

“Be Careful Not to Forget”

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Reformation Sunday

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Now this is the commandment—the statutes and the ordinances—that the Lord your God charged me to teach you to observe in the land that you are about to cross into and occupy, so that you and your children and your children’s children, may fear the Lord your God all the days of your life, and keep all his decrees and his commandments that I am commanding you, so that your days may be long. Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe them diligently, so that it may go well with you, and so that you may multiply greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, as the Lord, the God of your ancestors, has promised you.

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

When the Lord your God has brought you into the land that he swore to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give you—a land with fine, large cities that you did not build, houses filled with all sorts of goods that you did not fill, hewn cisterns that you did not hew, vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant—and when you have eaten your fill, take care that you do not forget the Lord, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. The Lord your God you shall fear; him you shall serve, and by his name alone you shall swear. Do not follow other gods, any of the gods of the peoples who are all around you, because the Lord your God, who is present with you, is a jealous God. The anger of the Lord your God would be kindled against you and he would destroy you from the face of the earth. (Deuteronomy 6:1-15)

As we crisscrossed the nation of Scotland on our recent trip, we encountered many remembrances of John Knox – statues, paintings, stained glass windows. Even the house on the Royal Mile where Knox is believed to have spent only a few months near the end of his life is now preserved as a museum dedicated to his life and accomplishments. The irony in all of this is that John Knox would have hated all of that pomp and circumstance. He was famously iconoclastic, which meant that he was vehemently opposed to the veneration of religious artifacts or images, which he considered to be idolatrous and sinful.

For example, when Catholic forces captured Knox and imprisoned him in the galley of a French ship, the Catholic crew would often torment the Protestant prisoners as they rowed. On one occasion, the guards carried a statue of the Virgin Mary down into the hold and tried to force one of the prisoners to kiss it. The prisoner, who was almost certainly John Knox himself, replied calmly, “Trouble me not. I will not touch that idol.”

The angry guards then grabbed the prisoner’s chained hands and forced him to take hold of it. Given this unique opportunity, the prisoner immediately tossed the statue out the window into the sea. “Let our Lady now save herself,” Knox said. “She is light enough; let her learn to swim.”¹ That is what John Knox thought of statues. He did not want to be remembered or praised. He wanted God to be remembered and praised.

¹ Douglas Wilson, *John Knox: Stalwart Courage* (Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 2021), pp. 39-40.



That is what Moses wanted, too. The Book of Deuteronomy, which is presented as the last words of Moses, is described by many as “the book of remembrance.” After more than forty years as the leader of the Hebrew people, having led them out of bondage in Egypt, through the wilderness wanderings, Moses and nation of Israel are finally looking down into the valley of the Promised Land. Nearing death, Moses will not enter with them. But he takes the opportunity to offer one, final sermon – one last chance to prepare the people for the new life that lay ahead of them. And in that extended sermon, again and again, Moses repeats a certain word (“remember”). Repeatedly, he warns them, “Take care not to forget.”

And what is it that Moses wanted the people to remember? Interestingly for us on this Reformation Sunday, those memories actually line up very closely to things that John Knox and the other Protestant Reformers wanted Christians to remember. In accordance with established Presbyterian preaching practice, I will share three of those things with you... three things we should “take care not to forget.”

The first thing is **our history**. As Israel entered the promised land, Moses wanted the people to remember the places they had been and the road they had traveled with God as their guide. “*Be careful,*” Moses said. “*Watch yourselves closely so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them fade from your heart as long as you live. Teach them to your children and to their children after them.*”²

That is the main reason we went to Scotland... to learn about our history... to remember what people of faith and courage did to defend true faith as they understood it. We stood in churches where preachers like John Knox railed against idolatry. We walked around cobblestone markers where Reformers were burned at the stake for their beliefs. We saw the scars on cathedrals where private altars, barriers, symbols of indulgence were torn down because the Church of Scotland wanted to remove anything that stood between God and the people. We saw palaces where kings and queens were told that their subjects would serve them, just as long as those kings and queens didn’t try to dictate how they worshipped God. In all of these ways, we were channeling the lesson of Moses: “*Remember the days of old; consider the generations long past. Ask your father and he will tell you; [ask] your elders, and they will explain to you.*”³

The second thing we should take care not to forget is **our selfhood, our true identity**. I remember very well something my parents would often say to me when I grabbed the car keys on the way out the door -- particularly if they knew that, when I got to where I was going, I would likely be faced with some decisions about what to do and what not to do. Your parents may have said it to you as well: “Remember who you are.”

Moses said the same thing as his children as they were leaving to enter the Promised Land. Remember who you are. “Remember that you were slaves in Egypt.” Remember the hard lessons you learned in the wilderness. Remember that, when you needed help, God was always there for you.⁴ And remember that, without God, you would never be here. These memories are not just guides for you. They *define* you. They make you what you are.

One of the things I heard a number of times on our trip was people remarking about how things that were being fought over in the 1500’s were still being fought over today. We are still being guided by the ideals of the Reformation. We don’t have priests in this

² Deuteronomy 4:9.

³ Deuteronomy 32:7.

⁴ See Deuteronomy 5:15; Deuteronomy 7:18-19; Deuteronomy 8:1-5.

congregation because we are the priesthood of all believers. We prioritize scripture and preaching because the Word of God is central to worship. We confess our sin every Sunday, and ask forgiveness every Sunday, because we believe that salvation comes by God's grace alone. These ideas are not just theories. They define us as people of faith.

So, whenever my parents would say me, "Remember who you are," I knew that it was advice. But I also knew it was kind of a warning. The implication was that, if I went out and made decisions that were bad for me, there were likely to be consequences that were bad for me. That's why Moses didn't tell the people just to remember certain things. He warned them, "Take care not to forget." Because Moses knew that the Promised Land, the land of safety flowing with milk and honey, would be good for God's people as long as they made good decisions. But if in their comfort, in their good fortune, they started to forget who they were... if they began to forget how much they needed God... if they began to take credit for blessings God had given them... the consequences would be dire. "Be careful," Moses said. "Be careful not to forget who you are." It was good advice then. And it is good advice now.

Which leads us to the final thing we need to take care not to forget. We cannot forget **what we are called to do**. As he said his final goodbyes, Moses wanted the people of Israel to remember what was most important... to hold onto the basics, the fundamentals. Remember, he said, that there is only one true God. Remember that you are called to love the Lord your God with all of your heart, and with all of your soul, and with all of your might. No matter how good things go for you, or how badly things go for you, those two priorities form the foundation of your faith, the very heart of your spiritual life. Do not get distracted. Do not wander off. Take care that you do not forget.

A few weeks ago, I mentioned that the first two things we did when we landed in Scotland after a long overnight flight over the Atlantic, were to (1) take an hour-long bus ride, and (2) go to church. Even I can confess that, if staying awake is a priority, this is a dangerous combination. So yes, we worshiped that morning at the Govan & Linthouse Parish Church, and my spirit was quite willing; but, alas, my flesh was weak. I nodded off at least twice. I felt bad about that, until right after the service, when the ladies of the church indicated that we should follow them upstairs to a bright fellowship hall. Four tables were set for us, each brimming with finger sandwiches. Then came around with old-fashioned tin kettles full of coffee and tea, and then later with towers overflowing with delicious Scottish cookies and cakes. They served us with warmth, joy, attentiveness, and good humor. I cannot remember receiving a more genuine expression of hospitality from anyone, anywhere. It was the kind of thing that would make Moses smile, as they did exactly what God's people are called to do: to take care of traveling aliens in our midst... to open our home to the stranger. John Knox was probably smiling down as well, because these women will never have a statue erected in their honor, but they clearly know their history, they know who they were, and they know exactly what they are doing.

So, on this Reformation Sunday, we pause to remember. We remember our history: that God's story is our story, and our story is God's story. We remember who we are: grumblers and sinners who deserve nothing but have been given everything out of the boundless love and grace of Christ. And we remember what we are called to do: to follow the guidance of the Word of God... to do kindness, love mercy, and walk humbly with God... and to make sure our children understand just how important all of this is.

That is our history. That is who we are. That is what we are called to do and to be. Everything else is just a distraction. Remember this well, and take care not to forget. **Amen.**