Remember not the former things

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Date: 01 January 2000

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[0:00] Now let's turn to that first passage of scripture we read in the prophecy of Isaiah, Isaiah chapter 43. And we read there verse 18 and the first word of verse 19.

Forget the former things. Do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing.
The Christian is often represented as someone who has suspicions, suspicions of everything new. And sometimes the church is represented as preferring what is old-fashioned and ancient, what belongs to a previous day. And sometimes these representations that are made of us as Christians and as the church, sometimes these representations have got some semblance of reality.
Because quite often we do in fact give that impression. We have a tendency to do the thing that God says here through Isaiah we should not do.
[1:25] We have a tendency to dwell in the past. Now this seemed to be a tendency that the Israelites had also.

When they thought of God's power and God's grace, they obviously thought back to those great times when God's grace and power were demonstrated.
For instance, here in this context, looking back to the great redemption that God had accomplished in bringing them out of the slavery of Egypt.
This was the classic thing that the people of Israel always looked back to. The fact that God had worked in this mighty and miraculous way in bringing them through the Red Sea and bringing them to safety and to freedom.
Now, we also may have the same kind of attitude. We may hark back to old days in various ways.
[2:30] We may hark back to perhaps times that we remember earlier in our lives. Perhaps times when we had the feeling that more or less everybody went to church.

Where perhaps in our communities every house had family worship. And where perhaps things like the shorter catechism and the scriptures were taught even in the ordinary schools.
Perhaps our minds go back to days before that. Before times that even the oldest of us can remember. Back into times that we read about.
Back to the days of the early free church. In the middle of last century. When there was tremendous growth. And there was evangelical revival.
And the blessing of God. Or back before that. To previous times. The times of the great witness of the covenant. To the truth.
[3:37] Of the lordship of Christ over the church. Or back to the times of the reformers. Before that. And so on. There are various great times. That we can look back to.

In our nation. Look back at great things that God has done in the past. Even perhaps. Within living memory. But of course.
There are various problems with that. The first problem is. That. These times. Were never really. As ideal. As we sometimes like to think. We all know. The. Characteristics. That we all have.
That the older we get. And the further we get away from things. The rosier things appear. That's why. It's only. Drone up people. And probably middle aged people.
[4:37] Who say. That school days. Were the best days of your life. When you're actually living. In the school days. When you're going to school. You don't think they're very great at all. But then you're looking back to the days. Before you went to school.

You have this memory. Of a golden age. When you didn't have to go to school. And you didn't have teachers telling you what to do. We always have this impression. That things that were before. Were rosier.
Than the things. That we're in now. But actually. When you do. Dig deeper. And when you look. At the various situations. Some of these will be mentioning.

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You discover. That things were not really. As rosy. As sometimes they're painted. We can look back. For instance. Through all the great times.
Of blessing. And evangelical revival. Last century. And you can see. That there was never a time. When the city. Of our land.
[5:33] Were really evangelized. There was never really a time. When there was enough room. Even. In any of the churches. For all the people.

Who lived in the city. Very far from it. It's been true. It's true. That the cities of our nation. Have never really been. Holy.
Touched. By the gospel of Jesus Christ. And so we could go on. Every time. That we can look back to. As a kind of golden age. It had tremendous difficulties.
And problems. The time. The time. The time of the Covenanters. A great time. A great time. When people were prepared. Not only to live. But to die.
For the Lordship of Jesus Christ. But yet. When we look back. At those times. We see too. That there was tremendous. Disagreements. And differences. Amongst the Covenanters.
[6:30] Themselves. Very sad. As you look back on. So you see. None of those ages. That we may look back to. Were really. As good.

As we sometimes. Like to think. But. Even if we think. Of more recent times. I find. A problem here. Because I know that. Older people. Can look back. And they can see a time. In their past experience. When things. Certainly did appear better. Than they are today.
In our society. But for myself. As I look back. Into my early days. I don't see. These. Halcyon days. In any terms. And especially not. In spiritual terms. The highlands. That I grew up in. As a boy. Were not the kind. Of spiritual paradise. That they're often.
[7:24] Painted to be. Church going. Was very. Very low. In the area. In which island. Church going. And. At school. You were as likely.

To be taught. About evolution. And humanism. As about. The Bible. And certainly. Evangelical Christianity. Was not. Taught.
Clearly there. Ab hari. And it was. An area. Of course. As we know. That it still is. Where there is. Chronic alcoholism. And where there was.
Child sexual abuse. Although these names. Were perhaps. Not invented then. Or certainly not used. But these realities. Were there.
so I have no desire to hark back to a time in my own life or in my own memory when things were rosy and everything was fine and we need to get back to those days rather I want to find out what God is saying here when he speaks of doing a new thing forget the former things do not dwell on the past see I am doing a new thing I want to explore with you this evening something of what's meant by these words and to seek to apply them to ourselves and our own days but before I do that there's also the fact that we can have this looking back not just in terms of our society and the past of our community or our nation we also have this tendency in looking back at our own personal experience and Christians are not immune to this and here I speak especially to those of you who are Christians we can have a tendency to look back in our own personal Christian experience back to the time of our conversion when we became Christians back to times of special blessings when we felt that God was very real to us and God was working in our experience we can be on the personal individual level like what Israel were as a nation looking back to that great time when God brought them through the Red Sea out from the slavery of Egypt and into the freedom of the promised land harking back to times that are past now of course here again there is a great danger that we tend to glamorize and to idealize what has gone past and really if we're ruthlessly honest with ourselves we can look back at these times and recognize the hand of God and recognize the hand of God in them but recognize also a great deal of failure on our own path so that what we're being asked to do is not really to live on the past to look back and to see those times those things that God has done and to try somehow to transfer ourselves back by some kind of time machine into those times because that is impossible we cannot turn the clock back we cannot turn the clock back whether in terms of our society or in terms of our individual lives we've got to ask what is God doing now and what does God want of us now that's what this text this evening brings before us so I want to look with you at this emphasis that God does a new thing forget the former thing do not dwell on the past see I am doing a new thing well immediately objections spring to mind what about we may say what about the emphasis that are made clearly in God's word concerning the old ways and the old paths concerning the fact that

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[11:57] God has revealed himself in the past he has spoken he has done those things and we should honour those things and in that sense we should always look back to those things well of course there is that emphasis in God's word because everything that God has done in history is tremendously important whether on the global scale of history on the history especially as we call it revelation history what God did and what is recorded for us in the scriptures or at our own personal level of our own individual history all of these things are tremendously important and of course supremely important is what God has revealed his truth and the Lord Jesus Christ in no way plays down or denigrates the old testament what God had revealed before his coming rather he said he had come not to destroy it but to fulfill it so there is no emphasis here that God is sort of doing away with what he's done before but what he is saying here is a great exaggeration to restore the balance he's just been saying he's just been referring to the liberation out of Egypt in verse 16 this is what the Lord says he who made a way through the sea a path through the mighty water he describes himself as the one who did that he owns it he recognises it but he says forget it he's not saying forget it in the sense it's not important or it never happened or any of these things he's saying what I want you to do now is not to concentrate on that

I want you to forget that I want you to see that I'm doing a new thing I want you to focus your attention on something else so the technique that God is using here by this exaggerated statement is to restore the balance the balance is out of balance they were looking back to the past and trying to live in the past and so on and he's getting them to turn their attention now to the present and to what God is doing in doing a new thing so that's one objection hopefully answered but there's another objection what about we may say what about that emphasis in the book of Ecclesiastes that says there is nothing new under the sun you may say it's all very well you're going on here about God doing a new thing but doesn't God's own words say that there's nothing new under the sun and you know we as Christians sometimes take that as a sort of supreme truth there's nothing new under the sun and we have a kind of almost cynical attitude to everything in life and we say well it's all happened before we're not looking really for anything new to happen again well that is totally to misunderstand the book of Ecclesiastes and to misunderstand the whole tenor of churches the book of Ecclesiastes is talking primarily about life under the sun there is nothing new under the sun it says he doesn't say there's nothing new he says there's nothing new under the sun now what does that mean well if you look at it carefully in the book of Ecclesiastes you'll see he's talking about life lived without reference to God life just on the physical plane under the sun and life lived on that level produces nothing new history in these terms is indeed a wearisome repetition of old errors old hereties old immorality the same things that are happening today they happened in ancient Greece and Rome oh yes they may have slightly different forms but basically the same thing because human nature and its sinful nature is unchanged so in that sense there is nothing new under the sun there is nothing new in sin it may seem very new to us at the time but if we have a right understanding of God's word and a right understanding of history you'll see there is nothing new in it and there is nothing new in hell the devil never produces anything new he has never created anything new or original in his whole existence he only deformed and twists and corrupts what God created good there is nothing new under the sun but that does not contradict this emphasis and the emphasis of many other passages that say
God does a new thing God is the God of new things God is the God of creation God is the God of surprising things of bringing things into being that before were nothing and never thought of God is the God who does a new thing so let's look at this new thing of which God speaks here and we'll see that there are various levels in it obviously one primary reference here is to what God is going to do in bringing back the people from Babylon you see in verse 14 we read for your sake I will send to Babylon and bring down as fugitives all the Babylonians in the ships in which they took pride
I am the Lord your holy one and he goes on after the part of our text here to say I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland and if we compare this with various other passages you see that there is a reference here to God bringing back the people the Jewish people from their exile in Babylon to the promised land this time not through the sea but through the desert so that is something that God said he was going to do he prophesied it through Isaiah even before they had been taken away into exile he said he was going to do it and he did it a new thing and a thing that was really even more amazing in some ways than the liberation out of Egypt because at that time the time of

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Babylon it seemed as if the cause of Israel was almost extinct Jerusalem was destroyed the whole nation had been totally disrupted and moved away into exile Babylon and yet God brought them back and God re-established them there in the land so out of a situation where the cause had become very low God restored it and brought new life God but that I believe is the minor reference here because we see as we look how the passage developed we discover that God is speaking in terms far beyond the restoration of the people to Jerusalem and to the land of Judah and we know that these references in the book of Isaiah to God working away in the wilderness is brought to fulfillment in the New
[21:02] Testament in the preparing of the way of the Lord by John the Baptist in the wilderness you see there John the Baptist preaching repentance of sin preparing the way for the Lord to come opening up a way there in the desert he's pointing to the one who is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world and there you see is the supreme new thing that God did yes the restoration to Jerusalem from Babylon was a great thing but it was as nothing compared to the great thing that God did in Jesus Christ yes God did great things in the redemption of the people out of Egypt the liberation from slavery but it is as nothing compared to the liberation that the

Lord Jesus Christ did that liberation from sin as he laid down his life in the place of sinners yes God did great things in the Old Testament in giving to them his law and his sacrifice but the Lord Jesus Christ fulfilled all of these things he paid the price of the broken law he gave his life as a sacrifice for sin the true Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world and there you see is the greatest new thing that God has done thus far the great new thing of God sending his son into the world the thing that although it is promised there in the Old Testament was unlooked for by so many the great surprising thing that God did in sending his own son into the world the great surprising thing he did in his son taking upon himself the sins of the world so surprising that nobody really was prepared for it not even his disciples whom he had taught concerning it they didn't understand they couldn't appreciate they couldn't take in this stupendously new thing that God was doing that here the son of God the Messiah the Christ was crucifying was spat on was reviled went out into darkness crying my God my God why hast thou forsaken me they couldn't grasp it until it was revealed to them that this was the only way in which our salvation could be achieved the only way by which our guilt could be taken away by the Lord Jesus Christ taking the place of sinners and enduring hell for us God did a great new thing not only in the desert as John the Baptist pointed to Christ but he did a great thing in that wilderness into which the Lord Jesus Christ went when he bore our sins but then also here in this passage there's a clear reference to the coming of the Holy
Spirit in chapter 44 verse 3 for I will pour water on the thirsty land and streams on the dry ground I will pour out my spirit on your offspring and my blessing on your descendants and here we see a reference to that future time of the pouring out of the Spirit of God at Pentecost for there was the full outpouring of God's Spirit on the dry ground the pouring out of his Spirit applying the benefit of the redemption that Christ had won that pouring out of the Spirit that is still taking place throughout our church throughout the church of Jesus Christ the outpouring of God's Spirit bringing conversion bringing changed lives bringing lives that are dedicated to the Lord Jesus Christ again a great new thing that God did so new that again people were staggered when the
Holy Spirit was poured out at Pentecost what did the mean small minds of men think they thought oh it's only nine o'clock in the morning these men must be drunk and Peter had to say it's only nine in the morning we're not drunk it is the Spirit of God it is what is foretold in the Old Testament we are speaking the Word of God in different languages to different people that's why you think it's confused and stupid but it is God doing a miraculous and a great thing something unlooked for something unheard of something new that God did but then of course that newness is something that does not die with Pentecost so there was the beginning of that continuous new creation that occurs whenever someone comes to faith in
[26:43] Jesus Christ we read in 2nd Corinthians chapter 5 verse 17 that if any man is in Christ he is a new creature old things are passed away all things are become new you see again the emphasis on newness a new thing an amazing thing a spiritual revolution taking place in an individual's life and you may say oh well once the first person has been converted then it's not something new if it happens again well you're wrong because every individual human being is an individual that's part of what it means for us to be made in the image of God because each person of the trinity is an individual with individual properties the father eternally generates the son and the father and the son eternally cause the holy spirit to proceed from them there are individual

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properties within the mystery of the relationships in the triune

God and when he created us as individual human beings he didn't create us as clones of one another so that we're all identical even identical twins are not really identical they have their own personality God created us as individual and when the spirit of God comes upon an individual and he brings him to new birth to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ he has created a new creation a person who has never ever before praised the Lord or worked for him or produced new things in his terms new potentials new possibilities that God does by his spirit we must have something of that vision of what God does in doing this great new thing in bringing us to faith in him and the new potentials that he is opening up as he calls us into his service but also of course supremely there is the new universe that God will ultimately create in Revelation chapter 21 a few verses there speak of God making new heavens and a new earth

God says behold I make all things new and he speaks about a new Jerusalem now of course that renewing process is taking place already in the world as he calls people of different nations different places and different backgrounds to faith in the Lord Jesus but there will be a complete renewal of all things when he will create out of the ashes of this old universe a new universe yes in which there will be likeness to the universe that went before so that he speaks of a heavens and an earth and he speaks of things like trees and gardens and rivers and all the rest of it but it will go far beyond the possibilities of this universe it will be a universe in which righteousness dwells a universe that will be perfect and with a perfect environment for the development of all the human potential that he has brought to reality by creation and by recreation but then to return to the present

God is so much again to say in his word about newness for the present Jeremiah in that little book tacked on to the end of his prophecy little book Lamentations a name that really is a kind of turn off to us that we think well I don't want to read that book it sounds very sad and sorry well in that book there are tremendous gems of truth one of them is that God's mercies are new to us every morning his compassions fail not his mercies are new to us every morning isn't that something marvellous some vision that we need to recapture not just looking to the past and what God has done there but that every day we rise God's mercies are new to us not only new in the sense that we may make a new discovery of them but new to us in the sense that we may discover mercies that we didn't realize were there before new to us every morning whatever challenges we may have to confront on a particular day that our mercies of God provisions that he has made appropriate for that new for that new situation we look at the world around us we look perhaps at our own situation and we think I'm into a new situation here so I don't know how to handle it well God mercy is as new as the situation and he is ready to help you in that

God does a new thing we look at the world around us in terms of the Christian church being placed in this world today and we think sometimes the world has gone mad everything seems to be changing we can't keep up with the pace of change all these things that are happening these new things new developments what on earth can we do but God does a new thing God has new grace available for us in the situation in which he has called us and so the Lord Jesus too speaks of new wine he says that you can't put new wine into old wine skins the old wine skins would burst and so he was speaking there of the impossibility of putting his new grace and his new teaching into the old worn out habit of human thought the thought of the

[33:16] Pharisees and all the rest of them it wouldn't fit it was something new it was something dynamic and you see this message of God's grace today will not fit in to the old worn out patterns of the world around us there have to be new ways in which these things are thought out in the present age there are new things to be done how do you think theology developed theology was not given to us on a plate yes the basis of it is all there in the scripture but it had to be hammered out in new situations yes there are errors as old as the world itself as old as the fall in the garden of Eden that keep on cropping up but cropping up in new situations and they have to be answered from God's word and it is not in the errors that the new things are but it's in a new understanding a new illumination of the truth that we have throughout history the gradual development of theology so that we see

God's word applied in a relevant way to new situations and to new ages there are still things to be thought out theologically in the world in which we live today the Westminster confession is not the last word theologically there are things that it does not develop far enough the doctrine of God's word for instance or the doctrine of the Holy Spirit these are things that still need to be developed and to be worked out so the Lord Jesus speaks of new wine and he speaks of the teacher who is

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schooled in the kingdom of God bringing new truth new treasure out of his wealth as well as old so in conclusion we honour God for all that he has done in the past but we also look for new things the best wine in terms of what the
Lord Jesus Christ did at Cana of Galilee the best wine is still to come and we as we may look at our own society and our own generation generation we ought to think not we want to regain something that was in the past but our attitude ought to be we want a new thing we want a new thoroughgoing revolution a spiritual revolution in our society we look for something even greater than what was before you see the people who looked at the new temple that was being built at the time of Zerubbabel they thought this is a very small thing compared to the glory of Solomon's temple and as we may look at the church scene today as we may look even at our own denomination and other evangelical churches we may think these are very small things compared to the great things that the church of
God has done in the past but God drew the attention of the people at that time to something that they could not foresee and that was that the glory of this second house would be greater than the glory of the first house why would it be greater it be greater because that would be the house where the Lord Jesus Christ came it be greater because that would be the house where the veil of the temple was rent in two from the top to the bottom it be greater because there the glory of Jesus Christ would be revealed in all his love in all his grace and in all the forgiveness of sin and so we today look to God to do a new thing we look to God to work in our day and generation to give to the church of Jesus
Christ an overall balanced appreciation of truth a concern for mission a concern for the culture of the societies in which we live a concern for truth and a concern for morality a concern for every area that God is concerned for because we may look to the past and we may see great things that were done by the churches but there was always imbalance there was always failure and so today we look for an even greater thing for God to do a new thing for God to work amongst all the churches and to bring together out of all the scattered and broken and fragmented church of Jesus Christ a new and dynamic church the church that is going to serve him and do greater things than have even been done before not by any wisdom or strength or might in us as human beings but by his power and by his glory and by his grace because he is the God who says that he done a new thing let us pray our loving heavenly father we thank you for your grace to us we thank you that you have patiently borne with us as we have so often refused to face up to the challenges of the present we dream of the past and we dream of the future but so often our dreams are not based upon your word oh lord cause us to dream those dreams that are spirit inspired to see those visions which your word gives to us grant us that longing in our hearts to see your hand at work doing new things bringing into being things that were undreamt of before oh lord our gracious god we pray that you would enable us to play our part in your great work for we know that when a spirit of defeat comes upon us a spirit of comparing the present unfavorably with the past so often there is a spirit of lethargy so often

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