

The Gospel and Emotional Health

Break the Power of the Past

Genesis 50.15-21; Numbers 14.18-21; 1st Peter 1.1-13

(Genesis 50.15-21) When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "What if Joseph bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong which we did to him!"¹⁶ So they sent a message to Joseph, saying, "Your father charged before he died, saying,¹⁷ 'Thus you shall say to Joseph, "Please forgive, I beg you, the transgression of your brothers and their sin, for they did you wrong.'" And now, please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father." And Joseph wept when they spoke to him.¹⁸ Then his brothers also came and fell down before him and said, "Behold, we are your servants."¹⁹ But Joseph said to them, "Do not be afraid, for am I in God's place?²⁰ "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive.²¹ "So therefore, do not be afraid; I will provide for you and your little ones." So he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.

(Numbers 14.18-21) 'The LORD is slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, forgiving iniquity and transgression; but He will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generations.'¹⁹ "Pardon, I pray, the iniquity of this people according to the greatness of Your lovingkindness, just as You also have forgiven this people, from Egypt even until now."²⁰ So the LORD said, "I have pardoned them according to your word;²¹ but indeed, as I live, all the earth will be filled with the glory of the LORD.

(1 Peter 1.13-23) Therefore, prepare your minds for action, keep sober in spirit, fix your hope completely on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.¹⁴ As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts which were yours in your ignorance,¹⁵ but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior;¹⁶ because it is written, "YOU SHALL BE HOLY, FOR I AM HOLY."¹⁷ If you address as Father the One who impartially judges according to each one's work, conduct yourselves in fear during the time of your stay on earth;¹⁸ knowing that you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers,¹⁹ but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ.²⁰ For He was foreknown before the foundation of the world, but has appeared in these last times for the sake of you²¹ who through Him are believers in God, who raised Him from the dead and gave Him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God.²² Since you have in obedience to the truth purified your souls for a sincere love of the brethren, fervently love one another from the heart,²³ for you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and enduring word of God.

We're looking at the gospel and emotional health and using the outline and topics suggested in Pete Scazzero's book, *The Emotionally Healthy Church*, we're diving into places in our lives where our emotional immaturity is standing in the way of our spiritual maturity. The premise of that book is: you will not become spiritually mature while remaining emotionally immature.

Last week we looked at the need to look below the surface of our outward actions. What you see isn't always what you get.

Today we look at our past, our parents, family of origin, our history and the need to at least consider that and at times to break the power of the past.

What influences both positive and negative, good and bad has our upbringing, our past, memories, regrets, successes and traumas, sources of satisfaction – how does our history influence the way we think, speak and act, ways we think about God, ways we treat others and ourselves.

Using these classic passages, let's look at our history:

- 1) **An UNDERestimated Influence**
- 2) **An OVERestimated Influence**
- 3) **A Usable Influence**

The fact that our parents affect us goes without saying but how MUCH they influence us isn't always so obvious.

We can see it in a number of ways though; one way to see it is simple observation.

I remember a friend expressing great frustration over the way people conduct themselves on phone calls. He was appalled that people would call him at work and launch right into a conversation or complaint while never stopping to even identify themselves. (You know: "Aaaand – I'm sorry but WHO is this please?").

And I reminded this frustrated friend that both HIS father and mine were businesspeople. And growing up, I probably overheard hundreds of conversations in which my dad observed (what I NOW think of as) basic phone etiquette. Both my friend and I sort of absorbed the skill of conversation – at least how businesspeople do it.

And BOTH my friend and I ALSO learned how to feel a little superior to people who DON'T use what we learned as basic phone politeness. I have "phone righteousness" – which is far worse than failing to identify oneself on a call.

That's a small, kinda insignificant illustration but we see it everywhere we look (i.e., IF we look): the profound impact of our upbringing. Social scientists tell us that we are who we ARE due to some combination of nature and nurture and most of the nurture in early childhood is from parents.

We become like our parents without even knowing it. OR we can so react to what we saw in the home that we that we spend an inordinate amount of time/effort reacting to our parents' example. Sometimes attempting to be the unlike of Mom takes so much energy that we end up being controlled by Mom even as we THINK we're being FREE from Mom. A dad's asked why he won't allow his kids to go to VBS and he angrily replies, "My father made me go to church and I vowed NOT to do that with my kids" but he's actually still being controlled by Dad – he's not free.

So, the effect of our upbringing, whether we cherish it or despise it is profound; patterns we absorb, skills, habits, values, ways of seeing the world.

And NOT only what we observe but also from the histories of the Bible. We get this amazing window into multiple generations of people and how their strengths and weaknesses are passed on to children, grandchildren and beyond.

Think, for instance of the more developed biographies like David (I think we remember something about David) and we may look in on him before the series is over – but think of Abraham and HIS descendants (Abraham-Isaac-Jacob).

Abraham was a man who used lying to combat his fears. He lied about his wife's identity (Gen 12.19, 20.2) And his son, Isaac is noted for HIS lying (Gen CH 26): *"When the men of the place asked about his wife, he said, 'She's my sister,' for he was afraid to say, 'my wife,' thinking, 'the men of the place might kill me on account of Rebekah, for she's beautiful."* (V.7) Where'd Isaac learn that?

In the third generation, Isaac's son, Jacob, becomes the biggest deceiver of them all – born with his twin brother's heel in his hand, they named him *"Trip"* because he'd go on to trip-up or hinder people by his clever trickery.

And as we come to the fourth generation – Jacob's sons, the leaders of God's Tribes – they all unite in hating their brother, Jacob's pet, Joseph. So, they scheme (like it's in their blood!) and they sell him into slavery to some traders traveling to Egypt where Joseph is enslaved. Then the leaders of God's "first-family" deceive their own deceptive father (Jacob) – they deceive the deceiver.

Joseph then goes through a series of traumatic ordeals as a slave in Egypt (read it in Genesis 37ff). Joseph who'd once been sort of pampered is now sold and tempted, falsely accused, arrested, imprisoned, forgotten, AND eventually raised up by God and given insight into the future... Joseph interprets the dream of the Pharaoh (the most powerful man in the world) and Pharaoh makes this Hebrew slave his Prime Minister and puts him in charge of the largest government program ever attempted – to store grain for a coming famine that would last seven years. And those reserves of grain save the region from starvation – Joseph saves the world!

That's when, now an adult, Joseph is reunited with his conniving brothers who've come to Egypt from afar looking for food and they have to stand before the Prime Minister – WHOM they fail to recognize as Joseph. But HE recognizes THEM!

Now if we could hit "pause" for a minute to tabulate the influence all this past pain must have had on this young man: his father had four families (polygamist), that same father was a known liar, showed shameless favoritism, coddled Joseph who then became the object of his brothers' jealousy and hate. He's known betrayal, cruelty, kidnapping. He was enslaved and all the rest.

We all have hurts from our past – some of us have suffered profound damage but... probably few of us have suffered to this degree of weird, warped, brutality and betrayal.

Lastly, there's what we observe (in ourselves and others), there' are Biblical histories of persons and whole families influenced by generational sin...and finally, there's even a kind of indelible LAW, a theological cause

for all of this. Repeatedly we read, especially in the context of idolatry, that *“the sins of the fathers will be visited on the children.”*

Will I be punished for sins my parents have committed?

Well, not exactly but there IS a consequence that falls on the next generation. It’s as if God Himself designed the family with this inescapable law of cause and effect – what one generation does WILL affect the next generations. Tendencies are inherited. Damages are transmitted to generations to come.

It's observable, historical (in the family histories of the Bible) observable, historical and theological. YOUR past and YOUR parentage have an influence over your life more profound than you probably imagine: an underestimated influence.

And if you really reflect on this, it can lead to despair. On the one hand, we’ve all known a person who’s oblivious about how much his past and parentage have influenced him/her. Rose Marie Miller writes about her family where ORDER and CONTROL were the supreme family-value. When her mother slid into a spiral of control and depression and eventually attempted suicide and was committed to a psychiatric hospital, the family never talked about it. Rose Marie assumed this was totally normal.

There are people who never recognize the deep influence of parental patterns and expectations and unwittingly they’re controlled by their parents ...sometimes even after the parents have died.

AND we’ve also probably known people (in our sometimes overly therapeutic society) who’ve become SO introspective and fixated about the power of their past that it becomes the central plank in their identity. It can be used to explain, excuse and justify ruts and hang-ups and stagnancy in their lives. It’s as if their life-motto is *“my past is my destiny”*.

I also realize the danger in what we’re saying because in the light of our last point – a person’s past and upbringing IS powerful and emotionally mature people DO take it into account. We don’t want to minimize or trivialize abuse, molestation, domestic violence, neglect, an absent father or mother, suicide of a loved one OR all the varying degrees of coldness, tension, distance and danger that ANYONE may have experienced in childhood.

In fact, the past’s influence can be so intense and present it can be like a prison, like a strong ever-present chain.

But I have to add that my past is NOT necessarily my destiny. There’s only ONE Almighty and it’s not the past. God is *“the Potentate of Time”* and it’s here that Good News of Jesus Christ SPEAKS to us!

St. Peter recognizes (v. 18), *“I know you young Christians, inherited from your parents, patterns of life that were worthless and destructive, imposed on you and beyond your control... and you're trapped...”*

“BUT Someone has the key to the prison door. When Jesus Christ hung on the Cursed Tree, He was paying my ransom. He was cursed that I might be freed from the futility that’s haunted my family for generations”.

We may have tried to redeem ourselves by “silver and gold” and all our techniques and skills but NOW (v.18) *“you were NOT redeemed from the futile way of life inherited from your ancestors with silver and gold but with precious blood, as of a Lamb, unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ.”*

The One with the Perfect Father appeared. He, Jesus Christ, whose Father raised Him from the dead and gave Him glory – God the Father vindicated everything Jesus Christ did and said by the Resurrection. And you’ve begun to enjoy the benefits received by faith in Jesus WHO HAS SHARED HIS PERFECT FATHER WITH YOU!

You may look back with regret and grief on the hurts and flaws from your childhood, patterns of coping and behavior you adopted then that you’ve seen IN your behavior and thinking now. You may have wished, *“Oh if only I could be born into a different family...if only I could go back and do it differently...if only I could...”* YOU COULD WHAT? Be born all over again?

And Peter puts it right out there: *“You HAVE BEEN born again from new seed – a new Father – not like the corruptible parents who did their best but had STUFF that THEY inherited too...(like an unbreakable cycle – Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, the 12 sons and their children and on and on) BUT YOU have been born again NOT of perishable seed but IMPERISHABLE, the Living and Lasting Word of God.”*

The Mind/Word of God became physical in Jesus Christ and that MIND/WORD has now been implanted in all those who believe – it’s a new birth, a new life, a new upbringing!

And THIS makes my past – happy and sad, positive and negative – it all becomes USABLE in my new life. I’m not trying to ignore the past NOR to enthrone the past (so it dominates me or excuses all my sin) but the Gospel makes my past God’s servant to help and shape us. My past becomes a tool I can utilize for God’s glory and the good of others and myself. Here are seven ways to use it:

First, reckon on your past – don’t ignore it. It likely affects you more than you think. When you ask, “Why do I have a chip on my shoulder... why am I abrasive... so easily annoyed... always afraid... can I never say ‘No’?” – that question is often answered, “Because that’s how we did it in my family of origin” OR “It’s partly due to my birth-order” or “I was bullied as a kid” or “my parents divorced.”

Be grateful for the good; be aware of the not-so-good or the outright evil. In today’s first passage – notice Joseph’s brothers still lying and scheming but they’re also owning their wrongs and their need for forgiveness. Joseph calls their actions “evil” and so we have to factor it in.

Peter too, notes the futile patterns in the lives of these young Christians. He names it too. So factor it in. Name it.

Second, celebrate your New Father and ask Him to help you taste and see that HE IS THE ONE ALMIGHTY! See His sovereignty in your past and His good ordering of your life even in very painful and even catastrophic moments. He had plans to use the good and the bad – all things working together (Romans 8.28) to get the benefits Jesus Christ won TO YOU.

Joseph came to that very place in HIS OUTLOOK on his past. He saw that past hurts and past privileges have a much bigger meaning and purpose. In what some have called “the theme verse of the Bible”, Joseph says, “*you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive...*” (Gen 50.20) In other words, “What I once thought was senseless, pointless pain – turned out to be grace!”

Because Joseph saw that it enabled him to forgive. He knew that God was almighty and NOT his past. God could turn the deepest suffering into the greatest good – THAT’S what Christianity is all about. Jesus Christ’s suffering that preserves many people alive – man’s evil turned to good.

Third – cultivate the discipline of hope in future grace, “brace your minds for action” (see – don’t be paralyzed by your past) “keep sober” (take life/past seriously) AND “*HOPE COMPLETELY in the grace to be given you at the revelation of Jesus Christ...*” Somehow, then it’ll all make sense. So don’t hope in your good upbringing, your present happiness or success or your being merely and only a victim – IN CHRIST, you're more than a victim. See yourself TODAY in hope – a sinner among sinners who need God and keep on believing in God’s ultimate solution.

Fourth – learn the freedom of having a perfectly good and trustworthy NEW FATHER (v. 14 “*as obedient children*”). He’ll never steer you wrong either by His being limited or mean. So, get to know His word, His mind and trust that His commands are good always and only. If you’re a believer in Jesus Christ, the Spirit is shaping you so that you become in practice whom God has declared you to be. Obey, fail, repent, believe and get up and do it again. You’re moving toward holiness so be in awe. God’s turning your shack into a castle!

Fifth, ask God to make you a forgiver. Forgiveness is a big topic but suffice it to say that when he saw that God was at work in his past and that God had good and saving purposes for his pain – Joseph received the ability to forgive. God loves to give that ability to those who ask.

Sixth, a new Father means a new family. We need our brothers and sisters – “*fervently love one another from the heart.*” We need the help of this new family. This requires TIME (Phil spoke about this last month) time in eating, laughing conversation, crying, praying together.

Don’t stay aloof from your new family – we need each other.

Seventh (last) – go easy on your parents (Gen 46.29; 50.1). I say this as a grandfather. Remember: your parents had parents too and hurts and the rest. AND you may have kids and grandkids who judge YOU so ... give your parents a break. Let’s pray.