

THE MYTH OF THE GOOD OLD DAYS

Job 29:1-10, 21-25 (NEB)

INTRODUCTION

As we think of "the Good Old Days" we should remember the wise words of Will Rogers, "Things ain't what they used to be and probably never was."

I. JOB'S MEMORY OF HIS "GOOD OLD DAYS"--

Also called "The days of my youth," or "the Autumn days."

A. Details of what he meant by this; see the context.

1. When he went to city hall, "to the gate of the city," all paid great respect to him; the young and old, the princes and nobles stood and got quiet and listened to what Job had to say; and when they heard Job speak, they approved and called him blessed. Everyone listened to him, and waited, and kept silence for Job's wise counsel (29:21-22). The widows and fatherless, and the poor depended on him and rejoiced that Job was their benefactor; he was "eyes to the blind, and feet to the lame, and like a father to the poor" (29:15-16).

2. Job was the enemy of the unrighteous and "made him drop his prey from his teeth" (29: 17).

3. Job "sat like a chief and dwelt like a king among his troops" vs. 25.

B. Job remembered not only his physical, material, and social blessings; he remembered his spiritual blessings as well; "when the friendship of God was upon his tent" (29: 4).

Chapter 29 tells us about how "Job had it all," as we might say.

He had many good things to remember about his "good old days."

II. HOW WE REMEMBER OUR "GOOD OLD DAYS."

A. Often our Memory of our "Good Old Days" is like a Myth.

What is a myth?

Most people think of a myth as something which is not true.

A myth is not something which is not true. Myth is made up of genuine elements of truth and facts, but they are SELECTED and EDITED facts which are chosen and colored by our biased memory and emotions. This MYTH of selected and edited memories stands for something which is very important to us, especially in times of crisis.

Job was being severely tested; his religious faith and basic understanding of the meaning of existence were being shaken to the foundations by the calamities which he had recently endured.

B. Nostalgia is a kind of a home-sickness of the soul. Our English word "Nostalgia" comes from two Greek words, "nostos" (to return home) and "algia" (a painful condition). The term was first applied to Swiss mercenary soldiers who became despondent and melancholy while fighting in foreign lands. They became homesick for the Alps and for calmer periods of their lives. Any suffering or trials always trigger wistful longing for past memories of the "good old days" in all of us. This is perfectly natural. Job's memories of his good experiences of the past were quite normal for one suffering such horrible adversities as he was now when he suddenly and unexplainably lost his wealth, his family, his health, and everything.

C. You know, nostalgia shows up in church congregations, too.

Robert Dale, in his book To Dream Again points out how this can happen and discusses some good and bad things about this kind of nostalgia. It is first of all a sincere longing for a return to "the good old days." But, as always, it is built on a "selected memory."

D. Charles Kuralt, the CBS television commentator, observes, "There are three kinds of memories--good, bad, and convenient." Long after the original events of our life, we tend to remember and magnify the things that were pleasant, and to blot out the unpleasant or tragic happenings." In our nostalgia for the "good old days" we select only what is agreeable, and even those events we tend to distort or to turn into a myth."

E. Robert Dale wisely points out that congregational nostalgia can weaken our commitments to the present and future, which is not good; but it can provide a bridge to the past and the future, which is good. We need the continuity between past and future, which is why we should not forget the good old days. In order to know who we are we must understand who we were. To plan where we are going we need to know where we came from and how we got here. Such realistic insight is very positive. Even if it isn't totally realistic, even if it is somewhat a selected and idealized memory, provided it isn't too extreme, it can still be useful. We have an emotional need to repeat some of the good old days; it lends a sense of psychological stability, like an oasis in the desert. It gives us a firm toehold on the dreadful turbulence of our modern life.

F. It is not a bad trick which our faulty memory pulls on us to cause us to remember the "Good Old Days" in this way. On the contrary, it is good for us, and it is vital to our well-being.

G. We simply could not endure the constant memory of our bad times if they should overwhelm the memory of our good times in life. It is fortunate that we select happy memories over the sad ones, and color them somewhat to make them sometimes appear better than they were. We all do this in order to defend ourselves from despondency, and this is not all bad.

III. Now let us consider THE REALITY OF "THE GOOD OLD DAYS"

A. Job spent two chapters describing his lament about his present sufferings in contrast to the one chapter about his past blessings. This is about par for the course, as we say. Most of us complain about twice as much about our current trials as we praise God for past victories. Now nobody respects Job anymore. Now he is a byword to everyone, and they abhor him; rather than sympathize with him, they promote his calamity (30:13). His prosperity has passed away like a cloud (30:15), and days of affliction have taken hold of him (30:16), and he is in constant pain. He said, "when I looked for good, evil came; and when I waited for light, darkness came. My heart is in turmoil, and is never still." Now he stands in the assembly where he used to sit like a chief or a king, but when he cries for help, he is despised and rejected. He searches his heart and can find no sin or moral transgression to account for such a tragic fall.

B. Job's "Good Old Days" are all in the past, and he cannot imagine that his best days were ahead.

1. The debate of Job's Comforters was in part an indication of the "generation gap" which existed back in those days just as it often does today.

2. Elihu was a young man among older men, and his speech reflects his frustration (Job 32:6), "I am young, and ye are very old..."

C. Job's comforters were typical human philosophers, well-meaning friends and advisors. Their words were a mixture of some keen insights along with some totally false assumptions and conclusions; some good advice along with some bad advice. They were supposed to be the wise men of their time; but even wise men are not always right. God is the only source of pure and perfect wisdom.

We should listen to what wise and godly people have to say, but listen more to what God says and obey him rather than man.

D. Job could not see that he had romanticized and idealized his past, and he had at the same time failed to put his total condition -- past, present, and future -- in proper perspective.

This may have seemed like the end of his world, but it really wasn't.

IV. So the Memory and Reality of "the Good Old Days" of yesterday should lead us to a CONFIDENT FACING OF THE "GOOD NEW DAYS" OF TOMORROW.

A. Job's latter days were indeed better than his early days. We read in Chapter 42, verse 10, that

"the Lord gave Job twice as much as he had before," and in verse 12, that "the Lord blessed the latter days of Job, more than his beginning."

B. A few years ago a Washington politician was struggling with terminal cancer; he said in a televised interview as he remembered and evaluated yesterday's good old days, "Things were never that good, believe me. The good new days are today, and better days are coming tomorrow. Our greatest songs are still unsung."

C. Isn't that what Robert Browning meant when he put into the mouth of Rabbi Ben Ezra the words,

"Grow old along with me!
The best is yet to be,
The last of life, for which the first
was made:

Our times are in His hand
Who saith, "A whole I planned,
Youth shows but half; trust God,
see all, nor be afraid"

D. So the crucial message of Job is a contrast between the nostalgic longing (in 29:1) to go back to the old days, with the concluding assurance in verse 12 of the final chapter, that "the Lord blessed the latter days of Job more than his beginning." What does this teach us?

1. That some nostalgia about the good old days is normal, and quite possibly useful.

2. That excessive nostalgia and distortion of the past may be harmful to our commitment to the present and the future, if we allow it to be so.

3. That we must always remember that God is sovereign over all in our life, including our trials and testing, and that He can make everything work for good with those who love him, and are the called according to his purpose (Rom. 8:28).

4. That, regardless of how wonderful our good old days of the past have been, the Gospel assures us that the best days of our life, both personally and as a congregation, are in the future, if we continue to trust in God and remain faithful to Him.

CONCLUSION

Any life without this kind of faith in the Lord is largely and unnecessarily empty. If you don't have such security and hope, why don't you give yourself in humble repentance and trust to the Lord Jesus [This morning] while we prayerfully sing the invitation hymn?

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