

Redeeming Your Painful Past

Present Grace, Future Hope

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An Important Question: Could Your Past Have Anything to Do with Your Present Struggles?

Do you have areas of your life that seem difficult to change? Would the word *stuck* describe any part of your story?

For example, perhaps you often experience low-grade anger just below the surface. It takes very little to set you off. In rare moments of reflection you have even asked, “Why am I angry all the time?” Could your past have anything to do with that?

Maybe you avoid certain people in your life. You will not attend a social gathering if you know a particular individual might be there. If you see her coming down the store aisle, you turn and go the other way. Why is that? Could the honest answer involve your past?

It may be a profound lack of joy. You are sad—a lot. In quiet times you find yourself reviewing disappointments, broken dreams, and harsh treatment from others. While people around you seem to enjoy life, you cannot remember the last time you laughed out loud. Why?

Then there is the self-destructive behavior. You swore you would never get involved with a married man again. You promised that you would never cut yourself again. There would not be one more drink. Not one more binge. Not one more fling. Never again. You promised. So why did you just do it again? Could this mess in any way involve the past?

Two Competing Answers

It would be wonderful if there were a universally accepted answer to the question we have posed. But consensus is difficult to reach when it comes to matters of the heart.

Some suggest that your past is everything. You are being ruthlessly driven by irrational forces outside your control. Your reckless choices are the result of disappointments in your childhood. Your seething anger is because of your dysfunctional family. Your sadness is due to unmet needs from previous relationships.

Those who hold this view often speak of damaged emotions, toxic pasts, and hopeless victims. They appear to believe we would all be better off if we could walk through a device that would completely erase our pasts. Are they right? Are we really just victims of circumstance?

Then there are those who say that the past is nothing. Don't worry, be happy. Keep looking forward. Do more. Serve more. Give more. Pray more. Jump through the right hoops, and you will soon be fine.

But you have probably tried much of that. You want to get better, but sheer behavioral modification is not working. You don't want to be a victim, but you find yourself wondering if there is a balance between morbid introspection and shallow externalism.

Could your past have anything to do with your present struggles?

Scripture's Third Way

When we open the pages of God's Word, we find a rich theology—a framework of truth—to help us think about the past. Those who believe the past is irrelevant are not taking their cues from the Almighty. Behavioral modification and shallow externalism are the polar opposites of God's view of this subject. But please beware. The answers God gives for handling the past take us to a much deeper place than the culture of victimhood. Not only can we face our pasts—we can face them well. Here are some things we learn.

Your Past Is Powerful

The Scripture clearly teaches the potential significance of a person's past. For example, we see this in direct statements like Galatians 6:7: "Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap." Or Proverbs 28:13: "He who conceals his transgressions will not prosper." If we want to change what we are harvesting today, we often must examine what we cultivated yesterday.

This idea is also illustrated in clear principles in God's Word. Solomon warned his sons that "on account of a harlot one is reduced to a loaf of bread" (Proverbs 6:26). The New Testament continues that admonition by explaining that "the one who joins himself to a prostitute is one body with her" (1 Corinthians 6:16). A man's past choices have a dramatic impact on his present and future.