
God's Selective Memory (Isaiah 63:7-9)
1/1/2017 Sermon by Pastor Jason Liebenow



Jesus once said, "A woman giving birth to a child has pain because her time has come; but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that child is born into the world."

It's really true in a lot of cases. I remember shortly after my wife gave birth to my first son, after I had watched her go through all that pain of childbirth, I remember my wife holding our infant son in her arms and saying, "We should have another one." I reacted, "Are you kidding me!? After what you just went through? We're never having another kid ever again!"

But the truth was that in the joy of having a new child, my wife had largely forgotten the pain she went through during the birth. And, I clearly forgot her pain too as we did go ahead and have a second child.

In the same way that my wife and I remembered the joy of a new child but forgot the pain of childbirth, all of us have selective memories. We remember certain aspects of past events, but not all of them. In fact, one writer expressed it this way, "Remembering is just another way of forgetting." His point was that even in our clearest memories, we often forget parts.

An old man may remember his childhood as such a great time in his life, but he has forgotten the struggles he went through back then and in reality he was no happier back then than he is now. A child may have remembered his mother's instructions about his chores, except for doing the dishes, the one chore that he really didn't like to do. If a teenager gets into a car accident, they may remember very clearly everything the other driver did wrong, but they may not remember how they contributed to the accident. It's pretty natural for us to have selective memories, to remember only parts of past events, but not everything.

Would it surprise you to hear that God has selective memory too? Now, of course, God is all-knowing and as such he knows everything that has ever happened and that ever will happen with perfect clarity, but as you scroll through the pages of Scripture, very often there is this curious occurrence. As God talks about his people who lived long ago, he speaks about how faithful they were, how upright, how principled and moral they were. But read through the books of the Old Testament and describe the kind of people you see. We read about how the Israelites constantly grumbled against God, how they were unfaithful, how they were full of selfish pride and injustice. But that's not how God speaks about them as he looks back. Instead, God, in his grace, remembers them, not for their sin, but for the spiritual life that he

placed in them. God remembers them as his dear children.

Today, as Isaiah tells us about the kindnesses of the LORD, I pray that God give you comfort and strength to live a godly life, as we consider God's Selective Memory.

Isaiah begins by simply telling us what he's going to tell us: about the kindnesses of the LORD. This is really the essence of worship. Many people think of the act of worshipping as being a kind of supernatural, emotional experience that cannot really be explained in words. But since the beginning of mankind, worship of the true God has been nothing more than telling of the kindnesses of the LORD.

In the book of Genesis, we read about the earliest believers worshipping God and Genesis often uses the phrase "calling on the name of the LORD" to describe their act of worship. That word for "calling" can also be translated as "reading aloud" or "speaking out loud." And maybe you remember in Catechism class talking about the second commandment, where we learn that God's name is not just the syllable, "God." Instead, God's name includes everything God has revealed to us about who he is and what he has done. And so, this is what we do when we come together here. We speak about the great things God has done. We talk about his kindnesses to us. We talk about why he is to be praised.

And notice how Isaiah speaks about what God has done for us. Isaiah mentions the many good things God has done for Israel, *according to his compassion and many kindnesses*. In true worship of his God, Isaiah recognizes that God does so many good things for us, only, only because he has such great compassion for us.

We have not earned the blessings God gives us, and to think so really takes glory away from God. If we think that we have earned any of the good things God gives us, we are taking away God's glory and putting that glory on ourselves. True worship of the true God is recognizing the kindnesses God has shown us, is recognizing that God has been kind to us only because of his compassion and not because we have deserved it.

So, now that Isaiah has called us to true worship of God, he aims us at the unique relationship that God's people share with the Almighty. God said, *"Surely they are my people, children who will be true to me."* This is how God speaks about us. He calls us *his* people. He calls us his own *children*. And he confidently asserts that we will be true to him.

Is that how you think of yourself? Do you think of yourself as one of God's own people? One of God's children? Do you see yourself as someone who is true to God, never false?

Perhaps, you do not think of yourself in this way. Maybe in the same way that our selective memories can number the great many sins of the Israelites, you can remember a great long list of your sins, of times when you have been false to God.

Do you remember lies you have told, even small ones, but, nonetheless, lies that stick out in your mind? Do you have a nagging voice that eats away at your confidence, a voice that says, "Sometimes, I say things that aren't true"? Do you remember promises you have made to people, saying, "I'll be there," or "I'll do this," but then you just got too busy and you failed to do what that person was counting on you to do?

Many of us make promises to ourselves at New Year's, promises to improve ourselves, to do better than we did last year, but have those promises to yourself turned into still more lies?

Perhaps you even remember promises you have made to your God, promises that you would turn away from your sinful habits, promises that you would be true to your God. But again, promises that you failed to keep.

Maybe you feel you are better described as someone who is false to God, a child not of God, but a child of the father of lies, Satan himself. That wouldn't be far off. We are all naturally born into a large family of sin. We sin. Our parents sinned. Their parents sinned. All the way back to our first parents Adam and Eve who gave up their status as God's children by sinning and thereby choosing Satan to be their father and to be the father of every human born of them.

But this is why Isaiah speaks of the kindnesses of God. In spite of our sinful state, God in his compassion looks at us not as our sins deserve, but he considers us his own dear children who will be true to him. In the same way that God speaks fondly of the children of Israel, remembering their faithfulness instead of their deceptions and sins, God looks at you, graciously forgetting your sins and remembering the good works that he created you to do. God looks at you as his own dear child.

C. S. Lewis once wrote about what it meant to be a child of God by describing the difference between making and begetting. When people make things, we make things very different from ourselves. Someone could make a statue that looks very similar to a human being, but in all the fundamental ways, that statue will never be anything like a human being. It does not do what humans do.

The word "beget" or the verb "give birth to," however, always describes the creation of something very much like the subject. People beget or give birth to other people. That new person in all fundamental ways is very much like his or her parents. That child is a human being.

So here's the point: God has made all people, but in saying that God *made* us, we can understand that we are very much different from God, our Maker. That difference comes in one word: sin. Our sin makes us fundamentally different from God. Scripture describes us as being made in the image of God, but sin takes that image away and makes us fundamentally different from God.

But through faith in Jesus who became our Savior, through baptism by which we are adopted into God's family, we have been born again, God has begotten us, we have become born of God, and we receive back that image of God. We, therefore, again through faith in Jesus, we have become children who are very much like God, our Father. By taking away our sins, God has taken away that essential difference between us and God. God has removed that barrier and united us to him in the most close-knit familial tie possible.

Through our baptisms, we are God's dear children. And as our gracious Father, God does not look at us according to our sinful nature, which we do still have and will continue to have until we reach heaven. But God does not consider our sinful nature to be who we truly are anymore. God does not consider our deceptions and the times we have been false to him.

Instead, God looks at us according to the new life that he created in us when we were born again as his children. Instead of remembering our sins, God graciously remembers the times in your life when you have been true to him.

God remembers the times when you acted just like your Father by remembering your neighbor's actions in the kindest possible way. God remembers the promises you have kept just like your Father keeps his promises. God remembers the times when you have lived up to your status as a child of God.

And maybe you don't remember those times. Maybe your selective memory sees instead your great many sins. Dear fellow children of God, at those times when our sins plague us, may we remember God's selective memory. He sees those good deeds that you have missed. He loves those little loving acts that you never even considered.

God's selective memory sees us for who we truly are: God's own people, beloved children who surely will be true to him. May we too see ourselves in this way. May we live true and honestly just like our dear Father in heaven. May we shake off the deceptive ways of this sinful world, the ways of those who still lack that image of God. May we instead live true lives, honest lives, because through faith in Jesus, through our own baptisms, we have been born of God, and we are just like our dear old Dad, our Father in heaven. Amen.