

Remember and forget – January 4, 2015  
By Wayne J. Schneider – Soli Deo Gloria

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Deuteronomy 15:15; Ezekiel 36:31; Revelation 2:5a

In the Roman Pantheon the god Janus was portrayed as having a double face. One face looked to the past for wisdom and the other looked ahead to the future. Janus was thought to influence beginnings and endings. The month of January was named for him.

January is when some of us look to the past and attempt to make resolutions for the future. Because true in-depth inventories of the past are painful, we tend to skip over the embarrassing places that weaken our favorable self-image, and settle on the times and places that make us look good.

Oh, we will dig around in the past year and discover some “*not so bad*” things we thought, said, or did, and use enough shallow honesty about socially acceptable faults to fool anyone, and make us immune to being honest about the real problems in our lives.

Then we will choose a few frivolous resolutions such as eating less, exercising more, being kind to animals and small children, and attending church more often. And so, we trick everybody, including ourselves, while the real decisions that would lead us into a genuine new beginning never cross our minds. Does that sound like anybody you know? Well, I resemble this!

There are two indispensable steps to an effective new beginning: remembering and forgetting. It is not only paramount to remember the personal past in we have lived. It is equally important to remember that past through which we did not live but that influences our lives and the world in which we live.

January is an appropriate time for us to look back and learn and strengthened by the past, so that we may be prepared for what the future holds. Our heritage is not only in our private memories; it is also heavily endowed with shared memories that speak to us from the past. Voices from the past address us all.

The structure of our faith calls us to look back and remember. The most tragic stories in the Scriptures involve the lives of people and nations who forgot. When the prophets of Israel spoke, they nearly always began by looking back.

The Jewish Celebration of Passover is an annual reenactment of God redeeming Israel from slavery in Egypt. (Deuteronomy 15:15a). Passover is not only an

acknowledgment of the power of God; it is a not too subtle warning to “stay out of Egypt.” Remembering is essential to freedom from past mistakes. The Spanish-born philosopher and critic George Santana said: *“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”*

In our myopic view of reality we forget that our brief sojourn on earth is but a drop of time in the ocean of eternity. Our personal part in history is quite small.

Because our time on the stage of history is short, it is possible to miss the theme of what God is doing through the ages. If we do not know any more history than our own, we may not know that there have been periods of time in the history of the church that lacked grace or positive movement. There have been eras that were heinous.

There have been experiences in my own ministry when, if I had not known more history than that through which I was living, I would have lost heart. There have been years of disappointment and failure, institutionally and personally, that alone could have overwhelmed one’s spirit, but that were bearable when understood in the light of the total history of the church. It is essential for us to see that God is not limited by our failures. Saint Augustine suggested that God stands, at once, at every time, in the past, present, and future. God is not bound by time. In fact, science is showing us that time may not be as rigid as we think.

It is not enough to remember the past as objective history in a general sort of way. It is a dangerous assumption to speak of “objective history.” That deserves to be examined.

When Ezekiel spoke of the route to renewal for Israel, he was specific about what should be remembered. *“Then you shall remember your evil ways, and your dealings that were not good; and you shall loathe yourselves for your iniquities and your abominable deeds”* (Ezekiel 36:31). The book of Revelation is gentler in speaking to the church at Ephesus, but equally specific. *“Remember then from what you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first”* (Revelation 2:5a).

If we do not remember specifically how and why we find ourselves in a situation or lifestyle, then we are likely to find ourselves right back where we started before year’s end. If we take inventory of where we are and *“remember from what we have fallen,”* then we are ready to repent and begin again.

It is never easy to do the emotional heavy lifting necessary to intelligently determine what should be kept and what should be thrown away. Frederick Buechner, in his book, *A Room Called Remember*, says how we may not only choose the wrong road but we can also choose the right road for the wrong reason. It is good to love, but

Buechner speaks of how we can love too much for the good of either the lover or the beloved.

When we sift through the actions and motives that brought us to where we are, it is likely that with God's help we can correct our course and arrive at where we want to be. No one can tell you what to forget and what to remember, what to hold on to and what to turn loose. Others can support, love, and encourage, but we have to do our own heavy lifting.

Those who have experienced 'near death experiences' note being in the presence of overpowering love and acceptance, of being fully understood. Most people express the desire not to come back to life.

Maybe if we could remember our past in the presence of God in this life, we would not only create the essential conditions for a new beginning, but also get a taste of what it will be like when the Kingdom of God comes in its fullness.

Remember. Remember. Remember. Alleluia. Amen.