

Breaking The Power Of The Past

Over the last six weeks, we have been saying that spiritual maturity requires us to take emotional and relational health seriously. Our desire has been to connect you to God, to others, and to some helpful tools that will help you on your journey towards becoming whole. This morning I want to speak with you about something that often flies under the radar, but, has the power to keep us stuck in unhealthy patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting—I'm talking about your past.

Think about your life as it really is—a complex web of experiences, relationships, needs, dreams, and desires. There are reasons that you think, feel, and behave as you do. This morning I want us to consider the power we give our past in shaping our present.

Many years ago, I got to know a man who had grown up with an alcoholic father. He remembers as a young boy—9, 10, 11 years old—standing between his parents, trying to rescue his mother from his father's fists. Needless to say, this is a traumatic environment for any child.

When he grew into adulthood, because alcohol was never a temptation for him, he thought that his past was...in the past—unfortunate, but irrelevant to his present. And yet, this man continually struggled in his relationships; he had been married multiple times, with each marriage ending in painful fashion. When he began to work with a counsellor, he became aware of a common pattern in his relationships: he constantly pursued relationships with people he perceived needed rescuing.

We don't always see how our past informs and shapes our present. Have you met someone who is terrified of dogs? Likely, they had a bad experience when they were young and never recovered. Do

know someone who was in a deep relationship, got burned, and has been unable to love deeply, or, to receive the love of others? I could name a long list of people.

Do you know anyone who tried out for a school play, a sports team, or applied for their dream job and experienced rejection? I've met people who are so afraid of rejection, that they have settled for a life without "risks"—they never try, they never dream, they never reach—they are paralyzed with the thought that they might fail and be cast aside.

All of us carry baggage. The things that people have said or done to us leave a mark, difficult experiences we've had can weigh us down long after they've happened—it's possible to live with this baggage our entire lives. Unless we deal with past hurt, disappointment, and rejection in healthy ways, we will do no more than limp along in life. **Sometimes, in order to go "forward," we need to let God bring us "back" so that He can break the power that the past has over our present and future.**

This morning I want to tell you the story of a man who did all he could to avoid his past—he ran to another country, he hid in obscurity, he got himself a new job, started a new family, hoping to outrun his own history. But no matter how far he ran, he couldn't run from himself—none of us can. I trust that as I retell his story, you will hear whispers from your own.

The story of Moses can be found in Exodus 1-4. But as I tell Moses' story, try not to think about Moses the Leader, consider Moses the man: a man with a broken identity, a man who was unable or

Breaking The Power Of The Past

unwilling to face the pain in his life, a man who thought he could escape his past without dealing with it.

Turn in your Bibles with me to Exodus 1:6-14. Moses' story begins with a brief history. A new King came to power in Egypt, one who knew nothing about how Joseph, the Hebrew, had saved Egypt. When this new King looked at his nation, he saw that the Hebrew people were thriving and numerous; he was afraid that they might turn against Egypt and so he enslaved them. Exodus 1:11-14 says that the Hebrews were enslaved and sentenced to harsh manual labour—they were mistreated and oppressed on every side. But in spite of this oppression, the Hebrew population continued to grow. The King became more fearful. He passed an edict that every male baby born to a Hebrew mother was to be killed at birth.

It was into this setting that a baby boy was born to Hebrew parents; they loved their boy and refused to kill him—they hid him for 3 months. But when hiding him became impossible, the mother took a papyrus basket, placed her son in it, and put it among the reeds along the bank of the Nile River. Exodus 2:4 tells us that Miriam, the baby's sister, stood guard at the river to see what would happen.

In the providence of God, the Princess of Egypt went down to the Nile to bathe and she saw the basket among the reeds and sent one of her slaves to get it. When the Princess opened the basket, she saw a crying, baby boy—she knew that it was a Hebrew baby, she knew her father's edict, but she felt sorry for the baby nonetheless.

Miriam, who was still hiding among the reeds, appeared and said to the Princess, *“Shall I go and get one of the Hebrew women to nurse the baby for you?”* What a bold, bright, little girl! The Princess thought it was a brilliant idea, so Miriam ran home, grabbed her mom, and brought her back to the Princess. When they arrived, the Princess said to the mother, *“Take this baby and nurse him for me, and I will pay you. So the woman took the baby—her own baby—and nursed him. When the child grew older, she took him to [the Princess] and he became her son. [The Princess] named him Moses, saying, “I drew him out of the water.”*¹

In the providence of God, Moses' life was spared and he grew up in the palace of the King, with a Princess for a mother—this “rags to riches” story is the stuff of fairy tales. Or, is it? Think about how traumatic Moses' childhood must have been. He was born into a situation that was unsafe and unpredictable—Hebrews boys were supposed to be killed. He was abandoned by his parents, though they can hardly be blamed, only to be reunited thanks to the quick thinking of his sister. He was raised by his birth family, but how old was Moses when his parents sat him down and told him about their little “arrangement” with the Princess? *What do you mean, you're sending me away? I don't want to live in the palace? I'm your son! Don't you love me? How come Miriam and Aaron get to stay and I have to go?*

When Moses was sent away, he went from living hand to mouth, to a life of indulgence and excess. Living in a place may sound glamorous to us but I can't imagine it felt that way to Moses. The scraps from his plate in the palace could had fed his entire family for

¹ Exodus 2:9-10.

Breaking The Power Of The Past

a week—his stomach may have been full every meal but his heart was likely overflowing with guilt. *How can I be happy about my “full” stomach when I know that my family is starving?*

When Moses joined his adoptive family, he didn't look anything like them. He stood out; he didn't fit in. Inter-racial adoptees often confess wrestling with identity issues: *who am I? Where do I belong?* No matter how well Naomi and I love our daughter Anna, when she looks at a picture of our family, she is the only one with brown skin. Of course she notices. When her classmates ask her, “But who's your real mom and dad?,” they are asking the same question that she is asking of herself. *Am I Canadian, or am I Thai? What does it mean to be both?*

Every time someone looked at Moses sideways, when people whispered under their breath in his presence, he was left to wonder whether they were talking about Moses, Prince of Egypt, or Moses the filthy Hebrew. And there's another layer to the story. Moses' adoptive grandfather was the person who had issued the edict demanding his death as a baby. How safe do you think Moses felt growing up with a grandfather like that? Did he cringe every time his grandfather walked into the room?

One author sums up Moses' life with the following statement, “He lived between two worlds and yet was not fully at home in either place.”²

So how does a young person navigate these kinds of traumatic experiences and relationships? We can safely assume that Moses was

no different than we are—he employed broken strategies to deal with the rejection, the hurts, and the losses he experienced. He probably developed numerous coping mechanisms: he kept himself busy so that he didn't have to think about it, he denied/rejected/or stuffed his negative emotions, or maybe he indulged in escapist behaviour.

The most dangerous thing about these strategies is that they actually work—however imperfectly—for a time. We all employ these strategies, thinking to escape pain and loss, but from the very beginning these strategies undermine a healthy relationship to God, self, and others. This all became plain on the day Moses' life came crashing down around him.

In Exodus 2:11-12, we read, “*One day, after Moses had grown up, he went out to where his own people were and watched them at their hard labor. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his own people. Looking this way and that and seeing no one, he killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand.*”

I can't imagine this was the first time Moses had seen a Hebrew beaten. But notice the way vs. 11 is phrased: “*he went out to where his own people were and watched them at their hard labor. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his own people.*” Moses saw a fellow Hebrew being mistreated and he snapped. I don't really like using the word “snapped;” it makes it sound so spontaneous, like Moses' anger came out of nowhere. Moses' anger had been brewing for a long time. He had been repressing it, rejecting it, denying it, until he couldn't hold it in for one more second. You don't just wake

² Ruth Haley Barton, *Strengthening The Soul Of Your Leadership*, 36.

Breaking The Power Of The Past

up one day and decided to murder someone—every murder begins with unprocessed anger.

Sam Rima, in his book, *Overcoming The Dark Side of Leadership*, writes, “The dark side is actually a natural result of human development. It is the inner urges, compulsions, and dysfunctions of our personality that often go unexamined or remain unknown to us until we experience an emotional explosion... At times the dark side seems to leap on us unexpectedly but in reality it slowly crept up on us... it has been a lifetime in the making.”

What lies beneath the surface of our lives matters. Our awareness or lack of awareness of what lies beneath doesn't make our brokenness any less real. We are always dealing in reality—either embracing, ignoring, or denying.

Moses struck the Egyptian, and when he saw that the man was dead, he hid the body in the sand. When the news got out, Moses' adoptive grandfather tried to have him killed. The King wasn't concerned about the victim, he was concerned about Egypt. If Moses, the Hebrew Prince of Egypt, got away with killing an Egyptian, it could spark a rebellion—millions of Hebrews might rise up against their Egyptian oppressors.

Moses ran for his life; out to the desert he ran. The desert was a place of obscurity, a place of anonymity; he ran away both to forget, and to be forgotten. He wanted to leave his past in the past—he didn't want to remember who he was, what he'd done, or who he had become. It was much easier to start all over in a new place, with new people.

Moses' geography changed, but he leaned upon the same broken strategies: keep running, keep hiding, keep denying, and keep busy—maybe you'll forget. Many of us, in our attempts to avoid pain, have employed the same strategies. The problem is that pain can't be avoided—you can't go under it, you can go around it, you can't over it, you have to go through it. We will carry our hurts like baggage until we find Someone to carry it for us.

While he was in the desert, Moses had a son—he named him Gershom which means “*I have become a foreigner in a foreign land.*” The son's name describes his father's pain. Moses wasn't at home with his desert family any more than he was at home with his birth family or the royal family—he wouldn't feel at home anywhere until he faced his past hurts.

It's no accident that Moses began to awaken to God and self when he relocated to the desert. At this point, I'm departing from his geographical location and making use of metaphor. The desert is the place where silence and solitude catch up with us—where we become aware of inner compulsions, desires, wounds, habits, and longings for something more and better.

Ruth Barton writes, “In solitude our illusions fall away and we see—sometimes with disturbing clarity—our competitiveness, our jealousies, our rage, our manipulations... If we stay in solitude long enough, we become [honest enough] to say, *Yes, this is who I am...* This is not a yes that says, *I will remain the same.* This is a yes that says to God, ‘I recognize what I am now... Whatever it is that most needs to be done in my life, You will have to do.’”³

³ Barton, 52.

Breaking The Power Of The Past

We can wear yourself out trying to fix, change, or heal ourselves; what is required is to let go of old patterns that hinder instead of help.⁴ When we fail to name our hurts, our habits, our patterns and strategies, we end up wandering around, lost in the wilderness. Letting go is essential.

illus: The story is told of a Christian monk who was visiting St. Benedict's Monastery in Snowmass, Colorado. He came across a fellow monk who was working alone in the vegetable garden and he crouched down beside him to ask him the following question: "*Brother, what is your dream?*"

He writes, "He just looked straight at me. What a beautiful face he had. 'I would like to become a monk,' he answered. '*But brother, you are a monk aren't you?*' The man replied, "I've been here for 25 years, but I still carry a gun." He drew a revolver from a holster under his robe. It looked so strange, a monk carrying a gun.

'Are you saying that they won't let you become a monk until you give up your gun?' He replied once more, 'No, it's not that. Most of monks don't even know that I have a gun, but I know.' *'Well then, why don't you give it up?'* I said. He paused, and slowly said, 'I guess I've had it so long. I've been hurt a lot, and I've hurt a lot of others. I don't think I would be comfortable without this gun.' Gently, I said to him, '*But you seem pretty uncomfortable with it.*' 'Yes,' he said, 'pretty uncomfortable, but I still have my dream of becoming a monk.'

⁴ Barton, 53.

⁵ As told by Ruth Haley Barton, 56.

'Why don't you give me the gun,' I whispered. I was beginning to tremble. But he did—he gave the gun to me. His tears ran down to the ground and then he embraced me.⁵

Most of us have a gun—you may not have a holster under your robe, but you carry hurts, rejections, and losses everywhere you go; you are chained to your past—just like the monk, just like Moses. But if you know the Moses story, you know it doesn't finish in the desert. In Exodus 3, God spoke to Moses. What's interesting is that God didn't speak to him about the murder or the running away—God spoke to Moses about his calling.

Moses, I have more in store for you than this. You are a Hebrew, I am your God, and I will help you to lead my people out of slavery. No more hiding, no more pretending, no more running from your past; I am calling you.

In Exodus 3 and 4, Moses tried to resist this "calling" with a litany of excuses, but God countered every one. God names Himself before Moses, saying, *I AM the One who has always been and always will be—I am Eternal, Sovereign, and faithful, I will be with you; I am enough for you and for this task.* God speaks the same living word to us today.

For Moses to take hold of his calling, he had to go back—literally, he went back to Egypt. Exodus 4:20 says, "*So Moses took his wife and sons, put them on a donkey and started back to Egypt.*"

Breaking The Power Of The Past

It has been said that we need to use our past as a springboard, not a sofa.⁶ Sometimes, in order to go “forward,” we need to let God bring us “back” so that He can break the power that the past has over our present and future. With God’s help, we can name our hurts, disappointments, and losses. With God’s help, we can forgive those who have hurt us. With God’s help, we can experience the healing power of Jesus.

In the time remaining, I want to introduce you to a tool that you can pick up from the ushers on your way out this morning. Many of you know that we run a ministry called Celebrate Recovery—it’s a program designed to help people deal with the hurts, habits, and hang ups in their life. John Baker developed this tool and he describes it as a “fearless moral inventory”. By “moral,” he simply means honest.

The stated purpose of this inventory is to “*openly examine and confess my hurts and faults to myself, to God, and to someone I trust.*” This inventory allows us to face our past and the effect it has on us in the present.

In column 1, you simply list the people or experiences that have caused you pain, loss, fear, or resentment. Go back as far as you can. In column 2, you list the specific actions that someone did that hurt you. What did the person do that caused you resentment or fear?

In column 3, write down how these specific actions affected your life. List the effects it had on both your past and present. In column 4, name which of your basic instincts were injured?

- were relationships broken?

- was your safety threatened, or did you suffer financial loss?
- did you experience an abusive relationship?

In column 5, write out what part of your resentment against another person is your responsibility? In addition, list the people you have hurt, and how you hurt them.

I’ve said many times throughout this series, listening to a 30 minute monologue on emotional and relational health isn’t going to be the difference maker in your journey towards wholeness. It’s your life, your healing, that’s at stake. If you find yourself stuck in life, unable to move forward, this tool can become an exercise that God uses to break the power of your past.

This isn’t about trying to fix, change, or heal yourself—this is about relying on the courage and strength of Jesus. Isaiah 40:29 tells us that Jesus “*gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak.*”

If you want to be free from your past without facing your past, you’re not ready to leave your baggage behind. Let me encourage you to come to Jesus today, leave your baggage with Him. And while you invite Jesus into your past, let me also encourage you to share your journey with someone else. Very few people ever become whole on their own—they need God and others to support them along the way.

At this time I’m going to invite Nik Scot and the team to come and lead us in a final song of response, and as Nik comes, I’d like to take this opportunity to pray for you. **Prayer/Worship**

⁶ John Baker, *Celebrate Recovery: Leader’s Guide*, 107.