



THE PROBLEM OF THE PAST

1. Every one of us has a past and often that past intrudes into present life. The relevant question for all of us is: “What are we to do with our past and the way it plays into our present? Preoccupation with the past is a popular, cultural phenomenon. The past...and the accompanying degree of victimization...is a hot topic for Dr. Phil. I saw a cartoon recently that pictured an auditorium where a Hugh banner announced the “FIRST ANNUAL CONVENTION OF THE ADULT CHILDREN OF NORMAL PARENTS.” Only two people sat in the auditorium. Right now, you are providing what will become your children’s past. While raising my children, I often thought: “Oops, this kid is going to have to talk to a counselor about that one day.” Everybody has a dysfunctional family.

The punch from all of this is the fact that out of it grows a “victim mentality.” That is an exhilarating message to many people. It is very easy to love the culture of victimhood. It is easy to say, “This is why I am all messed up today. All these people who were not perfect did things to me.”

Listen to J.I. Packer: “Today vast stress is laid upon the thought that God is personal. But the truth is so stated as to leave the impression that God is a person of the same sort as we are – weak, inadequate, ineffective, and a little pathetic.” This leads us to the thought, “God, where were you when all this stuff was happening to me? WHEN YOU MOVE FROM YOUR EXPERIENCE TO GOD, YOU ALWAYS DISTORT GOD.

Just think of all the things you can be a victim for today. You can be a victim of an eating disorder, a sexual disorder, an anger problem, or anything at all. In a book *The Courage to Heal*, the following diagnostic questions are given to help determine if a person has been sexually abused:

- (1) Do you sometimes feel that you are bad and have something to be ashamed of?
- (2) Do you feel that there is something wrong with you deep down inside; and if people really knew you, they would not like you?
- (3) Do you ever feel that you have no sense of your own interests, talents, or goals, that sometimes you are just not sure what you want to do with your life?
- (4) Do you have trouble with motivation? That it is hard to “get going” at times?

(5) Do you sometimes feel you have to be perfect in order to be accepted?

While it may be true that a person who has been sexually abused may feel unmotivated, ashamed, or depressed and have even amplified those thoughts and feelings, it is also true that every one of us at one time or another has thought and felt those things, and not everyone has been abused.

2. The Past is a Psychotherapeutic Problem

A. Freud theorized what may be viewed as a “hydraulic view.” Classic psychoanalysis views the person as a closed container, full of emotional energy. Think of a hydraulic jack, a closed metal cylinder with fluid inside. You push down on the plunger, which puts pressure on that fluid and makes the piston go up. When you put pressure in one place, it must come out in another place. That jack can raise a car. This view sees people as closed containers full of emotional energy. People are the victims of the pressures other people put on them.

B. Second is the idea of the unconscious. By this we mean “repressed memories.” These things drive and influence everything we do.

C. Lastly is the idea of catharsis. The energies and emotions that are repressed must be expressed. If I was angry at my parents when I was four, that anger must now be expressed. The main role of counseling is to get people to express themselves.

3. The Past is a Biblical Lesson

Scripture is all about what makes people tick. The Bible says a lot about the past.

WHAT DOES GOD WANT US TO REMEMBER?

When we look at what God tells us to remember, three things come to our attention:

(1) The Passover. God sought to make this memory vivid. In Exodus 12:8 He said to eat bitter herbs as part of the Passover dinner. The bitter herbs were meant to remind the people that their time in Egypt was bitter. Memory of the bitter past makes His Mercy and deliverance sweet. There were many other exact details (it was to be at night, with unleavened bread, in conjunction with the Passover Lamb). Why such detail? WE TEND TO FORGET.

(2) The Lord’s Supper. We look back to the life, death, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ and we look forward to His return. The bread symbolizes His body and

the cup symbolizes His blood. There is something amazingly gracious about how God works to make what Jesus did in the past part of our present. But we also remember that Christ is to return. *One of the amazing, refreshing things about the Biblical view of memory and the past is that we also remember the future. If you have a future, it changes the way you think about your past.*

- (3) Look at 1 Corinthians 10:1-13. Paul rehearses the experiences of the children of Israel when they were in the wilderness. Here Paul is reminding us of the foolish things Israel did in unbelief. He reminds us of the past so we won't repeat their mistakes. The example of Israel is held out before us with a punch line: "Therefore, let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall." (1 Corinthians 10:12).

WHAT CONCLUSIONS SHOULD WE DRAW?

- (1) History is always accompanied by explanation. The Bible is God's interpretations of God's actions. He acts and explains. He observes us and explains us. Why is this important? Human memory is no different. Human memories are interpreted also. When we interpret them Biblically, we are on the right track. When we misinterpret them because we see them from a human perspective, we have trouble.
- (2) Past events push into the present. Memories are not only for the sake of nostalgia. Memories in the Bible are for present living unto God. Look in Psalm 44 and 77. In Psalm 44 the Psalmist begins by remembering all the good things God had done. Then, about a third of the way through he reverses himself and he says, "God, what happened? Have you forgotten? Then he begins to complain. His hope is that God who has acted in the past will act in the present. In Psalm 77, matters are reversed. He starts out complaining. Hal-way through the psalm he turns the corner and says, "But I'll remember. I remember what God has done in the past."

We are never called to remember the past for the past's sake. The past is there to push its way into the present.

- (3) The past reaches into the future. Our hope is that the God who has acted and is now acting will continue His work in the future. Hope is our memory of the future.

The Past: God's Context for the Person in the Present

The past influences the present in countless ways.

- (1) Memory is active. We choose to remember. That is the only way to make sense out of the fact that God commands us to remember. Memory is not like a video camera where the switch is on, and everything that happens is recorded. You decide what you remember. You choose what to film, what to cut, and how to interpret what you keep.

(2) Memory is selective. You don't remember everything. In Genesis 50, why was Joseph's memory dominated by what God had intended and not what his brothers had intended? Why did Paul talk about God's grace at work in his weakness and suffering rather than dwelling on those sufferings? Why do we remember only certain things out of the infinite possibilities experience brings us? And why do we then recall, recollect, and think about only certain things out of all that we have stored in memory?

(3) Memory is creative. Memory puts a spin on what happened. Psalm 1:1 tells us not to walk in the counsel of the ungodly. This means "don't listen to the lies of the wicked. Don't listen to their godless explanations and reinterpretation of life. What does this have to do with counseling and memories? Any counselor who has listened to a couple tell what happened in their "fight" will tell you that they hear two different accounts. We all have our own slant on "what happened."

How Should We Deal With the Past?

Ephesians 4:17-24 is a key passage. Verse 22 speaks of the former manner of life. The transliteration of the Greek word is *anastrophe*. It means *to turn again*. The former manner of life is one to which you turn again and again and again. A good understanding might be HABIT PATTERNS. Ephesians 4:25 – 6:9 then speaks of changing this "manner of life."

AN EXAMPLE: Jacob appears on stage during Genesis 25-49, but we will focus on Genesis 32. Suppose Jacob came to you for help. He is scared to death. He is on his way back home but has to meet Esau. He is frightened because he is not sure what Esau might do to him. He has just learned that Esau is on his way with 400 men. His first words to you are "Help!" You say, "What is going on? Why are you so terrified?" "My brother is coming to get me. He has 400 men!"

You say, "Why would your brother possibly want to kill you?" (NOW YOU ARE INTO HISTORY!)

Jacob says, "It is complicated. I think he misunderstood some things I did a while back." Upon questioning, he tells you how he stole the birthright.

You ask, "Did you ever repent and ask his forgiveness?"

"No, not really. I don't suppose I've ever really gone that far. I do feel bad about it though."

You encourage him to sit down and write a sheepskin letter immediately, asking Esau's forgiveness and promising restitution.

Has this taken care of the situation? For the moment. Has it solved the problem? Not the problem of Jacob's "MANNER OF LIFE." We know that many things went into making Jacob a "deceiver." His style was to supplant by guile. He acquired Esau's birthright, Isaac's blessing, Laban's herds, and multiplied riches through scheming.

It was not until Jacob wrestled with God and was CHANGED BY GOD that he was no longer ruled by fear but by God's promise "I WILL DO YOU GOOD."

FINAL PROPOSITIONS

1. Our past has a significant influence on the development of our manner of life. However, we are not "helpless victims who manner of life is determined by the past.
2. People creatively interact with and interpret past events and incorporate his interpretation into his manner of life.
3. Christians should seek to interpret the past as coming from God and for God's glory; unbelievers distort events with explanations that do not honor God's truth.
4. We are not always aware of the assumptions values, and habits which shape our manner of life.
5. The exploration of a person's past may help to reveal to them their manner of life.
6. Change occurs in the present. It involves repentance for the distorted values and habits of a false manner of life, and the putting on of godly values and behavior patterns in the present.
7. God is sovereign over all the events of a person's life and works providentially through those events to make Christians more like Christ.