

Not on the Fly!

Numbers 9:1–14

We started on this text last Lord's day. Our message was entitled "A Gracious Reminder." God reminded his people that the Passover was coming, and they needed to be ready. He was not obligated to give them a reminder, but he did it out of his free grace.

It has now been 11½ months since the LORD miraculously rescued his covenant people out of Egypt. Each family was to slaughter the Passover lamb on the fourteenth day of the month and smear its blood around their door. God spared his people from his bloody judgment exacted on Egypt. Notice in verses 2–3 that the Jews were to keep the Passover "at its *appointed time*." God says this *twice*. The timing was very important. Whether it was convenient or not, God's people were to celebrate the Passover on the fourteenth day of the first month. God wanted to burn into his people's memory the significance of that date. The time was significant as well: "twilight": literally "between the two evenings"—between high noon, when the sun began to set, and 6 PM, when it would be fully set—that is, 3 PM. This was the same time that "Christ our Passover" would voluntarily yield up his spirit and die in his people's place. Mark's Gospel records that "at the *ninth* hour" (that is, 3 PM—the day began at 6 AM) "Jesus cried with a loud voice, and gave up the ghost."¹ Our Lord fulfilled the Passover exactly. "Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us."² Praise his holy Name! At the precise moment when the Passover lamb would be sacrificed at the temple in Jerusalem and in thousands of homes all over Israel, Jesus, the Lamb of God, would die for our sins, fulfilling this Old Testament type.

Now, we've heard this truth many times, and that's by design, for Christ instructed his ministers to "preach *the Gospel*."³ That is to be the preacher's topic every Lord's day, no matter what text he is preaching from. Clearly, God intended his people to hear the Gospel every week of our lives. We all need to know that we are sinners estranged from a holy God and bound for eternity in the Lake of Fire. Our only hope is the blood of Jesus Christ which cleanses us from our sins. If a preacher is preaching any other message than the Gospel, then he is failing his people. But we must at all times "take heed how [we] hear" (Luke 8:18). The right way to hear is to respond in worship: *Yes, Lord, thank you for your Word, thank you for your Gospel, thank you for fulfilling Old Testament Scripture, thank you that you are my Passover Lamb, I am yours forever!* To hear the Gospel and say, "Ho, hum—how boring!" is sinful and wicked and must be repented of. Be honest

¹ Mark 15:34, 37

² 1 Cor. 5:7

³ Mark 16:15

now: how do you respond when you hear that Jesus Christ is the Passover Lamb who suffered and died for you? Your response is telling!

In verse 6 we read of “certain men who were defiled by a human corpse, so that they could not keep the Passover on that day.” They were alarmed when they realized that they would be prevented from keeping the Passover because they were ceremonially unclean. And rather than thinking *Oh, goody, we got out of that obligation!* they were disheartened and dismayed.

The other day I saw a little bit of the old TV show “The Waltons.” An evangelist had come to town and was holding meetings. Mrs. Walton really wanted the family to go, but Mr. Walton and “John-Boy,” the oldest son, were not interested. No matter how much Mrs. Walton pled, they would not go. The lesson that came through was that religion is just for women and children—not for men. *Real men* do not go to church! Young intellectuals do not go to church! They go to school where they learn that there is no Creator-God. Everything evolved and came into being strictly by chance.

But this is not true! The Lord Jesus was an intellectual—the Truth incarnate. He was a man’s man. His biceps were well developed from years working in his father’s carpentry shop. The apostle Paul was an intellectual—ever read Romans and Galatians? Yet he was totally sold-out to Christ and answered his call to take the Gospel to the Mediterranean world, enduring much persecution and punishment along the way. No matter! People who were perishing needed to hear about Christ!

So it was in our text today! Here were *men* (אֲנָשִׁים)—*adult males*!—who loved to worship God and didn’t want to miss out. Here were men who genuinely wanted to keep the Passover—to remember the mighty work of God that had delivered them from enslavement in Egypt one year earlier. They didn’t want to miss out on celebrating the Passover.

And they didn’t waste any time. Our text tells us that “they came before Moses and Aaron *that day*.” They explained their situation. They had been defiled by handling a human corpse. This was no doubt a situation beyond their control. There had been a death, and strong men needed to carry out the body for burial. So they asked Moses and Aaron: “Why are we kept from presenting the offering of the LORD at its appointed time?” They wanted to worship God for his mighty work of delivering them out of Pharaoh’s clutches one year earlier.

Remembering God’s mighty works is a practice that God commands; it is glorifying to him. God wants us to *remember* his mighty works. His works were done for a purpose. This is something that the church in every age is advised to do. Consider three Psalms.

Psalm 105:5, “*Remember* his marvelous works that he hath done, his wonders, and the judgments of his mouth.”⁴ This is an imperative—a command: *Remember* God’s marvelous works! It is a duty. To *remember* is the duty of every Christian. This is why we need to read our Bibles and attend the preaching of God’s Holy Word, to learn God’s mighty works and fix them in our minds.

Psalm 77:11, “I will *remember* the works of the LORD: surely I will *remember* thy wonders of old.” Here, godly Asaph accepts this duty—but not at all grudgingly; he commits himself to remember, and *repeats* his solemn promise: “I will *remember* . . . I will *remember*.”

Psalm 143:5, “I *remember* the days of old; I *meditate* on all thy works; I *muse* on the work of thy hands.” God pulls out all the stops in this one—three coordinating verbs for emphasis: “remember,” “meditate,” “muse.” David is the speaker. He is keenly committed not to let God’s mighty works slip out of his memory. He is going to *remember*, *meditate* and *muse* upon them. “Remember” means to call to mind. If we don’t go over precious truths, if we don’t sing the songs of Zion, if we don’t regularly review the Bible verses and catechism questions we have memorized, then we are prone to forget. Keeping these things in mind is costly, for it requires effort and discipline. Christ’s disciples must be disciplined. We should emulate the apostle Paul, who said, “I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.”⁵

The other two verbs are important too. The word translated “meditate” is very expressive; it means *read in an undertone, ponder by talking to oneself*.⁶ Now we may think it strange to be walking around talking to ourself. When we hear someone talking to no one in particular, we may wonder if he is all there. But there are times when talking to ourself is for a good purpose—think of an actor about to go on stage, whispering his lines as a last-minute reminder. But whatever *man* may think, there is no doubt that *God* is pleased when he hears our lips recounting his wonderful works. He made us to reflect his glory.

The word translated “muse” means *to occupy our attention on*.⁷ This, too, requires effort. God wants you to focus your mind on him.

Christian, God wants you to “remember,” “meditate” and “muse” on his mighty works. Saving his people from Egyptian slavery by killing the firstborn of Egypt, sparing his elect by his blood, and finally persuading the cruel Pharaoh to let God’s people go, is something we are to remember.

⁴ Cf. 1 Chron. 16:12

⁵ 1 Cor. 9:24–27 ESV

⁶ William L. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, הגה

⁷ Op. cit., שיח

How prone we are to forget things—not only from a memory that grows weaker with age, but even worse, from not properly treasuring those things in the first place. Now there are things we want to forget. There are things we *ought* to forget (“*forgetting* those things that are behind”: past indiscretions that have been confessed to God, and that he himself has promised to forget through the Gospel—praise his name). But there are things that we ought *never* to forget, and God’s mighty works are right up there at the top of the list: the work of creation, the work of redemption, the many miracles recorded in Holy Scripture. God *intends* that his people remember them. He is *honored* when his people remember them.

Yesterday was our fifty-sixth wedding anniversary. Several times this past week I remembered it and discussed it with Norma. On Friday I thought: *tomorrow is our anniversary*. The first time I saw Norma yesterday I was just getting in from my morning walk. She greeted me at the door with a twinkle in her eye. I couldn’t figure out what that was all about, so I made small talk and took off my hat and shoes. We sat down to breakfast and worked on a crossword puzzle together. Then I got a text from our daughter: “Happy anniversary!” Stupidly I said, “Oh, that’s right—hey, hon, did you remember, today’s our anniversary?” She replied, “Yes, I knew. I was waiting for you.”

God has given man the gift of memory. It is one of his greatest gifts. Can you imagine what life would be like without memory? Remembering promises, remembering to do things, remembering people’s names, remembering where you put things—all of these are important to human life. Individuals, couples, families, churches, and even nations have special memories. I got an email from Facebook yesterday regarding our anniversary. I get multiple letters and postcards in the mail reminding me to vote. We are told to “Remember the Alamo!” Remember Pearl Harbor! Remember 9/11! And on it goes. We write ourselves notes. We keep a shopping list, a Christmas card list. We pray that we don’t get Alzheimers or dementia.

My dad was always so organized. He got up before dawn five days a week, dressed, shaved, sat down to breakfast and got out the door in plenty of time to be early to work. He paid his taxes on time. He didn’t take on debt. He and Mom each had a will. He was a deacon at church and befriended numerous fatherless children, picking them up for Sunday school and doing nice things for them. Six weeks before retirement from Detroit Edison Company, where he worked his whole career, he was assaulted by a couple thugs in an alley on Detroit’s north side, where he had stopped to check on a job site. They mercilessly beat him on the head with a pipe and left him for dead. He had surgery to remove clotting on the brain, which saved his life—sort of. From that time on he needed 24-hour care. Mom stayed beside him the whole time, but sometimes Dad didn’t know her or remember her name. My strong, capable father was just a shadow of his old self, his memory

mostly gone. I pray that none of us turn out like that, but no matter what happens, we are in God's hands. He knows what is best. If you have a *strong* memory, then exercise it in the things of the Lord! If you have a *weak* memory, then exercise it in the things of the Lord!

But notice something in our text: When the men came to Moses, saying, "Why are we kept from presenting the offering of the LORD at its appointed time," what did Moses answer? What he said was very instructive. He said, "Stand still, that I may hear what the LORD will command concerning you."

Here was the great prophet, personally called by God to lead his people out of Egypt. Moses grew up in the palace as the adopted son of Pharaoh's daughter. He was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians. God called him at the burning bush. The LORD spoke out of the burning bush: "Moses, Moses." And he said, "Here I am." God said, "Come now . . . I will send thee to Pharaoh, that thou mayest bring forth my people the children of Israel out of Egypt." Here was the man who was singularly called by God to the office of prophet. But now, a group of men who were ceremonially unclean stood before him and Aaron. They wanted to observe the Passover, but they could not, because they were unclean. Here were men who had been paying attention to the Word of the LORD! They remembered that the LORD had said, "The person who touches any unclean thing, such as human uncleanness, an unclean animal, or any abominable unclean thing, and who eats the flesh of the sacrifice of the peace offering that belongs to the LORD, that person shall be cut off from his people" (Lev. 7:21). They made the connection between the peace offering and the Passover—very astute! They had been meditating on Holy Scripture.

These men were in a difficult spot. They knew that the Israelites were expressly commanded to celebrate the Passover,⁸ and that if they didn't keep the Passover, they must be cut off from God's people. On the other hand, they knew that if they ate while ceremonially unclean, they must also be cut off. They would be cut off either way! What should they do?

Surely Moses and Aaron wanted to be helpful. Here were some godly men who wanted to do the right thing. Their humility was exemplary. But the LORD had not spoken to this particular issue. It is noteworthy that *Moses and Aaron did not just answer their questioners on the fly—making it up out of their own heads right then and there, so to speak*. Rather, Moses said, "Stand still, that I may hear what the LORD will command concerning you."

Moses deferred to the LORD. He wanted to be able to return an answer that originated in the mind of God, an answer that would stand the test of time, an

⁸ Ex. 12:47

answer that was authoritative and definitively expressed God's will. The rest of our text this morning is not the word of Moses at all. Rather, it is the word of God.

“Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ‘Speak to the children of Israel, saying: “If anyone of you or your posterity is unclean because of a corpse, or is far away on a journey, he may still keep the LORD’s Passover. On the fourteenth day of the *second* month, at twilight, they may keep it.”’”

A conscientious Israelite who was defiled or providentially hindered could keep the Passover a month later. He would not be cut off from God’s people out of a stubborn refusal to keep the Passover, neither would he be cut off if he ate the Passover while ceremonial unclean. The LORD provided an alternative. Moses’ asking God anticipated the advice of the apostle James: “Now if any of you lacks wisdom, he should *ask God*, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.”⁹

The critical view of the Pentateuch is that it was entirely the work of man. Moses—or someone pretending to be Moses—cooked up the whole thing out of his own mind. There is no God, and the five so-called books of Moses are not divine revelation at all, but simply good, humanistic advice that Christians uncritically accept as divine truth—dumb Christians!

But if Moses were only making this whole thing up out of his own mind, then why did he bother to seek the mind of God on this question? The answer is that Moses had a holy fear of God. He did not dare to presume to answer for God if God had not spoken. As the LORD says in Deuteronomy 18, “The prophet who presumes to speak a word in My name, which I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that prophet shall die. . . . The prophet has spoken it presumptuously.”¹⁰

The Christian faith is revealed religion. It was divinely revealed by God. Now we do not read the Bible as if every private individual has the right to interpret it definitively all on his own. Rather, we read the Bible *with* the church. The church must teach *everything* that is in the Bible, and *nothing* that is not in the Bible. The Bible is self-authenticating. Scripture interprets Scripture. “When there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture . . . it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly.”¹¹

If a church teaches something that is *contrary* to Scripture, man is not bound to receive it. If a church teaches that a sinner is saved partly by his own works, then that is plainly contrary to Scripture, and must be rejected. If a church worships using images or icons, that is plainly contrary to Scripture, and must be rejected.

⁹ Jas. 1:5, Berean Standard Bible

¹⁰ Deut. 18:20, 22

¹¹ Westminster Confession of Faith 1.9. https://opc.org/wcf.html#Chapter_01

So in our text today. Here were men who were conscientious. They wanted to glorify God by remembering God's past mercies with due reverence. This is evidence of a regenerate heart. Their coming forward to appeal to Moses for permission from God to keep the Passover later indicates that they were truly men with a heart for God—role-models to be emulated in every age of the church. We do not know their names, but God does! In heaven the church will learn their names and honor them with the assembled saints from every age.

These men were surely born again. In case you haven't noticed, the unregenerate—those whose hearts have not been born again by God's blessed Spirit—do *not* love the worship of God! They are not flocking to faithful churches, hungering and thirsting to hear the Gospel, to sing God's praises, to receive Holy Communion.

If a person is saying, "Bummer! Do we really have to go to church today?" that is an indication that their heart is not right with God. They have a worldly value system. They are acting like those who hate God, not like those who love him.

If he says, "I was *glad* when they said unto me, Let us go into the house of the LORD,"¹² then that is an indication that they love the Lord and long for fellowship with him. It is an indication that they are truly born again.

Which of these describes you?

May the LORD give you a hunger and thirst for righteousness, and a desire to worship him with all your heart. Amen.

¹² Ps. 122:1