

# Knowing God in the Word

That I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death. Philippians 3:10.

## Remembrance in the Afterlife

It seems that speculation about the life to come often ranges far beyond what most people know of the Biblical facts regarding the subject. Many people set forth numerous theories and ideas about what life will be like in the future, and it seems they do so without bothering to check their speculations against the Scriptures to see whether or not these things are so. Some of these ideas take on the character of "Christian myths" or "Christian fables," insomuch that they are so often repeated and so widely accepted that few seem to have any real knowledge as to whether they came from the Bible or not. In fact, some would hold to them as strongly as they would hold to any Biblical truth, just because they believe them and those they know believe them as well, so they conclude that they must be true. Yet for those of us who hold the Word of God as the highest authority in all such matters, we cannot afford to be found believing myths or fables just because the Christian world at large around us believes them. We must examine the Word of God, and find therein what it truly has to say regarding these things. Then, if it truly has something to say on the matter under consideration, we must discover what it says, and what it means by what it says. Only then can we know that we are believing the truth.

One of those ideas which some have accepted as true without much real speculation about the matter is that of memory in the life to come. We all know that there are certain memories in this life that bring us sorrow. We cringe to remember them, we weep to remember them, we are hurt every time we remember them, and such memories seem to have no power except to bring us pain. Other memories are full of guilt, reminding us of our sins. There are many who seem to conclude that they could never be happy as long as these memories remain. Thus, without any real consideration as to whether the Word of God upholds the idea or not, they conclude that we will not remember this life in the life to come.

This is a drastic idea, yet it is one I have heard quite a few people express. Others have a similar idea, but take it to less of an extreme. They think that we will remember this life, but only the good things. Anything bad, anything having to do with sin or sorrow or pain, will pass from our memories forever, and will eternally be forgotten. Others apply this idea to the unsaved. They encounter the problem in their theology that asks them, "How could one be happy and in eternal bliss if he remembers those who were unsaved who are currently suffering sorrow and pain in hell?" This is indeed a hard question, and one that those of a more contemplative nature who hold with the eternal conscious torment of the unsaved must come to wrestle with at one time or another. And so the solution to this that some have devised is to conclude that the saved in the life to come will not remember the unsaved, and so they will not sorrow over their lost condition or the torture they are currently experiencing. This is a convenient solution, yet does it really match up with the Word of God? For It is the Judge to which we must take all such matters for appeal. This is all too seldom done when it comes to this subject in particular.

The Bible does contain passages that speak of something "not being remembered" or ideas similar to this. In order to deal with this issue, we should examine this list of passages, so that we make our decision based on the facts, and not on the ideas or speculations of men. For the purposes of this study, I have merely used the New King James Version, and have not checked the original languages. Let us examine the passages in order, saving one passage in Isaiah for last.

The first passage we come upon is Job 24:19-20.

19. *As drought and heat consume the snow waters,  
So the grave consumes those who have sinned.*  
20. *The womb should forget him,  
The worm should feed sweetly on him;  
He should be remembered no more,  
And wickedness should be broken like a tree.*

This is talking about the grave consuming those who have sinned. The womb forgets him (his own mother,) the worm feeds on him (his body is destroyed,) and even the memory of him passes away. Thus, his wickedness is broken like a tree. Yet this is talking about memory in this world and in this life. It has nothing to do with memory in the life to come.

The next passage we will examine is Psalm 88:5.

5. *Adrift among the dead, Like the slain who lie in the grave, Whom You remember no more, And who are cut off from Your hand.*

The Psalmist dreads being like one whom the Lord remembers no more.

Next is Proverbs 31:7.

7. *Let him drink and forget his poverty, And remember his misery no more.*

In this passage, the drunken man no longer remembers his misery that led to him drinking. Again, this has to do with memory in this life. Moreover, this is only a temporary forgetfulness, since the memories will come back once he is sober.

Our next passage is Jeremiah 3:16.

16. *"Then it shall come to pass, when you are multiplied and increased in the land in those days," says the Lord, "that they will say no more, 'The ark of the covenant of the Lord.' It shall not come to mind, nor shall they remember it, nor shall they visit it, nor shall it be made anymore."*

Here, it is the Ark of the Covenant that is not remembered. This presents us with a problem, however, since the Ark is mentioned in the Bible. Can it be that people will literally forget it, when it is written about in the Word of God? Will the Bible then pass out of existence?

Our next passage to consider is Jeremiah 11:19.

19. *But I was like a docile lamb brought to the slaughter; and I did not know that they had devised schemes against me, saying, "Let us destroy the tree with its fruit, and let us cut him off from the land of the living, that his name may be remembered no more."*

Here, the enemies of the Lord Jesus hope to destroy Him so that his name will be remembered no more. Of course, they speak of memory in this life, since they have no power over memory in the life to come.

We meet again with the same idea in Ezekiel 3:20.

20. *Again, when a righteous man turns from his righteousness and commits iniquity, and I lay a stumbling block before him, he shall die; because you did not give him warning, he shall die in his sin, and his righteousness which he has done shall not be remembered; but his blood I will require at your hand.*

Notice what is not remembered here. This man had formerly been righteous, but now he had turned from that righteousness to commit iniquity. Therefore, it is the man's former righteousness that is not remembered. Does this mean that it is literally forgotten?

This same concept appears in Ezekiel 18:24.

*24. But when a righteous man turns away from his righteousness and commits iniquity, and does according to all the abominations that the wicked man does, shall he live? All the righteousness which he has done shall not be remembered; because of the unfaithfulness of which he is guilty and the sin which he has committed, because of them he shall die.*

Again in this passage, a formerly righteous man's righteousness is not remembered due to his later sin. Does this mean that his former righteousness is literally forgotten, or is there another meaning?

Ezekiel 21:32 contains the next occurrence of this idea.

*32. You shall be fuel for the fire; Your blood shall be in the midst of the land. You shall not be remembered, For I the Lord have spoken.*

We learn who it is who is not remembered a little earlier in verse 28, where the Lord says, "Thus says the Lord God concerning the Ammonites and concerning their reproach." Thus, the Ammonites are not to be remembered. Does this mean that they will literally be forgotten from history? Will the Word of God, the Bible, also be forgotten then? For how could they literally be forgotten while they are mentioned in the Word of God, unless His Word also perishes?

This concept of not remembering something is clearly a commonly used idea in Ezekiel, as our next occurrence is also in this book, Ezekiel 25:10.

*10. To the men of the East I will give it as a possession, together with the Ammonites, that the Ammonites may not be remembered among the nations.*

This says again that the Ammonites will not be remembered, to which I would add the same comments as regarding the previous verse discussed.

In the minor prophets, we find this concept of not remembering used in Hosea 2:17.

*17. For I will take from her mouth the names of the Baals, And they shall be remembered by their name no more.*

The Baals are no longer "remembered by their name." Does this mean that they will be remembered by a different name, or remembered but nameless? What does "remembered" indicate here?

Zechariah 13:2 contains another use of this idea of not remembering.

*2. "It shall be in that day," says the Lord of hosts, "that I will cut off the names of the idols from the land, and they shall no longer be remembered. I will also cause the prophets and the unclean spirit to depart from the land."*

Again, the names of idols are no longer remembered. Does this have to do with literal memory, or something else?

The next passage is our only occurrence of this idea in the New Testament, Hebrews 8:12.

*For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more."*

Will God literally forget the sinful and lawless things done?

Now, let us back up and return to the final passage where this phrase occurs, the one I passed over in Isaiah. This passage is Isaiah 65:17.

*17. For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth; And the former shall not be remembered or come to mind.*

This would be the "proof text" those who claim a loss of memory concerning this life would turn to to prove their ideas. Yet does this literally mean that those who live in the new heavens and the new earth will forget all about the former heavens and the former earth? Is there literally no remembrance of this life or the things of this life? For if so, then the Bible Itself must be forgotten, since most of the things it speaks of have to do with this life and the things of this life!

I do not believe that this is what this verse means. The passages I have quoted above show, I believe, that in the Bible, "remembering" does not merely have to do with having a memory in the mind. Rather, remembering has to do with taking action based on that memory.

When the Lord remembers someone no more, as in Psalm 88:5, that means that that is the end of possible existence for that person. Someday, all men will be raised from the dead, both the righteous and the wicked (Acts 24:15.) As long as this resurrection is in view, there is hope for all men in that they will live again. Once God has condemned someone as wicked and remembers that person no more, however, that means that that person will never be raised from the dead again, and literally he will never again be visited by the Lord, even in memory, for his good. This does not mean that his memory is literally erased from the minds of anyone who knew him. The wicked are not a skeleton that God wants to hide in His closet or sweep under the rug. It is not impossible for us to serve God in eternal perfection unless we totally forget all those who failed to make it there. This is not what the passage means.

The Ark of the Covenant is not eradicated from people's memories. It is mentioned in the Word of God, so it can never be forever forgotten. But what does happen is that people no longer view it as an object to be looked up to, venerated, honored, and celebrated. God has removed His presence from the ark, it has ceased to exist, and all customs and laws regarding it have ceased. People may remember it in their memories, but never will anyone seek to rebuild it or to commemorate it or otherwise celebrate it. It will have passed off the scene, it will no longer be a part of God's religious plan for men, and thus it will no longer be remembered.

In the case of the formerly righteous man who turns to iniquity, no action is taken to reward him for his one-time righteousness. All actions that might have been taken have been erased by his later wickedness. All actions that will be taken in judgment will have to do with his wickedness, not with his preceding righteousness. His former righteousness has no effect on his ultimate fate, and thus it is no longer remembered.

In the case of the Ammonites, it is clear to me that not being remembered has to do, not with literal memory, for that will continue as long as the Bible endures, but rather with any chance of restoration they might have. No one will ever make a move to bring the Ammonites back to power. No one will work to restore an Ammonite nation or bloodline. Nothing will ever be done to bring back to them an independence and a government. No action will ever be taken to restore them. This is how they are not remembered. This does not mean that no individual Ammonites will ever be saved, or that no Ammonite will receive eternal life. Yet the Ammonites as a nation, a people, and a government will have ceased to exist. No remembrance will ever be made for the Ammonites.

The Baals and other idols are not remembered by their names. One's name has to do with the reputation one has, or the esteem in which others hold one. If the idols are no longer remembered

by their names, this means that they are no longer remembered by their reputations as powerful gods, but rather they are remembered as false gods, empty images, and worthless deceptions. They do dwell in memory, but only as this, and not by the reputations they once had. That is how their names are no longer remembered.

Does God literally forget all sinful and lawless deeds? I do not believe that God will forget that we were ever sinners whom He had to redeem (although He may forget which specific sins we have committed individually. Being God, this is certainly possible with Him, if He wishes it.) This passage does not have to do with literal memory. Rather, and far more importantly, it means that God will never call the sins and lawless deeds of His people into mind in order to blame them for them or to judge them for doing them. In other words, God will never remember these things in order to call people into account for them. This passage promises that, for His people, the punishment will be canceled, and the debt owed will be forgiven. The sins we have committed will never be brought to remembrance before God. Whether or not He remembers that we did them, He will never blame us for them. Of course, this is possible because of the work Christ did on the cross when He died for our sins. This is the wonderful truth taught by this passage.

Finally, we come to the passage in Isaiah. I believe that this passage, too, does not have to do with literal memory. In this context, I believe the indication is that the former earth will never be celebrated, will never be looked at with fondness or nostalgia, and will never be desired that it might return. No commemoration of the old heavens and earth will ever be made. No one will speak of those times as “the good old days,” or wish they could go back to them. We will be able to remember the old earth, but we will never long for it. What is new will be so much better that it would never enter our minds to want the old back again in any way. That is the truth taught here.

One last thing must be said regarding the sorrows and heartaches we face in this life. As I said in beginning this article, I believe that many have embraced this idea of having no memory of our past life in the life to come in order to provide a solution to all the terrible pains and heartaches and sorrow they see around them, or that they themselves have experienced. Many have hurts that are never fully healed, guilt that is never fully eradicated, or sorrow that never really ceases. These experience such pain and heartache, and find it so impossible to be relieved of the burden which they live under, that they cannot imagine that they could even in the next life be happy unless all memory of this pain and sorrow were erased.

To answer this argument, let us consider Revelation 21:4. Here, we read,

*4. “And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away.”*

The interpretation that is usually given of this verse is that, in the life to come, we no longer are able to form tears that overflow from our eyes and flow down our cheeks, or that we are no longer capable of feeling sorrow. This is a simplistic interpretation that lacks real reflection. In order for someone to dry your tears, you have to be crying in the first place. In order to be crying, you must be feeling sorrow. We might imagine the tender picture here of a father using a handkerchief to dry the tears of his young child as he holds him in his arms. This is what our Father will do for us. The child stops crying based on the father’s assurance that everything is going to be all right. And in the time to come, our tears will be dried as our Father does not just assure us, but also makes things right. Our tears are dried as our sorrows are reversed. All the things that hurt us and caused us pain are at last made right under the Father’s powerful ministrations. There is no one else who could possibly do this. There are no natural means possible for removing all the hurts and sorrows of this life. Only God could dry all the tears of His children, and someday, this verse assures us, He will do so. Then, we will no longer have any cause for sadness or sorrow. It is not that our capacity to be sad has ended, but rather that there is no longer any reason at all for us ever to be sad again. This is how our sorrows are reversed: not by forgetting them, but by having them fixed at last.

To close, teaching that we have no memory is almost equal with denying that we have any resurrection at all. The fact is that much of what makes you “you” are your memories. If you suddenly remembered nothing about your past life at all, you would be a very different person indeed, and no longer could you be called the person that others had known up until that time. Only if your memory was restored could we ever say that you were truly with us again. In the same way, if we do not remember our previous life in the life to come, then the truth that we will be raised from the dead is all but nullified. If I do not remember who I am, then how can it truly be said that I am raised from the dead? If something that is called “Nathan Johnson” is raised, but it doesn’t remember a thing about who Nathan Johnson is, then can I truly say that it is I? I do not believe so. If I, memories and all, am not raised from the dead, then God failed to keep His promise to raise me, pure and simple. Praise God that the truth of resurrection is sure, and that we, the same people we are now, will be raised from the dead, to experience the joyful future the Lord has in store for us! May that Day come soon.

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