

# **THEY REMEMBERED HIM**

## **Chapter 2 from the book**

**Edward W. H. Vick** *Jesus the Man*

Jesus' followers remembered him for what he did, for what he said, for what happened to him, and for what they believed him to be. Nor was his scandalous death an ultimate barrier to their faith.

### **They Might Have Forgotten**

However, the records suggest that at one point they might have forgotten - during the interval between Jesus' death and resurrection. It was the interim that they did not recognize as an interim, the period when they judged that Jesus' death meant the end.

Since their hopes had been raised for the fulfillment of all that they and their people had wished for, what better consolation could they enjoy but to forget the whole thing, if they could? The forlorn wail of those whose hopes had been dashed by Jesus' death was, 'But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since this happened' (Luke 24:21, RSV\*). 'Simon Peter said to them, 'I am going fishing' ' (John 21:3). But how could the disciples forget, when they had become a part of what had happened? Perhaps in their despair they could still hope that something else might happen.

Something more did happen. They did not forget. They remembered. The resurrection of Jesus was a turning point. In their Resurrection-faith they came to see that God had not abandoned Jesus in death and that God was even then acting through their very faith. They remembered what he had been because they now knew him for what was happening to them. Jesus was in their midst. He was seen. When he was spoken about, people experienced and believed. That was the new thing, and they were involved in it. It was much more than historical memory. They believed that what they had hoped for was not illusion but was now reality. They were part of the new happening.

### **Before They Wrote It Down**

There was a period when nothing was written down about Jesus. But as the early Christians began to worship Jesus Christ they not only remembered his sayings, but they also wrote them down for others. There is good reason to think that short manuals with 'sayings of Jesus' began circulating in the very early days of the church's history.

When the apostles and eyewitnesses began to die, or were put to death, it became important to preserve their knowledge and understanding of Jesus. So a new kind of writing, called Gospel, came into being. Mark, the earliest of those that now remain to us, was written about AD 65 — many years after the event. The remembering came first. Then came the writing.

There were other reasons for putting what was being transmitted orally into the more permanent form of written works. First, Roman persecution and harassment, assisted by Jewish hatred, scattered the infant church and deprived it of its leaders. Only a few like Luke (see Luke 1: 1-4) were in a position to give an authentic and ordered account of the things believed among the Christians, and time was pressing. Death might claim those who could write.

Second, the demands of communicating and teaching made the production of Gospels desirable. The inquirer and the new believer could be referred to reliable accounts of Jesus and could then make up their minds for themselves. So memories were selected, compared, compiled, and edited, and the Gospels came into being as a literary deposit of the memories about Jesus.

### **We Remember What Is Important**

Why do we remember certain people and certain events but not others? We have a fund of selected memories. So does the historian when he comes to write about a particular topic, period, or character. But even within the limited whole of what we do remember, some things are more important to us than are others. So it is with the historian. All that he remembers is important, but some of what he remembers is more significant than the rest. In writing his book, as in our keeping a diary, only the most important memories (judged, of course, according to a particular set of values) will be retained. These events or persons are significant because of their particular personal or social meaning. By saying that it is important we mean that it has particular or unusual meaning for us.

The non-Christian sources of the first century A.D. that mention Jesus add virtually nothing to our knowledge of him. They do clearly show, however, that his historicity was taken for granted and that he was not considered of any significance, let alone the epoch-making significance the New Testament gives to him. Philo does not mention Jesus, even when speaking of Pilate. Josephus says nothing about Jesus. (There is a debated passage in Josephus' writings, but see Gunther Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth*, pp. 13, 14, 28, 195, 196; W. H. C. Frend, *The Early Church*, p. 35)

Consider, for example, the memory of the Roman historian who wrote the following: 'Christus, from whom the name [i.e., Christian] had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus' (Tacitus, *Annals*, 15. 44.).

Another passage may refer to Jesus Christ, but if so, it is incorrect. Suetonius in the second century wrote, 'Since the Jews constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus [sic], he expelled them from Rome' (*The Deified Claudius*, 25. iv).

This is really the sum total of authentic references from primary historical sources outside the New Testament. They are of a different order from the memories of the New Testament writers. For example, the Book of *Acts* quotes Peter as saying, 'This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. But God raised him up, having loosed the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it.' 'God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified' (2:23, 24, 36).

Look at Paul's evaluative memory of Jesus' death, 'In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself' (2 Corinthians 5: 19). Jesus died. That is something which *happened to* him. But for Paul, the Christian believer, Jesus' death is also and primarily something Jesus did—indeed, something God did. For the historian, death is the end, as it is in Tacitus' account. Hence this Latin historian's casual reference contrasts with the burning dedication, gratitude, and joy in the confession of the meaning of Jesus' death for the apostle.

### **Two Kinds of Memory**

Let us go one step further in specifying the difference between our two kinds of remembering. There are occasions when we remember the dead. We call them memorial days. We pause awhile and think of those who were, but now are not. This has to do with the past. We remember what they were and, perhaps, reflect upon what might have been. But our thoughts are linked with what can no longer be. If the present differs from the past, it is because those whom we remember are absent. We may speak of them as 'present in thought,' but that is only a way of observing their real absence. Death is final, and such remembering is thus an occasion of sadness. When Christians commemorate the Lord's Supper, a remembering takes place. The ceremony calls to mind a death — the death of Jesus. But communion with the one who is remembered as well as anticipation are added to the memory. In this particular case the experience and celebration of Jesus' living presence and the anticipation that accompanies it are part of, ingredient to, the memory. The Communion Service really is memory plus living presence plus anticipation. During the Eucharist, Christians do not simply recall the death of a good man so that he is 'present in thought,' as when we ordinarily remember the deceased. Instead, they claim that he who died is in some way present and that his influence is not simply the continuation of the good which he started during his life, like other men. Jesus is, in some way, now here, which is a different sort of memory than that of memorial.

When Christians celebrated the living presence of Jesus, the proper

and natural thing to do was to remind one another about Jesus-what he did, what he said, and what happened to him. Thus, the incidents in Jesus' life would be recalled, recited, and handed on from one Christian group to another and from one Christian to the group and to the new believer. In Latin the word that means 'handing on' is *traditio*. In English it becomes *tradition*. Since the word also means 'what was handed on,' we may say that a Christian tradition began to arise. Later the content of what was handed down would be put in writing, but it would be repeated many, many times in worship before it took a fixed and permanent form.

### **Deliberate and Selective Remembering**

The Gospel writers deliberately selected and arranged the traditions about Jesus and explicitly stated they had done so (Luke 1:1-3; John 20:3, 31). The question arises, What was the basis for the inclusion or exclusion of a particular story or statement? Basically it was the relevance of the material to the church's needs, one of which was, by John's own admission (John 20:31), the adequate fulfillment of the missionary task. As the young church faced its particular problems as a community in the Roman world, it would recall what Jesus had said or done on different occasions. These recollections would help the church follow his will in the new situation it had to meet. So, we can almost feel the New Testament writers' thinking as they addressed the different congregations and provided guidance upon the authority of Jesus Christ for the different kinds of problems that arose.

The selective remembering in the Gospels fixes a *limit* for our knowledge of Jesus, and the survival or perishing of such collections fixed a further limit. What these historical documents present is all that we can know of Jesus. Had the authors not written down what they did or if all of what they recorded had perished, we would not now be in a position to remember Jesus ourselves- unless a very reliable oral tradition had been maintained from that day to this. So we depend upon the Gospels. With them we reach boundaries of our historical evidence and the limit of our historical knowledge.

### **Later Dependence On The Earliest Witnesses**

All Christian thinking depends upon the recollections of those first witnesses and the survival of their memories in a literary form. So does all historical knowledge with documentary evidence as its sole source. If we do not have evidence, technically speaking we do not have history. Strangely, this is not the same as saying that it did not happen. But how can we know what happened unless some of the evidence of the event remains? History depends upon memory. For Christianity this means that the existence and continuance of faith have an indissoluble tie with history. Yet faith in Christ is not identical with a historical understanding of Jesus.

The Gospels were the only extant, primary, literary evidence for the person of Jesus from which an authentic ‘picture’ of Jesus might be drawn. Once this fact was recognized formally, they became set apart from all other Christian literature and were widely read in the many churches that had sprung up. The *canon* of the New Testament emerged because the writings it was to contain were connected, or were thought to be connected, with an apostle or the associate of an apostle.

All other Christian thought and writing thus depends upon the New Testament canon and is, in a particular sense, secondary to it. Witnessing to Jesus’ resurrection provides the continuity between the ‘historical’ Jesus and all later Christian faith, understanding, and speech.

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\*All Bible texts cited are from the Revised Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

Edward W. H. Vick, *Jesus the Man*, Nashville: Southern Publishing Association, 1979.