



## Your Past Can Be One of Your Best Friends

One time in college we went to speak at an FCA rally. We were all staying out in the country in a log cabin. One of our group suggested that we go out hunting – at night. We had not been hunting too long (from the comfort of our van) when the ground began to get mushy.

- As soon as we gave the engine any gas it all, the wheels just started spinning. There we stood looking over the new pool to the back corner of the yard where my dad's camper sat. When I close my eyes I can still practically hear that sound of those wheels hopelessly spinning. There are few things worse than being stuck.
- did you know that many people feel just like that?...stuck...where lives or relationships are filled with tendencies you wish would go away.
  - Like the spouse who promised to communicate better but just lashed out with biting sarcasm, again.
  - Or the parent who wants to be more positive but just harshly criticized his child, again.
  - Or the single person who wants to be pure but just fell into immorality, again.
    - Such men and women hate that word—*again*. Each time the sound of the spinning wheels of their unchanging lives becomes more mocking, frustrating, and hopeless.
- could I ask what may sound like an unusual question – could the past have anything to do with that?
  - it goes further...There are the private failures. Another night of internet pornography. - Another trip to the liquor store...Another purging session after dinner.
  - Like Jeremiah's leopard that cannot change its spots, such persons are exhausted from promising and failing over and over again.
  - again, could the past have anything to do with it?
    - perhaps the worst is being stuck...in the heart. Bitterness. Jealousy. Revenge. Rage. Disappointment. Hatred. Lust. Wrath. Discouragement. Fear. Worry.
    - Many persons have thoughts and desires that are both loathsome and familiar. They know they should think differently but such patterns feel like home.
    - Could the past have anything to do with it?
- with that question in mind, I'd like to ask you to open your Bible to 1 Samuel chapter 17...

### Growing From Your Past

We have the privilege and responsibility to do everything we can to challenge and equip every person to grow spiritually at the rate God desires...

- you could say it this way – there is a difference between “counting noses” and counting “growing followers of Christ...”

#### - Introduction

- now, let me say one more thing in an introductory way before we look at this passage...I realize that some might say – I'm not sure this topic is relevant to me...
- that would be an interesting response...because it appears to me that you can fall into one of **two extremes [we hope to avoid]** when it comes to this subject...

- **Those who Believe the Past Is Everything.** You fail today because you were abused in the past. Your love cup is only half full. Your deep personal needs were not adequately met. Your wounded inner child is creating emotional pain. Your memories need to be healed. Today's choices are not your fault because you are being ruthlessly driven by the past.
- but on the other hand are...
  - **Those who Believe the Past Is Nothing.** Do right. Suck it up. Serve more. The abuses of the past have nothing to do with your choices today. Jump through the right behavioral hoops and you will soon be fine. Your former failures are irrelevant to today's struggles. Don't worry, be happy.
- Both extremes are problematic for students of Scripture. The past is everything folks need to acknowledge that God's Word does not speak about wounded inner children and unfilled love cups. If such emphases were truly important in the change process, why aren't they more clearly articulated in God's Word?
  - People who follow such secular principles often find the relief short-lived and disappointing. To the people of God, ideas from the world are an uncomfortable fit.
- but those who believe the past is nothing need to explain why God created us with the ability to remember. Why are there so many examples in the Bible of men and women whose past choices dramatically impacted their present behavior? Why are we instructed, for example, to not let the sun go down on our wrath (Ephesians 4:26) if today isn't going to affect tomorrow?
  - Ignoring the power of the past often results in religious behaviorism...which in turn leaves thoughtful people feeling frustrated and unsatisfied, like eating chocolate cake on an empty stomach. Busyness and activity cannot drown out the cries of a hurting heart.
- what we're seeking is what amounts to a third way...

**The goal [s for this series]** is to craft a biblical theology of the past on a practical, understandable level, so every one of us can.

- **Understand the important place the subject of the past is given in Scripture.**
  - **Replace guilt and despair with forgiveness and hope.**
  - **Learn to distinguish aspects of the past that are truly different.**
  - **Take concrete steps to unplug the negative effects of the guilty past and discover how to take the lessons we learn from failure and turn them into stepping stones for growth.**
  - **Evaluate the place of the past in your current struggles to change and find hope in the midst of the process.**
  - **Develop a biblical approach to responding to times in the past when you have been hurt, abused, or sinned against.**
  - **Experience the joy that comes from viewing hard times God's way.**
  - **Appreciate the sovereignty of God who can use the past as a marvelous occasion to teach us valuable and life-changing lessons.**
  - **Be better prepared to help others who are struggling with the past and find fulfillment in ministry opportunities to others.**
- now, for our purposes today, we want to especially address "the past is nothing crowd"...those who seldom think about what has occurred in days gone by...
  - Here's today's point...**Your Past Can Be One of Your Best Friends.**
  - with the time we have remaining, let's think about **4 ways your past can be of great benefit to you.**

### **I. When You Need Strength and Confidence.**

- I Samuel tells the wonderful story of David and Goliath...it begins with...

#### A. The giant's challenge.

- **read 1 Samuel 17:1-10** [may have to only read a selected portion for sake of time]

- what is especially disheartening is the response of God's people, even their king –

**read 1 Samuel 17:11**

- at this point in history, David is too young to be fighting in the army, so he is back home helping his father tend the sheep...but the next verses tell us that David's father Jesse tells him to take some food to his brothers and bring back news of how they are doing...and providentially David arrives right in time to hear a dose of Goliath's daily insults..

#### B. David's question

- **1 Samuel 17:26 – Then David spoke to the men who were standing by him, saying, “What will be done for the man who kills this Philistine and takes away the reproach from Israel? For who is this uncircumcised Philistine, that he should taunt the armies of the living God?”**

- the men answer him but then David's older brother Eliab shows up...and remember the Scripture tells us that Eliab was a large man because God warned the prophet Samuel when selecting the next king from one of Jesse's sons, to not be fooled by Eliab's height...]

- so here the younger brother has been sent to get a report on their fighting...and there's not much fighting going on, even by the older and bigger brothers...

- so Eliab has to do something with his embarrassment, so he pulls out a tool that many of us would regrettably use in a situation like this...sarcasm and ridicule...

#### C. His brother's insult.

**1 Samuel 17:28 – Now Eliab his oldest brother heard when he spoke to the men; and Eliab's anger burned against David and he said, “Why have you come down? And with whom have you left those few sheep in the wilderness? I know your insolence and the wickedness of your heart; for you have come down in order to see the battle.”**

- thankfully David's not in an equally sarcastic mood...or he might have said – “and what battle might that be, big brother”?...

- but David is thinking about facing this challenge...even though he is being mocked by his own family...

- in fact he says to the king... **1 Samuel 17:32 – David said to Saul, “Let no man's heart fail on account of him; your servant will go and fight with this Philistine.”**

- remember that Saul too was a tall man...so his response was one of...

#### D. The king's condescension.

**1 Samuel 17:33 – Then Saul said to David, “You are not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him; for you are *but* a youth while he has been a warrior from his youth.”**

- now, let's just stop there for a minute...have you ever been there?...

- where you're facing a challenge that seems overwhelming?...

- a habit that seems impossible to break...a person ridiculing your belief...

- a threat or an insult that throws you off balance...

- and then to make matters worse, you have friends, or loved ones, or people in authority speaking to you as if there's no way you can handle this challenge...

- you've lost before you started...you might as well just quit now...

- now you know what you need right then?...you need a friend...the same friend David turned to...I'm talking about his past...

#### E. David's friend.

- **1 Samuel 17:34-37 - But David said to Saul, “Your servant was tending his father’s sheep. When a lion or a bear came and took a lamb from the flock, I went out after him and attacked him, and rescued *it* from his mouth; and when he rose up against me, I seized *him* by his beard and struck him and killed him. “Your servant has killed both the lion and the bear; and this uncircumcised Philistine will be like one of them, since he has taunted the armies of the living God.” And David said, “The LORD who delivered me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, He will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine.” And Saul said to David, “Go, and may the LORD be with you.”**
- do you see what David’s doing?...He purposely and consciously recalls God’s blessings in the past.
  - He draws strength and courage from memories of former victories from His God.
  - David had learned to cultivate a right relationship with his past.
- Can I ask you this -- Do you ever do that? Have you amassed a mental list of times God strengthened and helped you in days gone by? Can you talk about your bears and lions so you are prepared when a giant comes along?
- You might wonder how David developed this skill.
  - Perhaps a hint comes from reading many of the Psalms. It is not hard to imagine many of these worship songs being written and sung by a young shepherd on a lonely hillside. Think about the way he recounts God’s blessings in the past. Marvel at his descriptions of God’s character and his rejoicing in God’s works. To David, the past was his friend.
  - Part of what we should all do is to make a list of the ways God has blessed you in the past and then look for specific opportunities to mentally recount that list when facing a present challenge...
  - the point is – let the past be your friend...

- now, what are some other ways this is true?

## **II. When You Need Encouragement and Balance**

- Another hero of the faith who benefited from his past was Job.
- The book that bears his name begins by telling us that Job was blameless, upright, fearing God and turning away from evil. He and his wife had been marvelously blessed with seven sons, three daughters, and an incredible amount of wealth.

### **A. The onslaught of devastation.**

- The scene turns sinister as Satan comes to God and charges that Job only loves God because of the blessings. The relationship, according to the adversary, is nothing more than *quid pro quo*. Then Satan says..
- **Job 1:11 - “But put forth Your hand now and touch all that he has; he will surely curse You to Your face.”**
- It is critical to understand that this was not simply a test of Job.
- Fundamentally it was a test of God and whether the righteousness and goodness He develops in the heart of His children is simply self-centered, shallow, and based merely on temporal circumstances...The stage is set in verse 12 when we read...
- **Job 1:12 - Then the LORD said to Satan, “Behold, all that he has is in your power, only do not put forth your hand on him.” So Satan departed from the presence of the LORD.**
- From there the story develops in rapid fire succession.
  - Some of Job’s animals are stolen by a band of marauders while others are destroyed by fire.

- Then his children are feasting and a wind comes and destroys the house and takes their lives. Job has lost much of his wealth and all of his children.
- Then the camera pans back to Job to see if Satan's prediction will come true. But the faith God builds in His children stood firm when...
  - Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head, and he fell to the ground and worshiped. He said, **Job 1:21-22 - "Naked I came from my mother's womb, And naked I shall return there. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away. Blessed be the name of the LORD."** Through all this Job did not sin nor did he blame God.

- Now all Job has left is his wife and his health, until chapter 2 reports that...
  - Job 2:7 - Then Satan went out from the presence of the LORD and smote Job with sore boils from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head.**
- the climax comes when Job's wife says...
  - Job 2:9 - Do you still hold fast to your integrity? Curse God and die".**

- It is at that very point, similar to young David, that Job turns to a familiar friend. His past.  
**B. A reservoir of hope.**

- He says to his wife, **Job 2:10 - Shall we accept good from God and not accept adversity?**
- see, Job had a ready list of all the ways God has blessed him and his family in days gone by. They had enjoyed tremendous wealth. They had shared many marvelous times together as a family. God's goodness was rich and abundant.
- Did that erase the current trials? Of course not. But this is the critical point.
  - **Rehearsing the past helped him face the present with balance and encouragement. Doing so allowed Him to greatly honor His God.**
- We would do well to think about people like David and Job. Is it not amazing that at critical stages in their spiritual journey they both chose to benefit from their pasts?
- They had cultivated a purposeful connection to their past that was so habitual that they automatically factored it in to whatever they were facing at the time. Like any good friend, their past served them well.
- the question this am is – are you taking steps to develop similar habits, and if not, would it be wise to begin doing so?

- here's a third way your past can be on great benefit to you...

### **III. When You Need the Ability to Forgive.**

- In the gospel of Matthew chapter 18, Jesus taught his disciples how to respond if a brother sinned.
- We refer to that process as church discipline which is a beautiful expression of the character of God because the purpose for everyone involved is restoration and forgiveness...it starts by understanding...

#### **A. The importance of addressing problems.**

- Jesus teaches in verses 15-18 that if a person sins, those who are aware of it need to go privately and confront the individual...
- you can't have the presence of unaddressed sin in the body of Christ [the apostle Paul explained that it's like leaven that will affect the whole lump/body]
- and if a person repents, you forgive him...and if that doesn't happen, you get someone else involved as the second step...and if they repent at that level you forgive him...if not, Jesus said to tell it to the church...but the goal is always repentance and forgiveness because problems need to be solved...

## B. The obvious question.

**Matthew 18:21 - Then Peter came and said to Him, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?"**

- Peter even upped the rabbinic teaching that you had to forgive up to three times by ending his query with, "Up to seven times?" (Matthew 18:21). Imagine his shock when Jesus said, "Up to seventy times seven".
- But then Jesus told a parable intended to help Peter and the rest of us learn how to forgive others as often as they ask....

## C. A helpful parable.

- The Lord spoke of a king who decided to settle his accounts with his slaves. One man was brought in who owed the king ten thousand talents, an enormous amount of money which was much more than he could ever repay. The king commanded that the slave be sold along with his family and earthly belongings.
- Jesus went on to say that this slave fell down on his face and begged the king to be patient with him and went on to promise to repay all the debt. Of course that was impossible, but...**Matthew 18:27 - And the lord of that slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt.**
- The point is obvious—a person who has been forgiven of so much in the past would be quick to forgive others in the present and future.
- Regrettably, that is not the end of the story. Jesus explained that this same man found a fellow slave who owed him 100 denarii, about a third of a year's salary for a typical laborer. Of course that was a sizeable amount of money, but little in comparison to how much this man had already been forgiven. But amazingly, he seized his fellow slave, choked him, and demanded immediate payment. The second servant then made the identical request, "Have patience with me and I will repay you" (Matthew 18:29). But the man refused and had his fellow slave thrown in prison.
- Please contrast this man to David and Job. In what essential way were they different?
- Both David and Job were properly connected to their past. This man had spiritual amnesia.
- Even the other slaves in the parable recognized this man's ingratitude and reported his harsh actions to the king who said **Matthew 18:32-33 ...You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way that I had mercy on you?**

There was little question about Jesus' point to Peter, or to us. Your ability to forgive is directly related to your ability to constantly remember how much God has forgiven you. Perhaps that is one of the reasons Jesus instructed His followers to regularly celebrate the Lord's Table. When Christians gather together around the bread and wine we are reminded, among other things, of the tremendous price necessary to secure our redemption.

- Benefitting from this aspect of your past requires mental discipline. We should never cease to be amazed at the forgiveness we have received in Christ. His treatment of us should always be the template through which we plan our response to the shortcomings of others.
- As Paul told the Ephesians, **Ephesians 4:32 - Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.**

- If you are having trouble forgiving someone in your life who hurt you, it may be time to sit down and revisit all of the ways God has been willing to forgive you. In so doing, your past will become a more helpful friend.

- one last way your past can be your friend this am...

#### **IV. When You Are Struggling with Pride and the Need to Repent.**

- Many of us wrestle with the sin of pride. We tend to place a fairly high value on our own opinions, our positions, and our performance.
- It was with good reason that Paul instructed the Romans to **Romans 12:16 - Be of the same mind toward one another; do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly. Do not be wise in your own estimation.**
- One way we can avoid this sin is to properly benefit from appropriately recalling our sins from the past. This does not mean we should wallow around in them. In fact we will specifically deal with that tendency in a subsequent message.
- But if the Word of God is going to be our guide, there are clearly times when it is proper for us to remember the ways we have failed in the past.
- here's one example... Just prior to entering the promised land, Moses told the children of Israel, **Deuteronomy 9:7 - Remember, do not forget how you provoked the LORD your God to wrath in the wilderness; from the day that you left the land of Egypt until you arrived at this place, you have been rebellious against the LORD.**
- Moses is so emphatic about this matter that he actually makes the same point twice in the same statement. "Remember, do not forget..." Many of us are much better at remembering the failures of others than we are at remembering the ways we fell short in days gone by.
- Jesus made a similar statement to the people in the Ephesian church... **Revelation 2:5 - Therefore remember from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand out of its place—unless you repent.**
- This statement is especially haunting when compared to what we know about the churches in Ephesus from other places in Scripture. Paul had spent several years teaching them the Word of God (cf. Acts 20). The letter he wrote to them is a treasure chest of deep theological truths that would only have been given to people who had the maturity to process such lofty ideas. Yet now they had retreated spiritually to a place where they were in need of serious self examination.
- The Lord of the church suggests that they should go back to their pasts. They would be helped by reviewing where they used to be spiritually. Such an analysis would convict them and motivate them to turn around.
  
- being properly connected to our pasts can quench the sin of pride and motivate us to quickly repent about as quickly as any other exercise there is.

- the goal today is to try to convince all of us that the past can be your friend...

#### **I. When You Need Strength and Confidence.**

#### **II. When You Need Encouragement and Balance**

#### **III. When You Need the Ability to Forgive.**

#### **IV. When You Are Struggling with Pride and the Need to Repent.**

- perhaps being properly connected to the past can help us get unstuck in some way in our walk with Christ...

- meanwhile, back at the hunting expedition, since I'm notorious for not finishing my stories...
  - my co-hunters and I concluded that there was no way we were going to be able to get the van unstuck. It was way too muddy and we were sick of listening to those spinning wheels. They had also slung enough mud on us as we tried to push the truck that we were ready to try something new.
  - That is where the farmer came in. I can't remember exactly how this particular man on his tractor discovered our marooned mobile hunting platform..
  - . Now we had hope. Now we had a plan. Now we had answers.
  - We hooked our van up to his tractor (an engineering masterpiece) as we went from spinning wheels to productive movement. Before long we had the van out of the mud. There is nothing like to joy of being un-stuck.