

A Remembering Involving Forgetting

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Preacher: Rev James Maciver

[0 : 0 0] Numbers chapter 11 and at verse 4. Now the rabble that was among them had a strong craving.

And the people of Israel also wept again and said, O that we had meat to eat. We remember the fish we ate in Egypt that cost nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic.

But now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at. Can a Christian become bored with the Bible?

Can Christians become bored with church? Can a Christian lose interest in the gospel? Can a Christian even become bored with God and a relationship with him?

Well, the Bible answers these questions with a very emphatic yes. Every Christian has the capacity to spiritual decay.

[1 : 2 1] Just because we might be ministers who preach the gospel, elders who are given a position in the church, long-standing members of a congregation, that doesn't exempt us at all from the tendency to spiritual decline.

That's why the Bible gives us so many warnings to watch ourselves, to be careful how we live, to take note of what influences our lives.

passages such as 2 John and verse 7, just the one chapter there, which speaks about, watch yourselves, so that you do not lose what we have worked for.

Or passages such as Hebrews 3, verses 12 through to 15, Take heed therefore, he says, brethren, in case there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God.

Who's he talking to? He's talking to believers, people who profess to be the Lord's people. And all the way through the Bible, you have an emphasis on being careful, on being watchful, on being on your guard against this very tendency in our hearts, even as Christians, to stray, to become cold, to become indifferent, to lose our discipline, and so on.

[2 : 5 1] We've been looking at a number of passages with the word remember in them. We've looked at two as they apply to God, where God remembers certain things, such as the way he said to know, I remember my covenant when I see the bow in the clouds.

And tonight we're looking at this remembering because it's a remember in a very different sense, where the people of Israel here said, we remember the fish we ate in Egypt, and now we've got nothing but this manner to look at.

It's a remembering in which there is a forgetting, though that may sound like a contradiction. It's a remembering of certain things that they once had, but by doing so, they have come to forget the things of God.

In other words, tonight we're looking at what this passage has to say to us about spiritual decline or backsliding or various other words that might be used.

And I'm going to commend this little book to you. I'm going to read a few passages from it in the course of our study this evening. A book by Octavius Winslow, who wrote this in the mid-1800s, 1841 or so, and it's called Personal Declension, and the subheading is On Revival of Religion in the Soul.

[4 : 15] It's a book that every Christian should have, that every Christian should read. If you don't have it, I would commend it to you and ask that you read it through slowly but carefully for yourself, because the tendency is in every Christian to decline, this is a book that sets out various aspects of that and also how the recovery of a proper, vital, healthy Christian life is so important.

This is what he says just at the very beginning of the book, the first chapter is called Incipient Declension. If he says there is one consideration more humbling than another to a spiritually minded believer, it is that after all God has done for him, after all the rich displays of his grace, the patience and tenderness of his instructions, the repeated discipline of his covenant, the tokens of love received, and the lessons of experience learned, there should still exist in the heart a principle, a tendency, which is to secret, perpetual, and alarming departure from God.

Truly, there is in this solemn fact that which might well lead to the deepest self-abasement before him.

That's how he begins this book, by reminding the readers that every single Christian has this tendency within themselves, and if you let it feed upon itself, you're going to be in spiritual trouble.

You're going to be a declining spiritual being. You're going to be a declining Christian. So how does this passage tell us about this decline?

[6 : 05] What does it say to us among many other passages in the Bible? Well, first of all, let's ask the question, how did this decline come about in the experience of these people of Israel?

And what can we learn from that ourselves that we must apply to our own circumstances? How did this decline come about? Secondly, what did this decline consist of?

What features does it have? What do you see described here that tells you something about the nature of this decline? Thirdly, what do we do if we have such decline or some decline in our lives spiritually?

What do we do about that? How do we set about dealing with it? How did it come about then? Well, you see, this is what it's saying. Now the rabble that was among them had a strong craving.

The word rabble there isn't used in exactly the same word, same way as we would use the word rabble nowadays. It really means, and the old translation, I think, has it this way, a mixed multitude.

[7 : 15] Not a rabble in the sense of being a rowdy crowd, undisciplined, but rabble in the sense of being very mixed, sort of different people of different backgrounds.

And the thing is, they were not Israelites. They were not the people of Israel. They didn't belong to Israel as a people themselves. They had come out of Egypt with them. They had tacked themselves on to the departure of Israel from Egypt.

You learn that from Exodus chapter 12 and verse 38. A mixed multitude that was there just attached themselves to Israel when they saw them leaving Egypt. And here they are with them as they've begun traveling through the desert and as they've reached this point, this mixed multitude, this group of people, they had a strong craving.

What that means, basically, is that they were craving the things that they once had back in Egypt. They were regretting having left Egypt. They were regretting having joined themselves to these people of Israel who were following the ways of this covenant God.

And they influenced Israel. The sense of the passage is obvious, that the rabble that was among them had this strong craving. And then immediately you read that the people of Israel also wept again and said, Oh, that we had meat to eat.

[8 : 29] We remember the fish that we ate in Egypt. You see, the influence of this mixed multitude had this effect on the people that they were leading their minds back to Egypt, that they were now beginning to think upon the kind of food that they had back in Egypt and they were beginning to hanker for those things again instead of progressing onwards in their life with God through the wilderness.

And that happens all the time in the experience of God's people, in the experience of the church in every age, in the experience of individuals.

Think how often you found down through history various pressure groups if you like that grew up or came into the church or into congregations which then set up their own agenda and began to really exert pressure for changes that were substantial changes.

We're not talking about things that are just peripheral or secondary in importance but changes with regard to how you view the Bible and what do you make of the Bible and the authority of the Bible or did really Jesus or did he really rise from the dead?

Is there such a thing as the resurrection? You see, the apostles actually met with such things even then in their own age. People who denied certain basic truths and so the apostles had to deal with that and of course in passing we can just say that's where the church's discipline really comes into the picture for us and remember that discipline is not primarily a punishment whether it's a discipline of an individual or a group or whatever it might be the church's discipline is a pastoral thing it's a restoring thing they are measures that are intended to bring people back into the right track it's a positive thing that's just in passing but here are the people of Israel and that's what's happened amongst them this group that have come into their midst that have left Egypt with them and they've now influenced them to this extent that the people are crying out for the meat that they once had the food that they had back in Egypt and of course that is true on an individual level as well remember that when we're reading these passages that we deal with historically as actual history we're not just dealing with a history lesson we're not just dealing with something that you could look at outwardly and say yes this is what happened these were the events in the history of Israel and we're glad to note these events historically there's a spiritual meaning to all of this because in the Old Testament the Exodus is the great demonstration of God's redemption it's the great picture of God's redemption it means that

[11 : 15] God is teaching the people what redemption is about that he comes to deliver them from slavery which you then in the New Testament find of course is the slavery of sin and of death and God rescuing us from that by the redemption that's in Christ and through his death and through his resurrection but all of that is built into the way that God dealt with the people of Israel to bring them out of Egypt to bring them in fellowship with himself and his covenant into the desert to walk with him in the desert to be led by him in the desert on into the inheritance that he had promised them that's in a sense in a nutshell the Christian life and when you find things like this being described as the experience of the people well then you ask what does that mean for me as a Christian it means spiritually that we must be careful with what influences our lives it's true on an individual level as well it's not just about people that can influence us some people think that when you become a Christian when you're converted you should not have much at all to do with your non-Christian friends people who were friends with you before you were converted now we don't accept that we don't think that that's really a Christian way of looking at a Christian witness or a Christian influence that doesn't mean you just drop all your friends but it does mean that in your actions with them you can go so far but not into the extent of leaving God or losing your appetite for the things of God you can say well I'm happy to be with you

I'm happy to meet with you I'm happy to have a coffee with you I'm happy if you come and visit me or I can go and see you where you are but I can't go to the pub with you every Friday the way we used to there's a line that you don't cross and if you cross it you're in trouble you're into the area of decline and spiritual decay and there are other things on an individual level that can affect your life and nobody sees it it's not about relationships there are things that you and I do activities that we engage in habits that we develop and many a Christian has fallen on very hard times simply through getting into the wrong habits as much as in the wrong company you can develop a wrong habit on your own you can watch things on television that are not appropriate for Christians and you can tell yourself your life's not really being influenced well it is you can think that you can cope with pornography and stuff like that that television and internet throws at you many people who have been followers of Christ have found to their cost that developing such habits brings decline brings decay brings a turning aside from obedience to God and relish for the things of God that's what they're saying here the rabble that was amongst them had a strong craving and so they led the people away there's one other thing in passing that we can say influenced them as well and it's there at the beginning of the chapter where you find the anger of the

Lord had burned against them because of their complaining in the hearing of the Lord about their misfortunes about how difficult the way was for them so the Lord actually had a fire burned from the Lord amongst parts of the outlying areas of the camp just around the fringes of the camp a fire from the Lord burnt out that's what it says that's what we believe they saw that and undoubtedly everybody in the camp knew about that you don't get a fire from the Lord something remarkable like that breaking out along the outer parts of the camp without everybody in the camp hearing about it and knowing about it but it didn't really influence them very much did it because very soon you then go on to see how they complained that they didn't have the delicacies that they enjoyed in Egypt let's always be careful to learn from the experiences of life to learn from our trials to learn from the way the Lord speaks to us in providence to think seriously about what happens in our lives and to ask ourselves what's God telling me by this what's he saying to me what instruction is he giving me and why is this happening how did it come about well they allowed these non-Israelites to influence them to influence their thinking and to bring them to the point of complaining yet again and they came to it by not taking account of things that they had learned earlier that ought to have taught them that to go away from God was inviting disaster that's the first thing it came about in those ways secondly what did this decline consist of well two things we can say in summary of what it consisted of first of all it consisted of going back to what God had separated them from going back to what

God had separated them from like we said Egypt really in a sense represents as for us as Christians as you read your Old Testament Egypt represents the old life where we once were the kind of influences that we are held by and we were delivered from that as Christians we're taken out of that we're brought separate from that we're cut off from that God detaches us from the rule of sin though not from the actual presence of it while we're in this life but that's why you've got passages like Colossians chapter 3 just to pick on one example the apostle does this more than once he tells those he's writing to and we learn this because this is God's word God is saying to us through this exactly as he said to the Colossians what's he saying well he's basically saying what does it mean to be a Christian what does the Christian life consist of well he says this you have been raised with

Christ and seeing you have been raised with Christ seek those things which are above set your mind on things that are above not on things that are on the earth for you died that spiritually you died to sin and your life is hidden with Christ in God and then he says this therefore this is the outcome this is the logical conclusion from that saving power of God having taken place in our experience therefore put to death what is earthly in you sexual immorality impurity passion evil desire covetousness which is idolatry and he adds to that anger wrath malice slander obscene talk from your mouth lying one to another because you've put off the old self and you have put on the new self that's exactly the same in principle as what happened to Israel as what God was teaching through the

[18 : 47] Old Testament departure of Israel from Egypt that's what this passage in Numbers is saying to us God took the people out from where they were held captive he gave them a new life a new set of circumstances he brought them so many benefits compared to what they had but they have now come to the point where they want back to what God had separated them from and you notice what they're saying we remember the fish that cost nothing what have they forgotten when you read that don't you say to yourself wait a minute what were their conditions like in Egypt what are they really wanting to go back to they've become blind essentially to the fact that they were slaves in Egypt and Moses could easily have turned around and said to them at this point well just listen to yourselves here you are saying we remember the fish that we ate in

Egypt that cost us nothing cost you nothing it was at the cost of your freedom that's what it cost and yet they've lost sight of that they're so influenced by this thinking they're so much now concerned to think back to what God had separated them from that they've really essentially lost sight and their eyes have become dimmed they've lost sight of that dividing line between where they now are and who they are and who their God is and everything that's true about Egypt you see that's what happens when you allow spiritual decline to come into your life and it goes on unchecked and the more it goes on the more this is true the more you lose sight of that dividing line between what a Christian is and a Christian life is and the way of the world and what you were rescued from and the way people still live you mustn't think that

God allows us to be absolutely comfortable in a backslidden condition because in a backslidden condition we're not comfortable we know it's wrong and yet there's a kind of paralysis there but even though we know it's wrong and in a sense we'd like it to change yet it's still the case that to an extent we become familiar with it we become used to it we become somewhat comfortable in it and we lose sight of the distinctions and the priorities and the difference between God's way and the ways of Egypt we remember what cost us nothing what telling words these are about their opinion about their condition about the state of their souls so that's the first thing that it consisted of it consisted of going back to what God had separated them from it consisted secondly of getting tired of what God had provided them with getting tired of what God had provided them with you see it's very telling that when they are talking here about going thinking back to Egypt the fish the melons the leeks the onions the garlic yes they're delicious of course they are but then they go on to say but now there is nothing at all but this manna to look at what was the manna well the psalm we read described it as the food of angels and when you look at the description in the passages in

Exodus and here as well in the following verses that describe the manna and what it was like and how they gathered it daily except on the Sabbath day and how they used it and cooked with it and how it fed them you can see that this manna was a very very special thing indeed no people ever had this before or after this was food provided by God specifically for them this was sent from heaven it came down with the Jew every evening they didn't have to work for it it was provided for them they had it freely they gathered it as much as they needed each and every day for their needs to be kept alive to nourish them not only that but it was obviously nutritious it was something that had in it substance nutrition for their needs at the time and perhaps as much as anything else it was food that was designed specifically for their journey it was designed to meet their needs as a traveling people as they had left

Egypt and were on the way to the land that God had promised them here was God saying to them I'm giving you this special food I've never done this for any people before it's yours because you're my covenant people and because I've delivered you and made you my people and I'm going to look after you in a special way I'm going to give you this food that's going to come from heaven that's going to be nutritious that's designed for exactly the conditions that you're in the travel that you're on and now they're saying there's nothing for us but this manner how could they what a desperate slighting of the provision of God there is nothing but this manner and in our own decline we sometimes get towards that point if we don't actually reach it because the more you get an appetite for worldly things and back to the things of the world and of sin the more you lose your appetite for the things which are holy the things of

[25 : 12] God and God for our journey has given us the gospel he's given us his word he's given us the company of his people he's given us the church and its services and its ordinances he's given us the preaching of the gospel he's given us all this rich fear that's specially designed for people who are traveling spiritually having left land of sin and darkness and on the way to the heaven that God has prepared and reserved for his people he's given us everything we require to nourish us on the journey and when we come to backslide and when we come to let decline into our hearts and minds and lives now this is what happens there is nothing at all but this manner to look at let me begin with myself how's my appetite tonight for

God's word the fact that I'm preaching the word of God and that I can do that outwardly and stand in this pulpit it doesn't say anything about my spiritual appetite for my own soul how's my appetite tonight how's my relationship with Jesus tonight I can stand in a pulpit and speak about the word of God and the truth of God's word and commend these things to you and speak about Jesus and the sufficiency as a savior and yet my own soul may be very distant from him you see the outward things that we're involved with in the things of the church and of our worship and our religion and all the rest of it the things that we are engaged in outwardly are not necessarily an indicator of how we are inwardly how's your own appetite tonight are you saying I'm a bit tired of the prayer meeting I've lost my relish for prayer itself

I don't really feel like reading the Bible the way I used to I just don't get anything from it how's your relationship with Jesus when you do spend time with him does it have any effect on your life does it have an effect the way it used to does it really touch your soul deeply and mine with you when we pray to him is there any sense of satisfaction in the fact that we've spoken to God that we've waited upon the Lord when you come to read the Bible is it just an exercise now or do you do it with relish do you really say I know I have to do this it's my spiritual food it's part of my daily diet or does it just a going through the motions friends we're saying this because everyone in this building myself included needs to guard against spiritual decline if the cause of

God is going to flourish if we are going to influence the generation we belong to in a good and spiritual way then we have to watch ourselves and we have to make sure that our lives are as they should be as far as possible because otherwise we will be like these people as we hanker back to the things that once were in our lives even if it's just to a much smaller degree than they did you can be absolutely sure that that kind of person that kind of follower of Christ is a very weak and anemic person when they come to witness for the gospel there's really little influence or power about their lives so that's what we have to constantly actually put to ourselves our relationship with God our praying our reading of the Bible our attendance at church our fellowship with

God's people is there anything of decline tonight in my own life or in your life that corresponds to or is like something of what this passage says going back to what God had separated us from and getting tired of what God has provided us with the best things are the things God has given to his people and it's dishonoring of God isn't it on my part and yours if we've lost our relish for them if we don't have the same taste and appetite that we once had and if we find that there's not much of a difference in our thinking between what we once had and what we now have and what do we do if we have gone back if there is decline even to a small extent let alone a large extent well two things two things that you learn not just from this passage but other passages

[30 : 56] I'm going to mention what tonight if my soul is in decline what sort of thing should I do about that well the first thing is to remember the quality of God's love remember the quality of God's love Jeremiah chapter 31 verse 20 Jeremiah 31 is well known for the references to the new covenant and to all that's attached to that which brings of course into us into the new testament but there are so many other things in that chapter for example verse 3 that I have loved you with an everlasting love therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you remember he's speaking through Jeremiah to a people that have gone away from the Lord that have become idolatrous that have brought a lot of pagan things into their own worship and their spiritual exercises and then further on in the chapter as you read through it it's a long chapter but it comes to the point where

Israel is seen by the Lord as he calls them Ephraim and where Ephraim has begun to think about how God has been disciplined them through this time of captivity in Babylon all these 70 years for what they did and now it's beginning to have an effect and God is saying as he listens as he hears this is Ephraim my dear son is he my darling child for as often as I speak against him I do remember him still therefore my heart yearns for him and I will surely have mercy on him there are no more beautiful words or descriptive words than that of God and tonight of our hearts have grown cold be assured of this whatever is true of yourself whatever is true of anybody else that you know whatever is true of anyone in the church that you belong to or in the congregation be sure that you never lose sight of this fact that

God is yearning over your return that God's love is still warm towards you and that as you think of that continuing love of God however much he's by some things that have happened if it's been the case that you've gone away from him and are not right with him tonight this is what he's saying you're still my dear child my heart still yearns for you and for your return and when you come back to the rightful place with God you're not going to meet with a God who says what are you doing here but a God whose yearning will be made known as it was for the prodigal as he will welcome you back into his fellowship again if I can give you a passage from this book by Octavius Winslow where you find his description really there of

Peter and his return as the Lord actually dealt with him where you find that he talks about the love that Jesus had for Peter as he looked upon Peter what infinite goodness and gentleness is seen in the restoring of Peter it was but a look not a word fell from the lips of the saviour not an unkind rebuke not a harsh upbraiding word did he breathe yet that look what artist's pencil has ever been able to imitate it that look so full of love so full of gentleness so full of forgiveness did seem to say I am going to die for you Peter all this and more I suffer for you will you can you now deny me that look so touching so melting so eloquent so forgiving reached the heart of the back sliding apostle melted it broke it and sent him from that judgment hall weeping bitterly there was no expression in the look which

Jesus bent upon Peter but love let this truth be fixed in the heart of every back sliding believer the way back is to come to remember the love of God and to remember that that God's love is still the same and that that's what you return to however small or great our decline or back sliding may have been the second thing is as well as remembering the quality of God's love to repent and turn to God you see what you have in verses 4 to 6 is really sinful it's sin against God it's sin against his goodness against the abundance of his provision against the quality of his love and grace against his patience sins and sin is always something we need to repent of including the sin of backsliding itself psalm 23 psalm 32 rather gives us an account of when the psalmist was expressing his sin before

[36 : 50] God and what it felt like to him before he was doing this when he was just holding it all back talks about the blessedness of the one who has forgiven sin when I kept silent my bones wasted away through my groaning all day all day long for night and day your hand was heavy upon me my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer I acknowledged my sin to you you see there's a great relief in expressing our sin to God not only relief but relief that meets with grace as you come to this loving God once again our climb down from our own sinful height meets with the beauty of the love of Jesus and there's enough of that to call and to influence every backslidden

Christian to come back to Christ the call of his love his call to repent and meet with his grace in that great hymn oh for a closer walk with God we find a hymn writer there expressing his own sense of decline as well in his own life William Cowper one of the great Christians of history a man who was very prone to depression illness that type of thing where is the blessedness I knew when first I sought the Lord where is the soul refreshing view of Jesus and his word what peaceful hours I once enjoyed how sweet their memory still but they have left an aching void the world can never fill the dearest idol

I have known whatever that idol be help me to tear it from thy throne and worship only thee may God bless his thoughts to us this evening let's pray Lord forgive us we pray for the straying of our lives from that which is pure and wholesome from obedience to your word and to your will help us we pray as we seek your recovery whenever this happens even for the briefest moments Lord enable us to come to you with them lest we should enter upon a protracted time of backsliding and even if we have Lord we pray tonight that by your grace and in the warmth of your love we may be incited to return to you we know that we will meet with your loving reception and we thank you for the assurance that your word gives us that this is indeed the

God we follow bless each of us here we pray and if we have never strayed much from you Lord keep us we pray obedient to you and faithful to your ways and grant in your mercy and grace to receive us now for Jesus sake Amen let's sing now in conclusion from Psalm number 80 Psalm number 80 we're singing from the version on page 107 singing verses 14 to 19 14 to the end of the same page page 107 turn to us O God Almighty look and see from heaven above tend this vine your hand has planted and the son you raised in love see your vine cut down and withered and its branches burned with fire your rebuke has crushed your people and they perish in your ire and so he goes on then we will not wander from you turning from you to our shame strengthen us revive and heal us and we'll call upon your name let's sing these five stanzas from verse 14 turn to us

O God Almighty turn to us O God Almighty look and seek from heaven above tend is mine your hand has planted and the son your race in love see your mind the town and wither and its branches formed with fire you rebuke us crush your people and they perish in your ire let your hand be placed in blessing on the one at your right hand on the son of man you chosen whom alone you caused to stand then we will not wander from you turning from you to our shame strengthen us revive and heal us then we'll call upon your name look on us

[43 : 05] Lord God almighty let us see your glory bright turn us once again towards you come come and save us give us life I'll go to the main door at the back after the benediction now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you now and ever more amen to you