

Memorizing

Years ago, I didn't keep a calendar of appointments. I could remember meetings and commitments that were weeks in advance, and I never forgot a single event. Today, if I don't check my calendar in the morning (and then again, several times throughout the day), I am sure to miss my appointments. While I have more things on my calendar, that doesn't account for my inability to remember. I do not attribute my inability to age either. I recall beginning to keep a calendar, and within weeks of doing so, I lost my ability to remember what I was supposed to do without looking it up. I attribute a great deal of loss of ability to remember to the fact that I was no longer required to remember. I could look it up.

The philosopher, Plato, who lived a couple of centuries before Jesus was born, said that when we record our thoughts (and appointments) in writing, we weaken our memory. Plato found that if he could look something up, he didn't have to commit it to memory. If Plato also had that problem, I don't feel quite so bad.

We do have the ability to look things up easily. Anyone who has a smart phone can find information almost immediately no matter where we live in this world as long as we have access to the Internet. We must wonder what Plato would think if he lived in our day and age. Perhaps he would lament our inability to remember. Because we are able to look things up, we are less likely to remember because we don't have to remember. In fact, I choose to not remember certain things just because I don't have to.

Yet, committing things to memory is more than just an exercise in keeping our brains from weakening. When we memorize something, perhaps a portion of Scripture, it becomes more familiar to us. A number of years ago, someone told me that it was not impossible to memorize an entire book of the Bible, and so I tried it. I started with Ephesians, and in a few weeks, I had committed the first two chapters completely to memory. Unfortunately, I stopped after two chapters, but when I do read them today, it's almost like returning home. They are comfortably familiar, and I find myself reading them more deeply. In other words, it seems that when we commit something to memory, it tends to become part of who we are.

In the Christian grade school where my two children attended in Ontario, the students were required to memorize a portion of Scripture every two weeks. When they were in Grade 1, the verses were short, but as they progressed to the upper grades, the verses turned into paragraphs. Each year, at the end of the year, each student was asked to recite not only all the verses of that year but also all the verses of all the previous years. By grade 8, they had committed 1000s of words of Scripture to memory, and nearly all of them in last year's graduating class earned the reward that stated that they had recited all the verses they had learned while in that school. I marvelled at that because, from what I knew of these students, some of them were not the most diligent in their studies.

I reflect on the impact that having that much Scripture committed to memory should have on them. I know that a number of students who attended that school have walked away from the faith (as is true of every Christian School and church), but they cannot walk away from what they have put in their memories. True, they may not be able to recite the verses word for word, but we can be sure that when they hear

them again, perhaps at a wedding or a funeral, it will be bit like coming home. Those verses will strike a chord.

I believe that Plato might lament the current state of things if he were to be able to visit. He might say that the weakened state of our memories leaves us vulnerable. True, we can look up a verse in the Bible in a few seconds, and that is helpful, but just because we can look something up doesn't mean that we should be satisfied with our ability. What we read will still seem a little foreign to us, for it hasn't become part of us.

At one time copies of the Bible were so rare that they were chained to a table in a library. If someone wanted to take a verse or paragraph home with them, they either had to copy it or they had to commit it to memory. I don't doubt that many decided that instead of taking a pen and paper to the library (if they even had access to such things), that they committed portions of the Bible to memory. That way they would always have those verses with them.

I know that memory work has fallen by the wayside, and we no longer require our children to memorize Scripture as part of their church education curriculum. Parents don't want the hassle of making their children sit down and learn their memory work before Sunday School or Catechism. I don't want the frustration of having to deal with students who come with their verses unmemorized. Besides, if I remember my church education days, the way I memorized the verse of the week seconds before I had to say it allowed it to escape my short-term memory almost as quickly as it had entered it. That kind of memorization serves no purpose.

I rather like the way that the Christian school did it: the students had to remember some verses, not for 8 minutes but for 8 years. If we do the same, perhaps we will be well served as Scripture becomes part of us. It is not impossible to memorize significant portions of Scripture, and if we commit those paragraphs to our long-term memory by returning to them time after time, we can be sure that they will become part of who we are. Reading them in church or personal devotions will be like returning home, and we will be blessed.

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