

God Remembers

Numbers 7:1–17, 84–88

One of the most irritating things about growing old is a noticeable loss of memory. For about a year now I have tried to remember the word *synecdoche*. Now maybe that word isn't important to you. I understand. There were many years I never thought about that word at all. A synecdoche is a figure of speech where a part is put for the whole. We use it all the time and hardly think about it. Take the expression "a hired hand." A farmer needs hired hands at harvest time. Maybe he's trying to get his harvest into the barn before bad weather comes. There's a lot of work to do all at once, or he'll lose his harvest. He could certainly use a few hired hands. You cannot simply order "hands" through a catalog. Hands need arms, arms need shoulders, shoulders need muscles; muscles need hearts and stomachs and brains, and so on. A hired hand is a worker that helps with a task. We intuitively understand that. A worker is a person. Some people are hard workers, many are not. The farmer wants to hire good workers—good "hired hands." That is a synecdoche. There are synecdoches in the Bible. Jesus said to Peter, "*Flesh and blood* has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven." What does "flesh and blood" mean? Clearly, *people!* *Flesh and blood* is a synecdoche. I remember the concept, but sometimes can't remember the word.

So what do I do? I write myself a note. I have the word *synecdoche* on a sticky note on the front of my computer monitor. It's been there for almost two years now. Lately I've been able to remember the word, and I congratulated myself. I seemed to be making progress. But as I sat down to write this sermon and tried to write the word *synecdoche*, it just wouldn't come. I wracked my brain for a few minutes, then gave up and looked for my note. There was that word: *synecdoche*. How annoying!

Sometimes, when we want to remember something, we write a note. When we go to the store, we take along a shopping list. Sometimes I get to a store and realize I forgot my list. The list had ten items on it. I try to visualize the note and I do manage to remember some of the things—maybe even nine of them. But when I get home I suddenly realize that I had forgotten the tenth item, and maybe it was just the item that Norma had specifically asked me to pick up. Memory loss can be frustrating! Our text today shows us that *God* remembers.

Our Scripture reading was from Numbers 7. In case you didn't notice, it is a *long* chapter—89 verses in all. Now we didn't read the entire chapter—only 22 of the verses. If you read ahead to prepare for worship today and read all the chapter, you probably noticed there's a lot of repetition here. It was a very important occasion. Israel had camped in the desert to construct the tabernacle. It was very detailed and elaborate and expensive and took a lot of work and labor to put it all together. It would be the center of God's worship—the place of God's throne on

earth. It had to be made exactly as God had specified. It was a big project. The Israelites had donated the raw materials—gold, silver, brass, cloth, animal hides, precious stones, olive oil, incense, and many other things that were needed. God told Moses to hire a man named Bezaleel—a skilled craftsman—to oversee the project. Now it was finished, and it was going to be dedicated and put into service. There were a few items that still were needed. How were the really heavy parts of the tabernacle going to be carried? There were twenty bronze pillars, each ten cubits high—that’s about fifteen feet. They were solid bronze—very heavy. Many items in the tabernacle, such as the ark of the covenant and the golden lampstand, were carried by the Levites—carried on poles, by hand, with one man at each end. There were teams of men that carried them—carrying for a few hours, then replaced by other carriers, so the first could rest. But how could fifteen-foot solid bronze pillars be carried? They would be too heavy. God was indicating that the really heavy items were to be transported on six large covered carts or wagons, each pulled through the desert by a pair of oxen. Oxen are castrated bulls—draft animals. They are strong, and can pull really heavy loads. Here in the U.S., the covered wagons used during the westward expansion were often pulled by oxen. They were preferred for their reliability and endurance over long distances.

So where did these oxen and wagons come from? Our chapter tells the story. Israel was a nation, about two to three million strong. There were twelve tribes, each descended from one of the sons of Jacob—the twelve tribes of Israel. The twelve tribes went in together to supply the needed wagons and oxen. The text in each case attributes the gift to the tribal leader, but it should be obvious that such lavish and generous gifts were beyond the capacity of any single Israelite. Wagons with their covers, silver, gold, nineteen animals. Most of *us* could hardly afford such an expensive gift. Moreover, the whole nation had so recently been a slave people in Egypt. When they left, after the LORD had sent ten devastating plagues on Egypt, the Egyptians were so glad to be rid of them that they sent them away loaded with jewelry and monetary gifts. Here were a slave people that were possessors of silver and gold, that had large flocks and herds. Amazing!

Our chapter tells us that two tribes pooled their resources together to furnish a specially-built wagon. There were six wagons in all—one for each two tribes. Each two tribes furnished an ox. Six wagons, twelve oxen. These were given as free-will gifts to the LORD. They were to be given to the tribe of Levi to help them with their work. The Levites were to take responsibility for them—care for them, feed and water the oxen, grease the wagon wheels, and hitch up the oxen—so that Israel would be ready to journey whenever the pillar-shaped fiery cloud would move.

At the beginning of our chapter we see that Moses, personally called by God at the burning bush, and having led God’s people out of Egypt, had overseen the setting up of the tabernacle whose pattern had been given to him on the mountain.

But before it could be actually used in God’s worship, it had to be “anointed” (marked out by God as his property) and “consecrated” (publicly set apart for God’s use). The leaders of the twelve tribes were to bring offerings on behalf of the people and present them before the tabernacle—before the presence of God.

In verse 4 and following the LORD instructs Moses to accept the people’s gifts, and specifies that they are to be given to the Levites to be used in the tabernacle service. Moses then assigns two of the six wagons and their oxen to the sons of Gershon, who we know from chapter 3, had responsibility for transporting the tabernacle, the tent and its covering, the screen for the door of the tabernacle, the screen for the door of the court, the hangings of the court and their cords,¹ and the other four wagons and their oxen to the sons of Merari, who were responsible for the tabernacle’s boards, bars, pillars, sockets, utensils, and the pillars of the court, with their sockets, pegs, and cords.² Moses did not give wagons or oxen to the sons of Kohath, because their duty included transporting the holy ark of the covenant, the table of showbread, the golden lampstand, the altar of burnt offering and altar of incense, the utensils of the sanctuary and the screen,³ all which had to be carried on their shoulders, using the poles which the priests were to put in place before the people set out on the next stage of their journey.

It is noteworthy that the LORD commanded that the wagons and oxen be given to the Levites, but *Moses* was to use his God-given wisdom to assign the wagons and oxen to the sons of Gershon, Merari and Kohath, as their work required. Notice verse 6, “So Moses took the carts and the oxen, and gave them to the Levites.” God gave specific instructions but left it up to the wisdom of his servant to distribute the carts and oxen appropriately. There is an important principle here. In like manner today, Christ calls ministers of the Word, ruling elders and deacons to ecclesiastical office, but leaves the specifics of writing creeds, confessions, catechisms, a form of government, book of discipline and directory for public worship to the officers to work out according as is most needful in present circumstances. The church is free to choose pastors, elect moderators, and send out foreign missionaries according to the principles of godly wisdom. Our Confession teaches: “there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed.”⁴ God’s people submit to the spiritual oversight of their leaders and hold them accountable to govern always in accordance with the unchanging principles of the Word.

¹ Num. 3:25–26

² Num. 3:36–37

³ Num. 3:31

⁴ Westminster Confession 1.6, <https://opc.org/documents/CFLayout.pdf#page=6>

In verse 10 of our text we see that the leaders of each tribe offered expensive and lavish gifts—one a day on successive days. God had specified, “They shall offer their offering, one leader each day, for the dedication of the altar.” If you compare the paragraphs beginning at verse 12 and following, each paragraph contains the name of the offerer and the specifics of his gifts. You will note that the gifts given by each man gives are exactly the same! There is a lot of repetition in this section. It is a little like the song “The Twelve Days of Christmas” (“Ten lords a-leaping, nine ladies dancing, eight maids a-milking, seven swans a-swimming, six geese a-laying, five golden rings, four calling birds, three French hens, two turtle doves, and a partridge in a pear tree”).

Now “The Twelve Days of Christmas” is a fun song, but what we have in Numbers 7 is actually very important. Twelve paragraphs of exactly six verses each, enumerating the gifts given. These items—“one silver platter . . . one silver bowl of seventy shekels . . . both of them full of fine flour mixed with oil as a grain offering; one gold pan of ten shekels, full of incense; one young bull, one ram . . . one male lamb in its first year, as a burnt offering; one kid of the goats as a sin offering; and as the sacrifice of peace offerings: two oxen, five rams, five male goats, and five male lambs in their first year”—are important in their significance, but, most of all, they were important to God. They teach us an important principle: that *God remembers our works of service, done in accordance with his will*. Take special note of this. God remembers his own works of creation and providence, but he remembers his people’s works, too—done in obedience to his Word—and wants us to remember them. This is why churches keep records and write histories. This is why faithful sessions and other church courts keep permanent records of their minutes in minute books. The Bible assures us that “God is not unjust to *forget* your work and labor of love which you have shown toward his name, in that you have ministered to the saints, and do minister” (Heb. 6:10). God remembers!

Each offering in this chapter was freely given by one of the tribes of Israel. A lot of thought and preparation had gone into the gifts. Each gift was identical. This demonstrated that the various tribes of Israel were fully invested in the work of the LORD. The larger and smaller tribes each gave equally. One tribe gave its gift on each day, for twelve days in a row. No tribe could complain that it had been shortchanged or had not received adequate attention. The work of the tabernacle—dealing mainly with the forgiveness of sins and the pure worship of God—was the work of *all* Israel, even though only one tribe (the tribe of Levi) devoted full time to God’s service.

It is painful to bring up, but years ago I would read this chapter and ask myself, why all this repetition? Why this waste of writing materials and ink? Why this use of copyists’ time and energy in carefully and painstakingly writing all these words? Wouldn’t it have been easier for God just to have summarized everything and said,

“The leaders of each of the twelve tribes of Israel offered identical offerings on each of twelve successive days. Here is what they offered.” Wouldn’t that have conveyed the basic idea without using so many words? Wouldn’t the brevity have made the Bible less intimidating and more user friendly? Might that not have made the church’s task of evangelism easier? Would not a shorter Bible without so much distracting detail have been more inviting? Couldn’t God have seen this? Why did he make things so difficult?

But now as I look back upon my younger self I am ashamed. “*All Scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable.*”⁵ The God whose Holy Spirit inspired Scripture certainly considered every angle. He is infinitely wise. No part of the Bible is unnecessary. God intended that Numbers chapter 7 would have exactly 89 verses. He himself inspired these words and put them in Holy Scripture for his own glory. Who are we to reply against God?

Why were all these words included in God’s eternal Word? To teach us that *God remembers our works of service, done in accordance with his will*. If God remembers, then it’s our duty to remember, too. This is why we ought to read our Bibles every day. This is why it is helpful to keep a prayer journal. This is part of the reason why God wants his people to keep his Word in their hearts and on their lips, wanting us to cite it and refer to it in our daily conversation.

Notice that each tribe’s gifts included animal sacrifices. These are part of the ceremonial law that has been fulfilled in Christ and are no longer binding on the church. In addition to the silver platter, silver bowl, and golden pan that were to be used in the tabernacle ceremonies, each tribe offered a *grain* offering; a young bull, ram, and male lamb as a *burnt* offering; a kid of the goats as a *sin* offering; and *peace* offerings: two oxen, five rams, five male goats, and five male lamb yearlings. Notice the different offerings.

The grain offering (מִנְחָה). The silver platter and silver bowl were “full of fine flour mixed with oil as a grain offering” (7:13). It was a voluntary expression of gratitude and devotion to God, recognizing his goodness and provision—an acknowledgement of God’s blessings and an expression of fellowship with him.

The burnt offering (עֹלָה) was an act of pure worship (7:15). The entire animal was consumed on the altar, symbolizing complete surrender and dedication to the LORD. The Hebrew word can be translated *whole burnt offering*. The smoke of the whole burnt offering ascended up to God. Nothing was for the priest or for the worshiper. The whole thing belonged to God. God’s people are to freely offer their bodies as a living sacrifice.

⁵ 2 Tim. 3:16

The sin offering (תִּשְׂאֵף). The purpose of the sin offering was to atone for unintentional sins committed by individuals or the covenant community, cleansing them and restoring fellowship with God (7:16).

The peace offerings (הִשְׂלֵמִים) served to express gratitude and celebrate peace and fellowship between the worshiper and God (7:17). This was the only offering that included a communal meal that included the worshiper, symbolizing joy and communion with God and others.

Here is a principle that can be seen in this chapter: Here were extravagant, costly gifts, given to God, *but with them came sin offerings*. Costly gifts cannot purchase our salvation. We might give an expensive gift of time or money to God and think that we have done him a favor, but the fact remains that we are sinners standing sorely need of atonement—of reconciliation to God. How can we get this? Only *one* way, and that is by means of the way that God himself provided: through animal sacrifices (under the old covenant) which foreshadowed the death of Christ, the perfect sacrifice offered once-for-all to put away sin (Heb. 9:26). Now that the perfect sacrifice of Christ has been offered, there is no longer any need for animal sacrifices; in fact, it would be sinful and egregious for the church ever to reinstitute them—something that dispensationalist churches teach is going to happen after Christ returns. The whole idea is unbiblical and dishonoring to the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ.

The pastor of the church where I was raised would speak of the “sin problem.” Now I was a problem-solver and liked the challenge of solving problems. But I didn’t realize what a big problem the sin problem is. In fact, it’s the biggest problem man faces, though few people recognize it. Here is a problem that man cannot solve on his own. We have offended the God of absolute holiness and cannot be accepted into his presence. The only one who measures up to God’s perfect standard is the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the only one of whom the Father ever said, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased”—the only one! Let that sink in. Out of all the millions and billions of people who have ever lived, only one—the Virgin-born Son of God—measured up to the Father’s standard of absolute perfection. The rest of us fall short, and need a Savior. That is our only hope of heaven. We vainly try to assure ourselves that we are not too bad—we just have to try a little harder. Make no mistake: that is *not* the Gospel.

Many churches today no longer preach the Gospel. Or they distort it by saying that man needs to add to what Christ did upon the cross by living a life of good works—something that is impossible. They say that if we live a good life that pleases the Lord, we can be saved. They purposely ignore the fact that the Bible says that “*All* our righteousnesses are like filthy rags.”⁶ No matter how hard we try,

⁶ Isa. 53:6

our best works cannot please God. If we try to be saved by doing good works, at the final day we will be rejected. Only the perfect righteousness of Christ earns the Father's acceptance. If you want to go to heaven you must call upon the name of the Lord. Tell him: "I know that I am a sinner. I have no hope of heaven without the righteousness of Christ. Please save me for Jesus' sake." The Bible says, "Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord *shall be saved.*"⁷

But don't miss the main lesson of our chapter: God remembers our good works, done in obedience to him. Malachi 3:16 says, "Then they that feared the LORD spake often one to another: and the LORD hearkened, and heard it, and a *book of remembrance* [סֵפֶר זִכָּרוֹן] was written before him for them that feared the LORD, and that thought upon his name." The LORD inspired Moses to write down exactly what each tribe brought. It is kind of like a member of the family writing down what each person received as a Christmas gift, so that appropriate thank-you notes can be written.

Lord, grant us grace to serve you honorably, knowing that our good works, done in obedience to you, are recorded in the book of heaven. Amen.

⁷ Rom. 10:13