

# What God Remembers

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*Zakar* is the ordinary Hebrew word for remembering, and it appears around two hundred times in the Old Testament. It is not a rare or technical term. It turns up in law, in narrative, in prayer, in complaint. Which is part of the difficulty, because a common word carries its meaning quietly and we tend to supply our own.

In English, remembering happens in the head. Something comes back to mind. I remembered where I had left the keys; I remembered a face; I remembered that it was her birthday, and then I did nothing about it. The word is complete without any action attached. You can remember something and let it pass.

Hebrew does not work that way. *Zakar* almost always carries on into conduct. The remembering shows up as something done, and the doing is not a second step that may or may not follow — it is how you can tell the remembering happened. Which means that when the Old Testament says somebody remembered, the question to ask is not what came to mind but what changed.

Start where people are the ones doing the remembering, because the word is easier to watch there.

Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. The commandment is not asking Israel to have the day come to mind on the day. It is asking them to stop working. Remembering the Sabbath and keeping the Sabbath are the

same act, which is why the verse can put them side by side without any sense of repetition.

You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt. This is one of the most frequent instructions in Deuteronomy, and every time it appears it is attached to conduct. Remember you were a slave – therefore keep the Sabbath. Therefore release your servant in the seventh year. Therefore leave the sheaf in the field for the sojourner and the fatherless and the widow. The remembering is not nostalgia about hard times. It is the reason you are about to behave a particular way towards somebody with nothing.

The negative case makes it plainer. Joseph interprets the cupbearer's dream and asks one thing: remember me. The cupbearer is restored, and the text says he did not remember Joseph, but forgot him. He had not mislaid the information. He was standing in the one place where a word from him would have counted, and he said nothing. Two years pass.

God is also the one who remembers. When the text reports that somebody remembered, he is the subject more often than anyone else.

God remembered Noah and all the beasts and all the livestock that were with him in the ark. That sentence sits at the hinge of the flood narrative, and what follows it immediately is wind over the water and the waters going down. Nothing suggests Noah had slipped his mind for a hundred and fifty days. The remembering is the point at which the account turns from rising water to receding water.

God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. Israel is in Egypt and the exodus has

not begun. This is where it begins. Everything from the burning bush to the Red Sea stands downstream of that one clause.

And God remembered Rachel, and God listened to her and opened her womb. The same construction, on the smallest possible scale. One woman, one household. The remembering arrives and something happens that had not been happening.

In none of these does the text tell us God recalled something he had lost track of. What it reports is a change in the situation, and it names that change *remembering*. Before it, a condition that has gone on too long. After it, movement.

Ask what the object of the verb is, and one word comes up far more than any other. Covenant.

God remembers his covenant with Noah, and sets the bow in the cloud as the sign of it. He remembers his covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and Israel comes out of Egypt. He remembers it in Leviticus when the people are scattered and under judgement, and the remembering is what stops the judgement being final. The Psalms say it plainly: he remembers his covenant forever, to a thousand generations.

*Berit* is a formal word. It is the language of an agreement with terms, the sort of thing that could be produced in a court and read aloud. When God remembers his covenant he is acting on something that stands in writing.

He also remembers people, by name and one at a time. Noah. Abraham. Rachel. Hannah. Samson, once, at the end, when he asks to be remembered and is.

And twice he remembers what we are made of. He remembered that they were but flesh. He remembers that we are dust. Both times the remembering is the reason the judgement does not run its full course. Knowing what we are is itself the mercy.

Which brings me back to Psalm 98:3, and to what surprised me about it.

| *He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness to the house of Israel.*

The object here is not *berit*. It is *hesed* – covenant loyalty, the word God uses of himself. And on my reading it is the only place in the Old Testament where God is reported as remembering his own.

He remembers Israel's once. *I remember the devotion of your youth*, he says through Jeremiah, *the love of your betrothals*. But that is their loyalty to him, recalled at the point where it has run out. Psalm 98 is the other direction, and it has not run out.

I expected a long list. The pairing feels like it should be everywhere, because *hesed* and remembering sit together all through the Psalms. And they do – but almost always with the direction reversed.

Remember your mercy, O LORD, and your steadfast love. Where are your former acts of steadfast love, which you swore to David? Remember me, O LORD, when you show favour to your people. Remember your steadfast love to David your servant. Over and over Israel asks God to remember his *hesed*. It is one of the commonest things anybody says to God in the Old Testament.

So the pairing is everywhere as a request and hardly anywhere as a report. We ask constantly; the text seldom says he has. That asymmetry may

simply be a feature of what psalms are for – most of them are prayers, and prayers ask. But it means Psalm 98:3 is doing something the plea-psalms never get to do. It is not asking. It is saying it has happened, and that the nations saw it.

And the substitution matters. Where the formal word normally stands – the agreement, the terms, the thing on paper – this psalm puts the warm one. Not he remembered the arrangement. He remembered his loyalty.

I have written about what that verse cost me to see in a companion reflection, [The Asking](#).

There is one more thing the same verb does, and it is the reverse.

I will not remember your sins. I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more. None of the transgressions that he has committed shall be remembered against him.

Read those with English remembering in mind and they sound like forgetfulness – as though God mislays the record, or declines to look at it. Which raises the obvious problem: he cannot not know. And if the sentence means he has somehow arranged not to know, it is either untrue or it makes the forgiveness a trick of filing.

But *zakar* was never about the contents of the mind. It was about what follows. So *I will not remember your sins* is not a claim about God's knowledge. It is a decision about God's conduct. He knows exactly what was done. He will not act on it.

Which puts the two directions of the verb side by side, and they are the same word doing the same thing. What he remembers, he acts on. What

he refuses to remember, he refuses to act on. Neither is about recall in either case.

Psalm 25 has both in one breath, six verses apart.

*Remember your mercy, O LORD, and your steadfast love, for they have been from of old.*

*Remember not the sins of my youth or my transgressions.*

One verb, twice, pointed opposite ways. Remember this and act on it. Remember that and do not.

So the question to bring to the word is never what God has in mind. It is what he is going to do.

Psalm 98 answers it in the same breath as it asks. He remembered his steadfast love, and the ends of the earth saw the salvation of our God. The remembering was the salvation. There was nothing in between.

This article did not begin with artificial intelligence. It began with years of ministry, reading, prayer, suffering, and conversation.

During its development, AI became a conversation partner. It challenged assumptions, tested arguments, suggested structures, and helped refine expression. Many of the words here emerged through that dialogue.

The experiences, convictions, interpretations, and conclusions remain my own.