

Reflecting Back for Living Now

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I still remember it like it was yesterday. My grandfather had passed away after a long struggle with dementia and after one of the visitations, I brought my grandmother home. During that car ride, she said with an unwavering voice about the man to whom she had been married for the majority of her existence, “We buried him, but it wasn’t him because he wasn’t here anymore. And there is no reason to cry because he is so happy right now. He was a wonderful grandfather and father who raised every single one of his children in the fear of the Lord.”

Why do I remember that so clearly? What value is there in reflecting on this memory? Why have I held on to it? How does it affect me today? I am tempted to ask God why he let my grandfather suffer from dementia for so many years. But I also praise him for bringing his child to heaven at the appointed time and for teaching me valuable lessons through my grandmother’s care for him. As you can see, there are right and wrong ways to reflect on the past.

We all have memories that stick in our minds like the one I shared with you. We may even have the same memories as others. Sometimes, though we have the same memories, we may differ in what aspects of those memories stand out in our minds. We might remember some details that others do not. Those details may have special significance to us more than others. Even though the memories we have stored away in our minds are innumerable and varied, there are general themes that we can see in each memory. These general themes are some examples of how we may properly (and sometimes improperly) reflect upon the events that have shaped our lives. These themes help us as we live here and now.

First, we can reflect on how God in his providence has ruled our lives. What value is there in reflecting on the providence of God? Lord’s Day 10 of the Heidelberg Catechism describes it beautifully. Question 28 asks, “What advantage is it to us to know that God has created, and by His providence doth still uphold all things?” The phrase, “still uphold all things” implies that God always has and always will uphold all things. Therefore, we can reflect on how he in the past has governed all things. The value in this is that we can be confident that he will continue to do so, so that “we may be patient in adversity; thankful in prosperity; and that in all things which may hereafter befall us, we place our firm trust in our faithful God and Father, that

nothing shall separate us from His love.” Belgic Confession, Article 13 describes knowledge of the providence of God as giving us “unspeakable consolation” because we know that all things that befall us are by his direction.

All events in the past (and present and future) are ruled by God because as the Sovereign one, he has ordained that they would occur. Reflecting on these past events is important, but it must be done with a proper attitude. There are right and wrong ways to reflect on the past. When reflecting on a specific event in our lives, maybe a mistake we made, we might often think to ourselves, “if only I had known...then I could have...” You can fill in the blanks. This type of reflecting is good in so far as we think about the good lessons we learned by making that mistake. But we cannot let this type of reflection rule us. There comes the point where we need to move on. If we have become so fixated on the past that it can be said of us that we are living in the past, then we need a change of course. Our reflection on the past should be done in a way in which we are using the lessons learned and applying them to the present, not living with constant negative thoughts about the past.

There is value in reflecting not only on our own lives but also on history in general. History has many valuable lessons. We see God’s hand in history, guiding each event in such a way that he is glorified and his church is preserved. We might become anxious when we reflect on the depths that society has fallen to in its general acceptance of horrendous immorality. Not only is immorality accepted, it is promoted and even forced on many people. We may wonder what the world will be like 20 years from now. What types of evils will we have to live through? What about 50 years from now? What great evils will our children and grandchildren have to suffer through? We worry. We are also tempted to ask, “Why Lord?” We know and are comforted by the fact that he is in control, that he is glorified, and that his church is preserved, but we still want to know why. We try to pry into the mind of God, but this is where we must stop. “O the depth of the riches of both the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out! For who hath known the mind of the Lord? Or who hath been his counsellor?” (Rom. 11:33–34).

Second, we can and we must reflect on sin and redemption. When we think of the past, we often think of our sins or the sins of others. Those sins haunt us and we often experience their consequences in the present. But in our reflection on sin, we must remember that God, who is rich in mercy, provided the sacrificial lamb, Jesus Christ, to atone for our sins. Christ willingly

plunged himself into the agonies of hell so that “in my greatest temptations, I may be assured, and wholly comfort myself in this, that my Lord Jesus Christ...hath delivered me from the anguish and torments of hell” (Heidelberg Catechism, LD 16). Is this how we reflect on the sins we have confessed and repented of in the past and the sins we fall into daily when we are tempted? Do we view them as God does, washed away in the blood of his Son? Or do we look on them with doubt in our minds that since we are so sinful, they can’t possibly be washed away with Christ’s blood? It is possible for us to become so depressed when we reflect on our lives of sin that we doubt the efficacy of the grace of God to remove our sins. When we look back on our lives and remember how many times we have fallen into the same rut of sin over and over, doubts about our salvation can creep in and we become, as the Canons of Dordt describe, “not always sensible of this full assurance of faith and certainty of persevering” (Canons, 5.11). We may be tempted to lose sight of the assurance given us by the grace of God. It is in those moments that we need to remember that God in his mercy “does not wholly withdraw the Holy Spirit from His own people, even in their melancholy falls; nor suffers them to proceed so far as to lose the grace of adoption and forfeit the state of justification, or to commit the sin unto death” (Canons, 5.6). He brings us back to our senses. Our souls become restless, as the church father, Augustine said, until they rest in God. Read a little further in the Canons. The “certainty of perseverance...is the real source of humility, filial reverence, true piety...so that consideration of this benefit should serve as an incentive to the serious and constant practice of gratitude and good works” (Canons, 5.12). Reflecting properly on our sin and also the mercy of God in forgiveness and assurance spurs us on to a life that bears good fruit!

So look back on your life. See how God has guided every event in your life for your good. When you lost that loved one, he was there. When you fell into that same sin again, he was there. As a tender Father, he pulled you out of the pit and gave you the certainty of perseverance. Now as you reflect on past events, you see how God has used them for your profit so that you are better equipped to live now.

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