

Give It to God: Letting Go in the New Year

Some memories are treasures. Worthy to be guarded and cherished.

Some, like the Amalekites, must be left where they fell. From them we simply let go. Move on. We must, especially as we age, learn which is which. All too often we talk too much about the wrong memories. Moses was admonished to let God “put out the remembrance of Amalek.”

Real Life, Even More Real Day by Day

Letting go is among the most important of all the keys to aging gracefully. Yet, as important as it is, it sounds like a hollow platitude. I have heard it said a million times and seen it on bumper stickers and buttons: “Let Go and Let God.” The challenge is making that truism real in real time and in real life. We are somehow predisposed to hold on to stuff, wounds no less than blessings. Some people are emotional hoarders. Their lives are stuffed with junk they should have sent to the dump years ago. The question is, What do we let go of? What do we hold on to? We often memorialize the wrong stuff and jettison that to which we should desperately cling. Some things need to go in the rubbish bin never to be retrieved. Other things need to be cherished and enjoyed like beloved heirlooms.

Exodus 17:14 (KJV) is a fascinating verse. “And the Lord said

unto Moses, Write this for a memorial in a book, and rehearse it in the ears of Joshua: for I will utterly put out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven.” Why would God tell Moses to recount the wild, wonderful, dramatic story of the Exodus in Joshua’s hearing? Joshua had been there for all of it. Because they both needed to share the memory. Moses needed to tell it, and Joshua needed to hear it again. Some memories need to be shared repeatedly. The Amalekites need to be forgotten. The trick is knowing which is which.

Don’t Carry What Belongs in God’s Hands

Some years ago, I did some counseling with a man named Howard. He was a World War II vet in his 80s, and the sessions were strenuous for both of us, to say the least. The struggle was sorting through his war memories in an effort to find which were worth keeping and which needed to be jettisoned. Some of those memories were of camaraderie, of the men with whom he served and came to care about. They were good memories of courage and sacrifice and shared hardships. Those he needed to keep rehearsing just as the Lord told Moses to do.

Some of his memories, however, were horrific. Those memories were what I call “Amalekite memories.” Those needed to be “put out of remembrance.” Easier said than done. At first he just could not let them go. Or rather he felt deep inside that he should not let them go. Something had gotten all twisted around in his conscience. He felt he needed to be punished by remembering those things. Every session, every time we met, all we did was practice “letting go.” Instead of clutching at the memory when it came to mind, he worked with me to let go, to release those memories to an area we called “the Amalekite land of non-remembrance.” It was a discipline for him and not an easy one. But those WWII guys are tough, and Howard was one of the best.

One day he said to me, “I like following orders. It’s how I was raised and trained and how I fought my way ashore on two islands. Are you ordering me to let go?”

“No, Howard, I am not ordering you, but it is nonetheless an order. It’s just not my order. It’s God’s order. When those things come to mind, let go. From now on that’s a standing order from heaven.”

“Let go? That’s it?”

“Yes. That’s the order.”

“And keep on letting go. Right?”

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“Exactly. Let go. And keep on letting go.”

That was Howard’s turning point, and it can be a huge victory for anyone, especially in our senior years. So many memories have piled up like nasty dust bunnies under the bed. Let go! Where you were wrong, give the memory of those things to God and receive His grace. Where you were wronged, do exactly the same thing. Give those memories to God and receive His grace.

Some memories, Amalekite memories, need to go to the dump and stay there, but not every memory is of the Amalekite kind. Our sweetest memories are treasures of inestimable worth. Age can steal so much from us. The loss of our memories, not the loss of our memory, but the loss of specific memories is among the dearest of thefts. Clutch them, retell them, share them and rehearse them, just as God ordered Moses to do.

Theology in Action Is a Powerful

Thing to Behold

At our first little country church, not the least of the novelties for us was the gospel music culture. Having been raised in pretty traditional and somewhat liturgical suburban Methodist churches, neither my wife, Alison, nor I had ever heard songs such as “Build Me a Cabin in the Corner of Glory Land” and “I Feel Like Traveling On.” The lyrics were new and unusual to us. Mostly they seemed to be about heaven, and the quaint references to rural culture (witness a cabin, not a mansion) were interesting and endearing to us. Beyond that, our folks at that church loved gospel music, and we loved them. For us, that settled it.

It was there we were introduced to “all night singings,” or “sangin’s” if you prefer. Some were in big halls in Atlanta, featuring “big name” quartets, and were well attended. Others, the more interesting variety, were in small local churches, and they did, indeed, go on nearly all night. But they were come-and-go affairs, and no one seemed offended if one were to drop in, listen for a couple of hours and leave. They were fun, and the quality of the music was often surprisingly good.

At one such singing, somewhere around midnight, a magnificently obese, late middle-age woman several rows in front of us fell sound asleep and began snoring softly. Directly behind her sat a bone-thin young woman who grew increasingly moved by the music as the evening went on. At one point the group on the platform sang something—how I wish I could remember what it was—that evidently electrified the girl. She suddenly screamed a sustained high C over C and threw her arms in the air.

Thus rudely awakened, the huge woman in front of her erupted with lightning speed and incredible athleticism. She spun around with an impossibly voluminous purse in hand and, without a moment’s hesitation, knocked the young girl

completely off her pew.

“Scare a body to death!” she snarled at the girl on the floor and marched up the aisle and out the door.

I was bedazzled by the big woman’s slugging percentage, but even more remarkable was the concentration of the quartet. They never missed a note. They sang on bravely, as calm as if such muggings were to be expected, at least on certain songs.

Long-Term Perspective While In the Day-to-Day

I feel sorry, truly grieved, for young preachers starting their ministries anywhere but in country churches. So much of the smooth plasticity of modern life covers our real humanity in a slick exterior. The grittiness, the eccentricities, the unpretentiousness of rural life in the middle of the last century were the ragged end of a disappearing era. At that little church I sat on people’s porches and drank cool water they had drawn from front porch wells while they told me about their lives. Not just the good parts. Real life.

One man in his 80s told me a story, a hard story, and one I’ve never forgotten. It was a story about history and relationships and pain. The old man went only by the initials of his first and middle name, G.C. It stood for Grover Cleveland, who was president the year he was born, 1886. G.C. had been born near Pittsburgh and seemed destined to spend his life in the steel mills. The idea of that was horrible to him. He wanted out, he told me. Out of Pennsylvania and out of the blazing, loud, immensely dangerous mills.

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He saw a newspaper advert for jobs on the Central of Georgia

Railroad. It was 1904, and G.C. was 18. It seems the Central of Georgia had just absorbed the Chattahoochee and Gulf Railroad, and they needed hands. In 1904, Georgia, suffering from a lack of manpower, was still rebuilding from the Civil War, which had ended only 39 years earlier. To G.C. it looked like the opportunity of a lifetime. To G.C.'s father it looked like disloyalty of a particularly despicable and treacherous stripe.

G.C.'s father, who was 59 years old in 1904, had been wounded and captured at Chickamauga in 1863. He was sent to the infamous Andersonville prison in South Georgia, where he spent two years in a living hell. It was also at Andersonville that he lost a leg. He told G.C. that if he went to work in Georgia he would never speak to him or let him in the house or see his face ever again.

To young G.C., 1865 seemed light years away. Andersonville was a dark and distant thing to be whispered about and shuddered at, but to G.C. it was gone. Long gone. Not to his father.

"I took the job. I just wanted out. I didn't hate my father. I don't hate nobody."

"Did you ever reconcile? Did you ever see him again?"

"No, Preacher. Never did. I don't reckon he ever spoke my name again."

"That is so sad."

"I reckon. But I chose, and he chose, and them two choices just didn't match. Anyway, I became a real good railroad man. Real good. And a Georgia man all the way. Wars end. That how it is, and that's what my father just couldn't get a holt of. Wars end."

What I had a hard time "getting a holt of" was that I was talking to a man whose father had fought in, been wounded,

captured and lost a leg in the Civil War. Some years later I took my own son to tour the Andersonville prison camp just east of I-75 and only 22 miles from Plains, where Jimmy Carter was born.

It was not just his leg G.C.'s father lost at Andersonville. He lost that part of his soul where forgiveness can replace hate, wars finally end, memories can get healed and love can grow back even if severed legs cannot.

The answer lies in Exodus 17:14. From where I stand now, I can see it better. I wish every wounded preacher who ever got beat up by some wicked church and every hurt layman disappointed and disillusioned by some idiot preacher could see what I see from here. Oh, that every family could let go of their Amalekite memories and hold to the true treasure! Folks go through terrible things. Not all are as bad as the Andersonville POW camp but bad enough to leave them wounded and even maimed. If only they could see it. If only G.C.'s father could have seen it.

What we hope for is some dramatic moment of closure where healing comes and justice prevails. Such dramatic moments seldom if ever come.

Wars end. Eventually.

If we will let them.

You just have to let it go.

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