiles in the areas of Tyre and Sidon the hunger of four thousand was satisfied. His Judean ministry closed with the Passover Feast, which He celebrated with the Twelve, and at the same time He instituted the communion supper.

<sup>4</sup> The Pharisees and Sadducees asked Him to produce a sign from heaven. The Jews believed that demons could do signs on earth, but only God could produce a sign out of heaven. (Alford, Matt. 16.1 – 'in Jewish superstition it

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was held that demons and false gods could give signs on earth, but only the true God signs from heaven' – with reference to apocryphal Epistle of Jeremiah, verse 67 - where it is written of the gods of Babylon, 'Neither can they shew signs in the heavens among the heathen, nor shine as the sun, nor give light as the moon'. The Jews looked for such as manna from heaven, staying of sun, control of thunder and rain by Samuel, and rain by Elijah.)

<sup>5</sup> 'Are your hearts hardened?', Mark 8.17. Cf Mark 6.51-52, when He got into the ship the contrary wind ceased and they were 'very much exceedingly astonished in themselves' - 'for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened'. Nothing should have surprised. Failed grasp significance - needed ponder and think through implications - feeding of multitude spoke volumes about His Person and power – but also about His ability to provide.