LEST WE FORGET

I will remember the deeds of the LORD; yes, I will remember your miracles of long ago. I will meditate on all your works and consider all your mighty deeds. Psalm 77:11-12

When we fail to remember the past, we are condemned to repeat our mistakes and failures, whether it be nationally, personally, or spiritually. Do you believe that? Even before the alphabet was developed in the Tigris-Euphrates river valley, parents passed on to their children the truths which they wanted preserved. Oral history, we call it today. Sometimes the stories were myths but most of them were factual—who did what and what happened to whom. Those oral traditions included God’s dealings with people, and family history—battles that were fought, marriages which produced offspring, and cataclysmic events such as earthquakes, famines, and floods.

It was all there. Sometimes it was sung or chanted; sometimes it was told around the fireplace, but it was remembered and eventually passed on to the next generation. One of the great flaws of our present generation is that we are so consumed with the immediate, we have never learned what ought to be remembered. It isn’t really a matter of forgetting. We’ve never learned it. We depend on books, on computers, on the professionals whose business it is to preserve history. We’ve become a generation of spectators—not observers.

Confronting us today is a generational failure which is far more dangerous than being unable to read or write. One of the shocks which I first encountered when I went into tribal areas, where people were considered to be primitive, is that uneducated people—I mean individuals lacking formal education—are neither stupid nor ignorant. To the contrary, they know many things which in our educated sophistication, we have never learned. I’m thinking of items such as combs and baskets woven from fiber, medicines made from herbs and roots, tools which are made by hand, textiles and fabrics woven with intricate patterns—none of which bore the stamp, “Made in Japan.”

I recall the time in Africa I decided to teach a group a new song. I gave the congregation the words, sang the song once, and asked them to join me. The first time we sang, they had the words and the melody and sang with fervor. I thought, “Wow! How did they grasp it so quickly?” They learn through rote and remember what they learn, something which most of us have never accomplished.

The tragedy of our day is that we forget what should be remembered, and often remember what should be forgotten. The Old Testament constantly stresses that God’s people were to remember His deeds and to tell them to their children, who in turn would pass them on to their children.

The psalmist wrote, “I will remember the deeds of the LORD; yes, I will remember your miracles of long ago. I will meditate on all your works and consider your mighty deeds” (Psalm 77:11-12). The key verbs are “remember” and “meditate”—something best accomplished with the TV off.

Psalm 78 talks about the works of the Lord, saying, “We will not hide them from their children; we will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD, his power, and the wonders he has done” (Psalm 78:4). Moses instructed that parents not only remember the commandments He gave but to impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home or when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up” and so forth (Deuteronomy 6:7).

Why is remembering so important? By remembering good times, we are reminded of the grace and goodness of God. By remembering bad times, we may perhaps avoid the failures and mistakes which brought such difficulty upon ourselves.

By forgetting our history, we are condemned to repeat the same mistakes that brought bondage and death. By remembering we stay strong and healthy.