

Contents

Introduction	9
1. Living with a Tattoo	11
2. Ending the Denial Game	23
3. Pardon for the Unpardonable	39
4. Confronting Fatal Addictions	55
5. The Hurt and Healing of Abuse	71
6. Understanding Sexual Bonds	87
7. Breaking Sexual Bonds	99
8. The Healing Power of Forgiveness	111
9. Empty Obsessions	125
10. Channeling God's Power	139
11. Finding Your Way Back	153

Chapter One

Living with a Tattoo

When I asked a woman about the tattoo on her arm, she explained, “My former boyfriend did it—he was an abusive alcoholic.” She was now happily married to another man, but every day she was reminded of the pain in her past. She would have preferred to remove that tattoo, but it was burned into her skin.

We’ve all met people whose past is tattooed onto their souls. They’ve experienced abuse, lived in immorality, or acquired addictions. Some are women who live with the memory of an abortion; others are men who have fathered children out of wedlock or ruined their families. I heard a news report of a young woman who turned her own father over to the authorities because she had seen him commit a murder when she was a child. Think of the memories tattooed onto her soul!

“I’m trying to rebuild my life, like a house that has been destroyed within and without,” a woman wrote after she heard one of our radio broadcasts. “I hope to rebuild from the ground floor, and, if possible, not use any of the rotten wood I find all around me. This time, I hope to do the maintenance so that it won’t be ruined again.”

How different our past would be if we could relive it

Putting Your Past Behind You

knowing what we know now. Louisa Tarkington expressed the wish of millions when she wrote:

I wish there were some wonderful place
 Called the Land of Beginning Again
Where all of our mistakes and heartaches
 And all of our poor selfish grief
Could be dropped like a shabby old coat at the door
 And never put on again.

Is there such a place? I believe there is.

True, we cannot begin again in time, for hours become days, days become months, and months become years that can never be relived. No one can go back to the starting line in the race of life. Tacking an outdated calendar on the wall will not bring back the years, nor allow us to erase imprints left by mistakes of bygone days. We cannot go to God, as one teenager did, with “Lord, I pray this accident might not have happened!”

Like holes left in the wall after nails have been removed, the gaping wounds of sin often leave ugly sores. God wants to bandage our open wounds so that they might be healed. When those wounds have become battle scars, we will know that healing has taken place. Guilt, regret, and bitter heartache can be put behind us—there is a land of beginning again. Our past need not control our present nor future. It is never too late to do what is right; never too late to live our remaining days for God.

In *The Scarlet Letter*, Nathaniel Hawthorne tells the story of a woman who has a love affair with a young minister. As the story opens she is being punished by having to stand on a public platform with the large letter A, for “Adultery,” on her breast. She holds her illegitimate daughter in her arms. As the scenario unfolds she makes public expiation for her sin, taking the insults of the townspeople as her due—but she steadfastly refuses to name the father of her child.

In the meantime her husband, a shrewd psychologist, pretends to befriend the man whom he suspects was the accomplice in the affair. On the pretext of being a doctor, the woman’s husband makes this man squirm for years because the minister will not admit his guilt.

In the story, the immoral man who would not own up to his past suffered far more than the woman who faced her sin, accepting her shame and guilt. Better to come clean than to live with painful secrets that imprison the soul! If the immoral man had been willing to face his past, he could have lived with a clean, forgiven conscience. In choosing to feign innocence, he had to secretly confront his sin every single day.

The Hope of a New Beginning

In the Old Testament we read the remarkable story of Gomer, a woman who knew only too well what it was like to live with the letter A stamped on her soul. Her husband, Hosea, a prophet, had been commanded by God to marry a prostitute. Most Bible scholars believe she was not a harlot when he married her; nevertheless, God did say, “Go, take to yourself a wife of harlotry and have children of harlotry; for the land commits flagrant harlotry, forsaking the Lord” (Hosea 1:2).

Hosea had two children by this woman; but when the third was born, the prophet became painfully aware the child was not his. He named the boy “Lo-ammi,” which means “no kin of mine.”

Gomer continued her affairs, flitting from one lover to another, never finding the acceptance and fulfillment she craved. One day she fell into the hands of a man who was unable to care for her. Hosea saw her from a distance—distraught, humiliated, without food or clothes. Instinctively, he took some bread and wine and gave it to her slothful lover so he could take better care of his mistress!

Gomer’s moral toboggan slide continued until she finally ended up in the hands of a man who had her auctioned off to the highest bidder. Men stood and gawked at this hapless slave whose beauty had long since been marred by the high cost of emotional and spiritual decadence. Hosea outbid the other men and paid the fifteen shekels of silver and a bushel (a “homer”) and a half of barley.

Was Hosea irrational? What man would make such a painful sacrifice for a wife who had humiliated him, flaunting broken marriage vows and treating her children irresponsibly? Let her sleep in the beds she had made.

Foolish or not, Hosea brought her home, knowing he could now be with his lover again. He believed their marriage still had a future. They would rekindle the love of their courtship.

Putting Your Past Behind You

What had inspired such hope in the prophet? Hosea was convinced that they could begin again. He hoped she had reached bottom, had learned her lessons, and was ready to flee to him and to God. If she was not ready for a new beginning, her future would have died permanently.

God Himself gave Hosea hope when He said,

Therefore, behold, I will allure her,
Bring her into the wilderness
And speak kindly to her.
Then I will give her her vineyards from there,
And the valley of Achor as a door of hope.
And she will sing there as in the days of her youth,
As in the day when she came up from the land of Egypt.
(Hosea 2:14–15)

Gomer would sing again.

And there is more to the story. Her marriage vows would be reinstated, and she would live in purity and faithful commitment to her husband.

I will betroth you to Me forever;
Yes, I will betroth you to Me in righteousness and in justice,
In lovingkindness and in compassion,
And I will betroth you to Me in faithfulness.
Then you will know the Lord.

(2:19–20)

Eventually, she would be almost as though she had never sinned. Yes, she would sing again. She would stop her running and come home where she belonged. Spiritually speaking, her virginity would be restored.

I'm not saying the book of Hosea was written to give us an example of how a husband should treat a wayward wife—though God only knows how many marriages could be salvaged if the partners determined to show love even in the midst of unfaithfulness. Hosea's marriage does illustrate a point, however. No matter how far someone falls, restoration is always possible. God loves to save great sinners—even those wearing the big A.

No matter how deep or dark your valley, there is always a path leading out. God specializes in difficult cases. Anyone can begin again.

Perspectives for a New Beginning

The church in Corinth was made up of many believers converted out of homosexuality, adultery, drunkenness, and physical abuse. They lived in a culture much like ours, yet even more decadent. Paul wanted to assure them they could have a new beginning, a new life in Christ. In fact, many of them had already experienced it.

He wrote:

No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you may be able to endure it. (1 Corinthians 10:13)

Here is some good news for those who think their sordid past must control their future. We are not in the struggle alone; God walks with us through our past failures and future temptations. This passage of Scripture gives us perspective.

You Are Not Alone in Your Struggle

Your past—no matter how painful it is to remember—is common to the human race. This does not mean everyone has had your experiences, but that others have come through similar challenges and have done so triumphantly. In fact, Paul would say that the struggles of humanity are quite common. Your own private history has been lived, at least to some degree, by someone else.

Alcoholism
Child abuse
Divorce
Gluttony
Abortion
Homosexuality
Sexual addictions

Putting Your Past Behind You

Many people with one or more of these failures in their past have gone on to become blessed servants of Christ. You can overcome your past, whatever it involves. The purpose of this book is to explain what the Bible has to say about God's role in the process. Others have put a past just like yours behind them; so can you.

If we as a believing church wish to prove Christ's power, we must give credible hope to those whose backgrounds are cluttered with addictions, immorality, and/or criminal behavior. One-half of all children born this year will, at some time, live with just one parent; others will experience the terror of having an alcoholic father or a dysfunctional mother. About one-third of the baby girls born this year will experience some kind of sexual abuse, usually from a close friend.

These experiences are common to fallen humanity. Some people are greater sinners than others, and some have been sinned against in greater ways, but we all have the same human nature. Every one of us is somewhere on a continuum. To some degree we have all experienced the power of sin and have opened the door to temptation. Or we have felt the sting of being betrayed and used.

If I could listen to your story, it might resemble many of the others I've heard in my lifetime. I would look at you and say that your trial, your addiction, your injustice is common to man. You are not facing your hurt alone. God stands by to help; and He almost always uses His people to share in His work of restoration and healing.

Of course I don't mean to imply that what has happened to you is not serious just because it has happened to others, too. The fact that emotional and spiritual hurt are common does not make them less painful. Nor does it exonerate the person who inflicted the pain. Admitting the depth of that hurt might be the first step toward recovery. What I *am* saying is that ***no matter what you are facing, there is someone else in this world who has had the same past as you and has faced it successfully and gone on to live a productive life.***

One of the chains Satan uses to keep people bound to their past is secrecy. They believe their situation is unique, that no one else has lived through their hell. Thus, some who hurt carry within their hearts a dreaded secret, believing that if anyone else knew

about what they had done, they themselves would be rejected. Secrecy becomes their spiritual tomb.

As a pastor, I have frequently heard people say, "I'm going to tell you something that no one else in all the world knows." Then follows a tale of abuse, sexual perversion, or cruel injustice. I think to myself, *What a pity this person has had to bear his burden all alone these many years—even though his story is common to man.*

God Is Faithful

"God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able," wrote Paul in 1 Corinthians 10:13. If I think I am going through a trial that is too much for God, I am calling His credibility into question. God's faithfulness means He is obligated to not give me more than I can handle.

The addict says, "God cannot give me anything that can match the euphoria of psychedelic drugs, illicit sexuality, or alcoholism. He is no competition for the drives that control me, for the power that exhilarates me." Such a person denies God's faithfulness, and thus he remains bound in his sins. The freedom that God gives is better than the euphoria of sins that cloud our conscience and pollute the soul.

Understandably, thousands of people (yes, I am including Christians) are angry with God. After all, the argument goes, if God loved me, why did He let me get into this mess? Why was my father an alcoholic? Why do I have such strong sexual desires? Why did He let my dad abuse me, or my mother reject me? Why should I look to a God who failed me when I needed Him the most?

Thus, the God who can help is held at bay. The very source of strength and understanding that is so needed is rejected. I have never met a person who has successfully overcome a difficult past who has not had to "forgive God." (Although He does not need forgiveness, we sometimes think He does!) A former homosexual told me he never had a partner who wasn't angry with the Almighty. Homosexuals are angry because they believe this is the way God made them. This is the card they were dealt.

No one can put his past behind him until he resolves this hostility against God. To understand His sovereign control over the world and yet to believe He is loving is difficult. An abused woman

Putting Your Past Behind You

put it to me simply, “God wasn’t there for me when I was a child; why should I think He will be there for me as an adult? *I can never trust Him!*” Yet trust Him she must if she is to have rest in her soul.

How can such anger be dissolved? We must be honest in expressing to Him exactly how we feel. I’ve met people who think God would smite them with a lightning bolt if they were to tell Him they feel betrayed by Him. So rather than confront Him, they ignore Him, stuffing their hostility into their souls like garbage into a bag. The smoldering anger is stored away until it becomes unbearable. Some go to their graves in silent but seething bitterness.

David had a better solution. He would pour out his soul to God, openly admitting his disappointments and anger. He did it reverently, of course, but he did it honestly.

Will the Lord reject forever?
And will He never be favorable again?
Has His lovingkindness ceased forever?
Has His promise come to an end forever?
Has God forgotten to be gracious,
Or has He in anger withdrawn His compassion?
Then I said, “It is my grief,
That the right hand of the Most High has changed.”
(Psalm 77:7–10)

In numerous passages David questions God, asking why He has hidden His face. Then he confesses his confusion and disappointment with his Lord. God did not rebuke him for such honesty; it would have been worse if David had not talked to God at all. The Almighty is well able to take the heat—even if it is not deserved.

Since God knows what we think about Him, why not say it? He will not be surprised! Festering bitterness can be siphoned off only by honest communication. Whenever we are open with God, we will discover that grace has been poured into our souls.

If the first chain that ties us to our past is *secrecy*, the second is *hostility*. Anger toward God and others makes us stay in our own prisons, nursing a heart as hard as stone. It poisons all of our relationships. Yet God is faithful. You can tell Him everything, and He will keep it a secret. The chains of the past can be broken.

God Will Provide

Paul wrote that He will “provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it” (1 Corinthians 10:13). To bear raw pain is so excruciating that we all seek some escape route that will make life manageable. By nature we try to dodge our painful past so that we don’t have to face it. Initially, this seems like the easiest path, but in the end it is much more difficult. As we shall see, God’s way of escape is quite different from ours.

In the next chapter, I will expose the prison called denial. Abuse victims resort to denial to avoid the pain of reality; perpetrators resort to denial to protect their facade of innocence. Children develop happy fantasies to compensate for the hurt of real life. Such denial is common, but it is never a permanent, satisfying way of putting our past behind us.

Denial enables us to convince ourselves that we are in control of our lives and all is well. Once we start down that road, we will play a hundred manipulative games to get ourselves off the hook. It is difficult for any of us to see ourselves the way God sees us, or even the way others see us. Denial is not God’s way of escape.

Some people take flight from reality by compulsive behavior. They cram their lives with activity—often needless activity—simply because they cannot live with themselves. They compulsively overeat, overspend, or overschedule. To deaden the pain of loneliness and emotional emptiness, many resort to illicit sexual relationships and other destructive friendships.

Drugs and alcohol are other popular escape routes. Almost daily the media tells us about someone who died of an overdose of drugs. What is forgotten are the tens of thousands of addicts who die slowly, bit by bit, day by day.

With 10 million alcoholics among us, we have had many examples of mindless escapism. Far from drowning problems, alcohol actually irrigates them, causing them to grow much stronger. Pay-day cannot be endlessly postponed.

These escape routes only perpetuate the power of the past, rather than defeat it.

What Is God’s Way of Escape?

Biblical escape routes take many forms, but they always have these characteristics. First, there is honesty. The acting must end.

Putting Your Past Behind You

The lies that have covered the sin must be exposed. God will deal with us only on the basis of truth, not evasion.

Honesty is also necessary for those who have been the victims of other people's sins. No one can close the door to his past without taking a look at it and "making peace" with all that is there.

Second, there is humility. To be willing to do anything that God requires—even sharing our past with some of our friends who can pray for us in our need—is necessary. There are times when we cannot put our past behind us alone; we need the assistance of others.

Yes, the divine surgeon wants to lance our wounds so the poison can be released. Doctors tell us that in physical surgery a large area has to be cut out so that it can heal as a clean wound. Time is needed; to scrape the scab only delays the healing process. Just so, God heals our spiritual wounds, giving us the grace to forgive and be forgiven. He is a healing God.

Some people have been able to put a painful past behind them rapidly, perhaps at the moment of conversion. Others have needed more time but have not had to recall the details of all the hurt they experienced. Then there are those who will never be at peace until they have carefully looked at their past and dealt with all the hurts, one at a time. For some, just coping more effectively is progress.

So what is the way of escape? It is through matching the power of God with the deepest level of human need. *It is learning that God is with us even if the hurts will not go away.*

In the presence of God and His grace there is hope for a new beginning. Someone has said that when God closes a door, He opens a window. And when He gives us a trial, He gives us the shoulders to bear it.

I don't want to proclaim a God who is only capable of delivering people from small sins or helping those who come from stable families. God is able to bring even the most hopeless up from the miry clay, set their feet upon a rock, and help them learn to walk. And even if the wounds of the past never heal, these people can live productive lives, knowing that present suffering cannot be compared with the glory that awaits them.

The Search for a New Beginning

Let's sketch the big picture, get a glimpse of our predicament, and look at the first step needed to put the past behind us.

When the naturalist Thoreau was close to death, he was visited by a pious aunt, who asked, “Henry, have you made your peace with God?”

“I didn’t know we had quarreled,” he replied.

Thoreau was as far from the truth as one could travel. All of us have had our quarrel with God. Our problem is that we don’t want to admit we’ve quarreled and that, in the end, He is always the winner.

For starters, we are born into this world under the condemnation of sin. Unfair? Think of it this way: If you were born into a family that was greatly in debt, those debts would be passed on to you even though you had not personally incurred them. When Adam sinned, we all sinned with him—we participated in his decision in the sense that he, as the father of the human race, represented all of us.

That is only the beginning of our problem. As we grow older, we begin to behave like the sinners we are. The idea that evil is something we do because of the bad examples around us, and not because of the fundamental flaw within us, is naive and contrary to experience.

As we grow into adulthood, behavior patterns become entrenched; and without inner restraints, we tend to follow our desires wherever they lead. This begins a cycle of behavior we simultaneously love and hate.

Most people think the solution to their predicament rests with themselves. They may swear off their old habits, or even join a self-help group, and notice some dramatic improvements. Though these changes are good, they can ultimately be harmful if they become a substitute for God’s answer to their dilemma. The good has become the enemy of the best.

Self-improvement cannot rectify our quarrel with God. Nor can it take away the guilt that accompanies sinful behavior. It can only redirect it. Thus guilt reappears under different labels. Too often it is pushed into the subconscious.

What is God’s answer to our sinfulness? To ask the question differently, how can a sinner become just before God? To put it briefly, Christ’s death on the cross was a sacrifice for sin. This means God is able to actually credit us with the righteousness of Christ.

Putting Your Past Behind You

“He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Corinthians 5:21).

God is not waiting to clobber wayward sinners who dare to stagger into His presence. We’ve all heard of earthly fathers who can hardly wait to whip their children into line; but our heavenly Father invites sinners to dinner, binds up their wounds, and pours grace into their souls.

Like the father of the prodigal, our Father in heaven calls for the best robe (a symbol of honor), the shoes (a symbol of acceptance), and the fatted calf (a symbol of fellowship). He waits for sinners not with a club but with a cup of mercy and grace.

The Good News is that this act of God clears our record once for all. He declares us as righteous as Christ. “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life” (John 5:24).

This gift of righteousness is not given to everyone but is limited to those who admit their own helplessness and transfer all of their trust to Christ alone. God justifies the ungodly when they give up trusting themselves and believe in His Son.

Is that the end of the story? If God accepts us on the basis of Christ’s merit, do we ever have to confess our sins again? And does this mean we can sin as much as we please? What about those tattoos still branded onto our souls? Is there really hope for a new beginning?

These and other questions will be answered in the chapters that follow.

Read on.

Action Step Spend one unhurried hour singing hymns of praise to God and reviewing the promises of Scripture. Remember that faith in God’s goodness toward you is essential in order to cope with your painful past.