

The Days that are Past

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Date: 27 December 2010

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[0 : 0 0] of a word of a verse I should say that we've read in Deuteronomy chapter 4 page 179 and verse 32 Deuteronomy chapter 4 and verse 32 where we read these words for ask now of the days that are past which were before you since the day that God created man on the earth and asked from one end of heaven to the other whether such a great thing as this has ever happened or was ever heard of this week the Stornoway Gazette has been running a review of 2009 as indeed does it does every year and as many newspapers do and I guess that on New Year's

Eve there'll be as usual some kind of review of the year before the new year comes in and that will be on TV and on the radio and so on these reviews when people look back over the year that has gone by they're not only interesting they're important for one thing we are so prone to forgetting we've all got different powers of recall I don't have a very good memory and we all differ in terms of our memory but even those with the best of memories can very often forget and I must say that when I read the review this week in the Gazette I remembered things that I had by now forgotten things that had taken place and even the most life-changing events are very often forgotten soon after they occur it's not that long before these things disappear from our minds so it's important to make a point of remembering and things that you hear about and read about in the news and even our own personal diary some people are are disciplined and they keep a diary but for me I keep an appointments diary to remind me of what's coming up but an appointments diary can serve as a memory diary as well because you can read over the things that you've been doing and many of these things I have to confess that I had forgotten now God says it's important to remember just two weeks ago we sat at the Lord's table and we remembered Jesus' death we did so because God tells us to do so in remembrance of him he knows how poor our memories are and we're apt to forget and lose sight of even the most important events of history remembering is also important because history repeats itself and we can learn a lot about ourselves by looking over the past and asking how we acted in certain circumstances so that we don't do it again especially if it's something particularly if it's something that has been unwise or unhelpful or downright wrong and we can also learn from our looking back over our past about the life that we live in this world and by collecting all of these experiences we should become more experienced in this world and more mature and more ready to face similar difficulties in the past and that's why an older person should be wiser than a younger person that younger person may be full of enthusiasm and it's great to be full of enthusiasm but an older person has gone through many of the things that a younger person is now going through and that person is able to say yes but what if and he says that because he's gone through it and he's able to and that's why younger people ought to be able to listen to older people and to learn from them but very often they have to go through the same things themselves in order for them to be experienced as well that's life isn't it but it's still important to stop and this time of year of course is the kind of time when people do stop and they look back over things that have happened in their past some people of course can't be bothered with any of this well they live with the attitude that what's important is the future and what's past is past it doesn't matter what's past what's important is the future let's look to the future as that interminably annoying song that you hear at this time of year here it is merry christmas everybody's having fun let's look to the future now because it's only just begun well that's assuming that the future is going to be better than the past and that's that's a very very wild assumption because we don't know what's in the future none of us know what lies in the future and it's quite irresponsible for people to say it doesn't matter what's in the past what matters is what's in the future what if you don't have a future here in this world what if your life is going to end what's the point in looking to the future so-called if you don't have a future here in this world or if your future we all know this morning that our future lies in god's hands and it's the height of arrogance to talk about

let's look to the future when we don't look to the god of the future and we refuse to accept that every moment and every breath we take is in his hands and if he decides otherwise that's it everything lies in his hands in this chapter the people of israel were in danger of forgetting they were sitting or standing on the shores of the river jordan and in just a short time they were en masse just about to cross over from the wilderness on the east side to the promised land the land of canaan on the west side but before they did so mooses want them to stop and to think and to make sure that they know what they're doing and to make sure that they too have learned the lessons from the past and that's why he says these verses he wants them to stop and to remember all that they have done and much of it was wrongdoing and he also wants them to remember all that god has done how he has acted towards them in mercy and in kindness and in goodness to them he wants them so that they when they go into the promised land will not forget the god that they serve and the god that they know and who they belong to and the past didn't just stretch for them over the previous year but the past stretched their whole lifetime over the past 40 years some of them had been born in the wilderness but others well very few of them had had come out of egypt and particularly for the benefit of those who had been born the more those who had been born in in egypt in fact only two two of those who came out of egypt caleb and joshua actually eventually went over into the promised land they had all been been born uh in in in the wilderness or the or they had been uh young people um so they so the past stretch stretch not just one year but 40 years and many things they had to regret and to learn from like for example you don't have to to read very much into the book of exodus before you discover from the very beginning when they needed water as soon as they came out of egypt they needed water instead of trusting in the lord who had brought them out of egypt they started grumbling against him and they started rebelling against him and then they needed food instead of once again trusting him implicitly for for all that he gave them they they rose up and grumbled once again and then they needed water again and this time god took mooses to a rock and he commanded him to strike the rock and the water came out of the rock time after time proving to the people of israel that god was on their side and that god was going to provide everything they needed for them and they wouldn't believe him because they didn't trust him they wanted to grumble and they wanted even to wish that they had been back in egypt where they had been subjected to such cruelty and when mooses was up on mount zinah you'll remember of course that in their eyes they took too long and they persuaded aaron to build a golden calf and they began to worship time after time the people of israel they sinned and sinned again and again and they called down and today as we review our own lives wonder what kind of year it has been for each one of us

i'm sure that for most of us it's been a mixture of some difficult times and some easier times some good times and some not so good times perhaps for some of us the tooth at the year 2009 will will go down in our diary of life as a red letter year perhaps the year that you got married or the year that your child was born or the year that you started your first job or the year that you left home to go to university or college or to start work or whatever the year that something something significant has happened in your life but the year this year could also have been something dark a year that that is marked in your diary of life as containing something perhaps sad in which you have lost a loved one or some or or had some sad experience but that is i suppose every one of us looks back on this year with different emotions for some of us you rejoice for some of us it brings tears to your eyes to think of what has happened in 2009 but we also come we also are commanded to look at ourselves the bible tells us to examine ourselves to ask the kind of question that god wants us to ask in relation to where we stand as to the important relationships in our lives for example what about our marriages the people who god has bound us to those of you who are married what about our relationships to our family our brothers our sisters those we know our friends our neighbors but most of all god is inviting us in his word to ask where do we stand before him how is your relationship to god are you any closer if you're not a christian today are you any closer to the lord this time than you were last year how many how much do you think of the lord does he all does he frequently enter into your heart or enter into your mind do you think about him lots or it's as if he doesn't exist and you just get on with life and it doesn't really matter or so you say i hope that it won't be long before you discover what it is to have the lord changing your life once and for all in the way that only he can by coming to know jesus christ as your own personal savior and only he can do that only he can change you and bring you to and give you that newness of life and that that forgiveness of sin and that peace with god that is found through the lord jesus christ there's a right way to look at the past and there's a wrong way to look at the past the wrong way is to first of all to

ignore the things that shouldn't be ignored you know of course that if that even in the course of normal life for example if you have a leak in the loft you know the last thing you should do is to ignore that leak because it's only going to get worse it's not going to fix itself so you have to go up you have to get a plumber unless you know something about plumbing you have to get a plumber you have to get it fixed right away even if it's going to cost you money you have to get it fixed it's absolutely imperative to get it fixed otherwise it's going to get worse and your whole house could be ruined if you leave there are things in life that you just can't ignore and some of us are apt to when we come against difficulties things that we find uncomfortable it's like we go into denial and we pretend they're not there and we act as if they're not there and we don't face up to our responsibilities well God has given us responsibilities as well in many areas of life and I would like us to ask what responsibilities am I ignoring what areas of my life have I ignored over the past have I neglected over the past 12 months and I would like us to use this opportunity to go back over these and to sort them first of all before God but then with one another the Bible also tells us that as far as looking at the past is concerned and as far as our relationships with one another that it says that love does not keep a record of wrongs and the Bible tells us that for a very good reason because we are vindictive by nature when someone wrongs us our natural sinful inclination is to say that's it

[14 : 34] I'm going to remember that and that's what we do we remember the wrongs that other people have done to us but what the Bible tells us is what Paul tells us is that that is not the way in which the Lord Jesus has set an example for us that real love God's love as it acts within us and as we relate to one another and as we're tested as to the genuineness of that love it will not keep a record of wrongs the Bible goes even further than that and it tells us that if someone has wronged us we absolutely must be willing to forgive that person because the sign of a forgiving person is a forgiving person Jesus makes that absolutely clear in that passage in Matthew chapter 6 just after the Lord's the Lord's prayer for if you forgive others their trespasses your heavenly Father will also forgive you but if you do not forgive others their trespasses neither will your Father forgive your trespasses now it's as important as that these are the words of none other but Jesus Christ himself and we know what they mean don't twist them or turn them or qualify them that's it that is our responsibility so today as we ask now of the days that are past as we review the days that we've had ask amongst other things is there anyone who is a problem to me now of course we disagree with one another of course we do even in the church we disagree just as we disagree in families with one another it's one thing to have an argument or a fallout with somebody it's another thing altogether to bear a grudge or to become bitter against something because of either what I've done to him or what he's done to me or both usually it's both or a bit of both isn't it

Jesus tells us we must absolutely be willing to forgive now sometimes the circumstances are such that that reconciliation can't take place and that's a tragedy when one person it may be that you're willing to forgive and the other person is not willing to be reconciled there's not a great deal you can do except pray for that person and to make sure you look out for the opportunity who knows what God will do in time to come and yet the problem must not lie at your door remember what Jesus said if you come to the altar bring your gift to the altar and there remember your brother has something against you you go and you leave your gift at the altar and you go out and be reconciled to your brother don't mock God by pretending to worship him when there's bitterness in your heart and this is a good time of year to stop and to think about those important issues issues that relate to a relationship with God and that relate to one another because God will bless the more I live in this world the more I'm convinced that God will bless particularly those who seek reconciliation in the church and who seek harmony and well-being in the church to seek to love one another in the church that's what he said himself this is my commandment that I give to you that you love one another as I have loved you oh it sounds easy on paper it's another thing to actually put it into practice in a sinful church in a sinful community of God's people in a sinful family between a sinful husband and wife but we must do it because that's the way in which we are letting our light shine before men and women and by demonstrating what God has done in our lives and the way he has changed our lives and that's what we must do so there's a wrong way of the third wrong way is to allow our past to get to us and to consume us and to bring us down to dwell upon our past to the extent where it takes over and eats us up the Bible tells us that we must first of all take our ugly past to the Lord and we must confess our past even in its horror and shame and ugliness and I believe that there are many people who feel they can't come to Christ because they feel that their past is so

full of shame things that they can could never open up to anyone else about and they feel they can't even open up to the Lord about it even although they know he knows but the Lord has commanded us come to me you who are weary and burdened you who are heavy laden well what else makes us heavy laden except a past that is full of shame and sin and it's become just this unbearable load upon us that we can't bear thinking about it and yet we can't not think about it at the same time and I believe that many as a person

I believe many as a Christian is tripped up even having come to Christ and follow Christ somewhere along the road their past comes up and catches up with them and they can't it cripples them and consumes them and they can't move on because of it we have to bring it to the Lord and we have to confess these things to the Lord where there has been sin and wrongdoing and believe that when God forgives he forgives past present and future and our sins and our iniquities he remembers no more that's what God's cleansing is you'll never find it anywhere else you'll never find such forgiveness a God who takes away our guilt and he drives the guilt away and then he tells us don't let it get to you move on if anyone is in Christ he is a new creature a new creation the old things are past behold everything has become new have you discovered that for yourself and have you discovered it and yet gone back into it and you feel that God can't have that kind of forgiveness for me my past is so ugly it stands it stands different from everyone else in the world well everyone is different and you may feel that but there is nothing that God can't forgive nothing no sin is too dark for the Lord Jesus to cleanse and wash the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin so don't allow that sin that past that memory to consume you and to spoil your communion with God and your witness in this world you are a new creation and even the sins that we have committed as Christians as God's people in which perhaps some other some other people have seen them or are aware of what we've done and how we've we've denied our Lord just like Peter has done the Lord says confess if you confess your sins he is faithful and just and will cleanse us from all unrighteousness the right way is this to confess our sins to the Lord

I've already spoken about that so I'm not going to dwell on it anymore the right way is also to make sure that we make up for the wrongs that we have committed not to God we can't make up for the wrongs we have committed against God that's impossible we have to accept what he has done for us but what we can do is when we wrong someone else we can go to that person and we can apologize to that person and seek that reconciliation why is it that the hardest thing that we find in this life is to admit that we're wrong you ever ask yourself that question why is it so difficult to realize I've been wrong maybe that other person was wrong as well but actually I've been wrong and what we say is

I'm going to wait for that other person to go first why if you know that you're wrong why do you not go to that other person and apologize to that person because the Lord requires you to do so and to make whatever peace you're able to make with anyone you have wronged have you wronged anyone you may say well you've talked about this before no no this is something different this is something this is where you have wronged someone and where the Lord requires you today to think to ask now of the days that are past and to go to that person to make amends for the sake of the gospel and for the sake of what you are the right way is also to learn from the past to allow the past to strike a chord in our hearts where we can learn and to rise out of what we've done in the past and to make sure that we implement the lessons that we've learned so that when similar things happen again so we're ready for it and so that we're wiser and more mature as God's people so that we're prepared having the whole armor of God on but when God asks the Israelites to ask of the days that are past which were before you he doesn't want them to dwell upon themselves he wants them to focus particularly on what he has done for them and particularly the uniqueness of what he has done and that that can be summarized in just two ways first of all there was the way in which God brought his people out of Egypt the miraculous marvelous unique way in which they were rescued from their oppressors and from the nation that treated them with such cruelty and you all know the story in Exodus chapter

[24 : 43] Exodus the first few chapters of Exodus the plagues of Egypt how the people cried to God and how God sent Moses to them and rescued them and divided the Red Sea and allowed them to pass on dry land and then closed in the Red Sea over the people that was the way in which but then there were the next 40 years in some ways the Exodus was just the beginning of a life of communion and fellowship and God taking care of his people in which every step of the way was guarded and kept even although for many of those years the people wronged God and sinned against him yet God was faithful to them just as he is faithful to us who follow him and a marvelous

thing is this that as we confess our wrongs to God today we know that God does not hold our sins if he was to mark iniquity who could stand but yet with him there is forgiveness and there is a future for the people of God as we come to him in faith and as we read those words in the light of what we know about Jesus Christ and as we ask ask from one end of the heaven to the other which such a great thing whether such a great thing as this has ever happened as we're ever heard of what's the answer to that what's the greatest thing that has ever happened to you as a Christian this morning well surely it's this it's your exodus from sin how did that take place when Jesus came into the world and when he was put to death at Calvary when he became sin for us and when he bore our sins in his body on the tree as our sacrifice when he gave his life he laid down his life as the payment for our sins and rose again on the third day ask it says ask whether ever you can find anything in heaven and earth so great so unique so wonderful as God who came into this world as a human being and laid down his life for us on the cross at Calvary ask whether any religion you know it's it's laughable when people talk about well all religions are the same anyone who says that simply hasn't examined religion because any other belief says no other belief system comes anywhere close to the Lord

God the creator of heaven and earth who descended to our world as a human being as one of us and laid down his life in all the pain and the agony that that involved at Calvary ask is there anything that comes close to that story and the most marvelous thing of all is that it's true so today we read those words we're asking in the light of the New Testament and light of Jesus Christ can you think of anything else so wonderful that God has done no and that's the basis for which we end another year and that we go into another year because we stand on the solid rock of Jesus Christ and what he has done for us and where he is taking us because that's the second thing that the Israelites were able to think back upon not just how God brought them out of Egypt but how God led them step by step mile after mile through darkness and through danger and through sickness and through health and every other every circumstance you can think about he led them every step of the way even when things happened that they could not understand and that went completely the opposite to their expectations and you know as we look back over the last year and indeed as we look back perhaps over many years of our lives one of the most difficult things that grips the mind of a Christian is the way in which God has led them and how different that way has been from the way that they expected perhaps you can remember a time in your life where you had all the energy under the sun when you were young and you wanted to give your whole life to God in service and yet something happened and the course of your life changed you don't know why you were willing to do

God's will you wanted to go I've known missionaries in their young days they were ready to go out in the mission field they believed with all their heart that God had called them to the mission field and on the eve of their departure something happened an accident happened the whole of their life changed and they never ever went on the mission field isn't that amazing and you know there are a lot of Christians for whom a similar experience is theirs they look back and they say well I don't understand why God didn't do what I expected him to do and why instead of my life going in one direction it's gone the opposite direction and that's what I find difficult to get in my head round the fact is that the Lord has the Lord is in control and Paul tells us that he who did not spare his own son but gave him up for us all how shall he not also freely with him give us all things and whether we can recognize

God's hand in our lives or not God's hand is in our lives sometimes he shows us later on why he did things the way he did things sometimes he doesn't but we still have to believe that God's in control let me tell you the story I know I'm going to take a wee bit longer but I have to tell you this story because I heard it recently it's a story about China in the 1950s when there was persecution against the church against Christians and there was a man in China called Duan D-U-A-N Duan and he was a Christian during the 1950s he was a pastor and it was criminal to be a Christian and they had one son him and his wife had one son and their life was constantly in danger particularly from a general in the vicinity who had been a bully who had bullied Duan in school and had it in for him and this man was now a general and Duan and his wife had one son and one night his wife heard a voice now you'll know

I've said this before I'm not big on voices but in times of persecution I think the Lord does do extraordinary things she heard a voice and the voice said to her you have to give up your son your baby son to the general the next day Duan himself was reading Genesis chapter 22 about how

Abraham was commanded to give up his only son moments later after they spoke about this the general arrived to arrest Duan and he said to the general he said I'll go with you he said but I'm going to ask you to do something for me I'm going to ask you to take my baby son I know you're childless you and your wife don't have any children will you adopt my baby son imagine that so he did Duan spent the next 20 years in prison and he came out 20 years later and the first thing he wanted to do was find out where his family were first thing he discovered was that his wife had died two years after he had gone to prison in 1958

[32 : 55] I think it was the next thing he discovered was that the place where General Wu lived was hit by one of the worst earthquakes in the whole in the recent history and everyone in that area had died under the rubble he was utterly broken hearted and he spent the next 20 years again in a different part of China still afraid of being caught moving from place to place in fear of being caught and not being able to understand how God had dealt with him in the way that he had he actually was guilt ridden for those 20 years because he came to the conclusion that he had done wrong in giving his son to the general 20 years later he was on a bus and the bus broke down for some reason

Duan got off the bus wandered through fields and found a village and in that village he saw a cross etched on one of the door posts of the houses there so he realized this might be a Christian so he knocked the door and he said are you Christians yes they said we're Christians and they took him in and he stayed there and they said to him one of the first things they said to him well we're having some special meetings in the church and there is a special preacher coming a man through whom many many people have been converted a man called Wang so he said yeah I'll go and hear him he went and he couldn't get in for the crowd but when that preacher started preaching Duan froze to his to his himself his legs started buckling under him because as soon as he heard the preacher's voice it was a voice that was almost identical to his own voice and he fought his way through the crowd and he stopped the preacher from preaching and he says I'm really sorry to do this he said but I have to know this your voice is almost exactly the same as mine and the preacher turned to him and he started shaking as well father was one of the greatest

Christians that he had ever met so the son was converted and the son became a preacher not only a preacher but an outstanding preacher through whom many many people were converted he did not the most marvelous thing about that story it's true it's a real story it's a story that confirms God is always in control of our lives even when we don't know what he's doing and even when our hearts are broken when our spirits are crushed and when we cannot see the end from the beginning there is one who is the end and the beginning let's pray our father in heaven we give thanks that we are able even on the threshold of a new year to look back we look back with sorrow at what we have done that has spoiled our witness and with confession knowing that the blood of Jesus Christ is able to cleanse us from all sin but we also are able to look up to the God who knows the end from the beginning and to the Lord who is on the throne and has promised to do in us and for us more than we can ask or even think so we pray that even if our lives today are in darkness and we cannot understand your ways and your providence towards us Lord we pray that we will take hold of you as our future forgive our sins and be with us and speak to us in Jesus name Amen to you so you you