

Preface

The title of this sermon is *You Have No Memories, & You Have No Soul*. I share that title with you knowing full well that it is likely that every listener here immediately thought something along the lines of “Of course I have memories. What are you talking about?” All I ask is for several minutes of your attention while I make my case. Resist jumping to conclusions, listen to the stories that follow, and see if I cannot take you to a deeper and fuller understanding and appreciation of the assertion that you have no memories, and you have no soul.

Prologue

I was an athlete in my younger years, playing varsity football and baseball, wrestling, and on the track team, I was a discus thrower and shot-putter. Shot-put practice was simple. There are foul lines like in baseball. Any throw outside of those lines doesn't count. The lines were meaningless. No one ever came close to the foul lines. Throws went smack in between them, in the middle of the landing area, every single time. You took your practice throw, walked safely down the foul line and out to the center of the landing area, where you waited for someone else's throw to land. You then picked up the shot, got back in line, and waited to throw again.

It was 1975, and the shot-put event had been reinvented. An athlete named Brian Oldfield replaced the traditional 180 degree turn and throw with a discus-like motion of multiple twirls. He was the only one in the world who did it, and using it, he was the first man ever to throw more than seventy feet with 16 pound steel ball used in the Olympics.

It was my turn to throw. I did the traditional 180 turn and heaved the shot, *a 12 pound steel ball* used in high school, about 45 feet. After my throw, I began walking down the foul line, as I had done hundreds of times before. The next shot-putter stepped up. He decided to try the new Brian Oldfield technique, which he had not been taught and had not practiced. In fact, he had never tried it before. He got off a pretty good throw, but during the spinning, he lost his orientation. Somebody yelled.

I began to float softly through the air. I was like a feather, almost weightless, drifting every so slowly downward. I was enjoying the ride. It seemed like I was too light ever to make it all the way to the ground, and even if I did, I was floating so slowly that I knew the ride would go on for a very long time.

Once out here in Carmel, I received a Facebook friend request from the guy who had thrown after me in the Oldfield style. After well over thirty years, I was stunned by his first message to me. “Thanks for accepting my friend request. I wouldn’t blame you if you hated me. I’ve never forgiven myself for hitting you in the head with the shot-put that day.”

You Have No Memories

Like me, Scott Bolzan was a high school athlete. Like me, Scott Bolzan went to Northern Illinois University. There is almost nothing else I have in common with Scott Bolzan. My scholarship to NIU was for playing euphonium; his was for playing football. He was one of the very few Northern Huskies to go on to play in the NFL. When his football days were over, he went into the aviation business, eventually selling part of his company for a lot of money while retaining the jet management portion of the business. When times were difficult economically and

CEO's were feeling it was bad public relations to fly around in company jets, Scott thought of and began selling the equivalent of jet gift cards, good for 25, 50, or 100 hours of use of a private jet. He continued to make money, and to indulge his passion for watches. He had an extensive collection, each of which was worth more than my car. But there is one more thing I have in common with Scott Bolzan.

He went to the men's room in his office building on December 17, 2008. I know exactly what he means when he says, "Everything happened in slow motion as I felt my black leather shoes skid out from under me. As I was falling backward, my eyes ran up the beige wallpaper and cherrywood paneling to the big shiny mirror, and I saw my feet fly above my head. I did my best to try and brace my fall behind me, but there wasn't much I could do. I don't remember hitting the floor, but my head and left shoulder took the brunt of the impact, splitting my scalp open like a ripe melon. Spanning two and a half inches across, the cut went down to the bone. Because the scalp is rich with blood vessels, the gash began to bleed profusely. I have no idea how long I was unconscious..."

I never felt that shot-put hit. I thought I never lost consciousness. I thought I floated to the ground like a feather. Only later did I learn I crumpled like a house of cards and was out like a light.

Thank God that is all I had in common with Scott Bolzan. I have no memory of the ambulance or the emergency room. Scott remembers his ambulance ride, and feeling something pouring from his head. Yes, some of it was blood, but he could also feel himself bleeding information as he lost his memory. He was a Level I trauma victim, which is very serious. When he reached the emergency room and

was stabilized, he noticed a woman talking into a plastic thing with a wire attached to it. This woman had been kind to him so he trusted her, even while he wondered why she was trying to help him at all. The woman said, “He hit his head, so he’s a little confused. Then she tried to hand the plastic thing to him and said, “It’s your wife.” Scott Bolzan’s reply was chilling.

“What’s a wife?”

Forty-six years of life were almost completely gone for Scott Bolzan. He had one of the most severe cases of Profound Retrograde Amnesia on record. As he put it, “I lost my entire life as I’d known it.” There were a few odd pieces of procedural memory left: when watching a football game in the hospital, he remembered what the offsides penalty was, but he could not name a single player, team, or city with a professional team. He later found he remembered how to physically drive a car, but was stunned and thrilled at the miraculous discovery that four consecutive right turns brought him back to where he started. Outside of these few procedural recollections, Scott was a blank slate, plagued by horrific, constant headaches, partial loss of vision, and a persistent question which was, in his words, “Who the hell was I?”

The one called his wife arrived at the hospital She asked Scott if he remembered his children. He did not, not even when they, too, arrived. While they stayed with him, they produced two flat objects. The wife-woman had one and spoke into it, but the younger people worked their thumbs over the devices. Scott wanted to fit in, and asked if he had one of those. He did. The wife-woman, whose name was Joan, gave it to him. When he asked what it was, they told him it was his

Blackberry. The screen said he had missed two calls. Did he recognize the names?
No.

Scott was in the hospital for over a month. During his stay, he was in constant pain. One day, Joan seemed to be playful and said she knew how to make him feel better. He was shocked when her hand slid under the covers, and he recoiled. Joan seemed to think that was a strange reaction for him, but he had no idea why a wife would do such a thing. He had no idea how the ones they called his children had been created.

The people in the hospital kept saying there was no reason for his memory loss, and that it could come back at any time. It did not. He left the hospital without it. He went to a strange, new place. Joan called the strange place “home.” Scott knew that when Joan left the hospital at night, she went to the place called home. Scott reasoned that home was where one went after leaving a hospital.

At the place called home, preparations were being made. A special occasion would soon take place. It was called Christmas. One prepared for Christmas by decorating a special tree. Joan knew all about it, and already had boxes full of decorations. Scott helped her hang them on the tree. Many of them were round objects. One of the round things had a person with wings on it. Joan said it was an angel, and she was crying as she explained it. Scott asked why.

Joan said, “I was so hoping your memory would return before we had to relive this. Taryn was our first child, and she was stillborn full-term. Oh, God, Scott, it was awful.” Joan began to weep. Scott stared down at the round ball with the angel,

knowing he was supposed to feel the same pain Joan was feeling, but all he felt was empty.

On another special occasion, Scott was enjoying dinner with his family. This occasion had to do with the one called his daughter, Taylor. There was a round thing called a cake for dessert, and the cake had candles on it. Scott was looking forward to tasting it, because it had smelled very good when Joan made it. But suddenly, Scott was crying. Everyone in the room had started to sing, but Scott didn't know the words to what must have been the birthday song.

My friends, I could keep you here all day with example after example of the things Scott no longer knew. Instead, I'll fast forward. About four months after the accident, Scott had a series of vivid flashbacks from his childhood. He had been told that his memory would return starting from his earliest memories. He was thrilled as a series of thirty second flashbacks occurred over about an hour and a half. Then they stopped. What he recalled, vanished. That was it.

Repeated visits to various specialists finally resulted in a breakthrough. Scott was given a new type of scan that proved blood was not flowing properly to the frontal and temporal lobes of his brain. After being told over and over that there was no reason for his memory loss, Scott now knew that he was not crazy, but that there was a physical reason. There was some relief in that, but it came at a price. The problem could not be fixed. Scott's memory was gone forever, and nothing on earth could change that. That remains true today.

Scott did go on to rebuild his life. He began to work with other brain injury victims. He and Joan wrote a book called *My Life, Deleted*. I heard Scott speak on

the Dennis Prager Show on the radio. Dennis said to Scott that he, Dennis, had always wondered if we *are* our memories. Dennis asked Scott what he thought the answer to that question was. Scott said, “An absolute yes. The hardest part is I don’t know who I am.” This was his answer after rebuilding his life and helping many others through his experience. *We absolutely are our memories.*

And so, my friends, I tell you today you have no memories. What you have is a brain—something tangible, something that can be seen, studied, and God forbid, injured. You *have* a brain. You *are* your memories.

You Have No Soul

As the pieces of the puzzle of this bizarrely titled sermon begin to fit into place, you’ll begin to intuit that I am not here today to deny the existence of the soul, any more than I came to deny the existence of memories. On the contrary, I want to elevate our memories and our souls to a higher plane, beyond things that we simply have, to the level of being our very essence. When I said that you have no memories but that you *are* your memories and you have a brain, I was paraphrasing C.S. Lewis. Here is what he actually said, “You do not have a soul. You *are* a soul. You *have* a body.”

It is beautiful, elegantly phrased statement, but beauty and elegance are not equivalent to truth. As Scott Bolzan’s story showed all too clearly, truth can be ugly and messy. I will not satisfy myself with enticing your emotions with a seductive turn of phrase. I say to you today you have a body but you *are* a soul, and I intend to make a solid case to support that statement. To do so, we must go where all eventually go, but from where very few return. Even those who return

temporarily eventually go back permanently. We must visit the realm of the dead, the World to Come.

On what better day to do so? Today we do not eat, we do not drink, we do not perform the procreative act, and ideally we are dressed in white, the color of purity. What sorts of beings neither eat nor drink nor copulate and are garbed in white? Two sorts of beings: the angels and the dead. Today we stand before God and pray that we are worthy of the gift of life in this world. Now I ask you to join me for a brief look into the next world.

I had a dear friend named Andy, may he rest in peace, who was shot and left for the World to Come. He found a river blocking his path. On the far side of the river were his late father and grandfather. They told Andy it was not time for him to cross the river to join them. Andy protested, saying he wanted to cross, but they told him it was not time. Andy eventually woke up in Temple University Hospital. He later had a heart transplant. He cheated death a half dozen times after receiving his new heart. But the drugs he took to keep him alive were also slowly killing him, and around Pesach, Andy did cross the river.

One person hears his story of the bright light and the river and the presence of his deceased loved ones and hears a story about God and the World to Come. Another hears the same story and explains that it is the result of chemical or physiological changes in the dying brain, the power of suggestion, or some combination thereof. We have a standoff. Neither can prove himself right or the other wrong. So to make my case today, I must offer evidence that cannot be the result of chemicals or physiology or suggestion. Forget Hollywood and television—the word supernatural has a very specific meaning: above nature. My evidence that you have

a body but you are a soul is evidence to which even nature must yield. I will offer three types of documented case studies from a meticulously scientific study by radiation oncologist Jeffrey Long. You can read about it yourself, including long, tedious documentation of his scientific methodology, in his book *Evidence of the Afterlife*.

We begin with the escorts. In the vast majority of cases, loved ones who have already passed on to the World to Come arrive to escort us when our time comes. This is the classic stalemate: is this really happening, or are images stored in our brains brought forward by the chemical or physiological changes of dying? But now there is a checkmate: the experiences of children. There are several documented cases of children who did not know their escorts. Years after surviving the brush with death, sometimes decades afterwards, the child would see a photo in a family album, one the child had never seen before. When the child asked about the photograph, the answer would be something like “That’s your great-grandmother. She died many years before you were born.” And the child would respond with something like, “She’s the lady who came to help me when I almost died.” My friends, I have yet to meet the scientist who can explain how this could have been the result of changes in the brain. This really happens. When we pass from this world to the World to Come, we will be escorted by our late loved ones.

We move on to the deaf. People who had lost their hearing had the ability to hear when their souls left their bodies in near-death experiences. When they recovered, they remained deaf. Again, there was a stalemate. Perhaps what happened was a memory of what it was like to hear. But again we have a checkmate, this time a dual checkmate. With regard to those who lost their hearing, we checkmate with the documented fact that they could accurately report what was being said by those

trying to revive them when their souls were free from their bodies. That is not a memory of what it was like to hear. And now we have documented cases of people who were deaf from birth who had hearing when out of their bodies. They had no memories of hearing from which to draw, but they heard.

Finally, the blind. By now, you can anticipate what I'll say. Both people who had lost their vision and those who never had vision could see and accurately describe the scene as others tried to revive them. Again, no change in the brain could make sight possible for a person whose body was incapable of sight.

And now, my friends, we tie this amazingly powerful package together. When Andy came to the river, he did not ask his father and grandfather who they were. When blind people saw while they were clinically dead, they did not wonder what they were seeing. They did not fail to recognize their own bodies, or not understand what those around them were trying to do. There were no questions equivalent to Scott Bolzan's question, "What's a wife?"

Do you see how infinitely significant this is? When we leave our bodies, we take our memories with us. We cannot help but do so. We are our memories. We are souls. For a period of time, we exist in something that we have, something that we call a body. But we are not our bodies. We are souls. While we are using these bodies, one part of them, the part we call a brain, has the task of being the place in which our memories are stored. If that brain is damaged while we inhabit our bodies, we can't access that part of ourselves that is our memories. But when we leave these bodies and exist in our purest, most essential form, as souls, our memories do not simply come with us. They remain who we are. We are our

memories. We are souls. We have bodies, we have brains, but we are our memories and we are souls.

On this Day of Atonement, we recognize the infinite value of the gift of living in these bodies in this world. For all of its pain and imperfections and challenges, for all of its wonder and ecstasy and love and blessings, we pray to go on living in these imperfect, fallible bodies in this endlessly complex world. We all walked in these doors today aware, consciously or not at that moment, that our time in this world is finite. My hope is that when you walk back out today, you do so knowing that when our time in this world is over, it simply means we stop using something that we have. We have bodies, and we have brains. When we finish using them, we move on. It is only the use of our bodies that ends. We do not end. We are not our brains. We are not our bodies. We are our memories. We are souls.