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**INTRODUCTION**

Before we start looking at how to deal with painful pasts and how to counsel someone with a painful past, we need to look at the concept of the past first. In his book, *Putting Your Past in its Place*, Steve Viars said the following, “Many people make the mistake of thinking about their past as if it were a large, mysterious entity that cannot be understood, classified, or properly addressed”.

Jay Adams, in *The Christian Counselor’s Manual*, says this, “Some persons focus on the past. So long as they do, change will not be possible, since no one can change the past. It is not the past that needs to be dealt with; actually the past no longer exists. It is not his past that needs changing; it is the counselee himself as he now is who must change”.

These two quotes are very helpful when considering the past. It’s not a mysterious entity that has a mysterious force over us; and dwelling on the past doesn’t change anything. In fact the past does not exist anymore. It’s just a series of events that took place before the now.

The past however is not irrelevant, but does play a role in how we think and act in the present.

**WRONG VIEWS OF THE PAST**

Thus, there are two polar opposite ideas about the past - both of them **wrong** ideas.

* The past **determines** how I think and act in the present.  
  (1 Cor 6:9-11; Rom 6:13-14, 17-18)
* My past is **irrelevant** to how I think and act in the present.  
  (Job 30:26-28; Heb 12:15; Gal 6:7; Ps 32:3-4)  
    
  As already mentioned the past is not this mysterious force that controls me. I am not merely a product of my past. I am not a prisoner of my past. However, my past does play a role on the way I think about things and how I act. At the very least the past does inform us about the consequences of our actions and decisions, and it may have a much larger influence on us for better or for worse.

**TWO CATEGORIES OF THE PAINFUL PASTS**  
Painful pasts fall into either one or both of two categories, namely trials in the past and sins in the past. These two categories then need to be subdivided into two more categories, namely that which we responded to poorly and that which we responded to well.  
  
**1. Trials in the Past**  
  
A trial is something that happens to me that I don’t have control over. Something that, if I could choose, I would not choose it to happen with me. It might be a small irritation like the neigbour’s dog that keeps barking. It might be a massive event that shakes the foundation of my life like the loss of a loved one. It might be long, drawn out suffering like having to live with cancer for an extended period of time. But if I could, I would not choose it.  
  
In general, trials are part of life after the fall in The Garden of Eden. But for a Christian trials are given by God to test us, to purify us and to form us to become more like Christ Jesus, as James 1:2-4 explains to us:  
  
*Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, (3) for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. (4) And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.* (Ja 1:2-4 ESV)  
It’s important to understand that trials are a normal part of a Christian’s life. It is not out of the ordinary to experience various trials. In Jeremiah 48:11 we find an example of a nation that didn’t experience any trials.  
  
*Moab has been at ease from his youth and has settled on his dregs; he has not been emptied from vessel to vessel, nor has he gone into exile; so his taste remains in him, and his scent is not changed.* (Je 48:11 ESV)

I really like this picture of trials and suffering. It’s the picture of making sweet wine. The juice was left in a wineskin until the sediment or dregs settled at the bottom. Then it was poured over into another skin and left until even more dregs separated. They would keep on doing this until they were left with a pure sweet wine. Trials are the same way and Moab didn’t experience a lot of it and therefore was still as bitter and impure as it has always been.  
  
The Greek word translated “trial” can also be translated as “temptation”. The context of the verse determines which it should be. However, there is a fine line between the two. Trials are from the Lord and are good, but depending on the way we react to the trial, it may turn into a temptation for us. Or to put it like Paul, our flesh might use the trial as an opportunity to tempt us. (Jas 1:2-4, 13-17)  
  
The bigger the trial, the harder it is to bear, and the greater, potentially, the temptation to sin.  
  
Therefore when we think about trials in the past, it can be further divided into two subcategories. Trials in the past to which we responded poorly and those to which we responded well.

**1.1 Trials in the past to which we responded poorly**  
For example, a drunk driver killed a woman’s child and she is angry at God; or a person was sexually abused as a child, but never reported it to the appropriate authorities. And we can name many more.  
  
The counsellor’s response: Teach the counselee…

* To face his suffering honestly (2 Cor 1:8-9)
* To face his suffering hopefully (1 Cor 10:13; Ps 73:26)
* To embrace a right view of God:  
  a. His sovereignty and wisdom (Job 42:1-3; Ecc 7:14; Lam 3:37-38)  
  b. His Justice (Ecc 12:14; 1 Thess 1:6-7; 1 Peter 2:23)  
  c. His goodness (Ps 119:68,71; Rev 21:4)  
  d. His compassion (Is 40:29-31; Lam3:18-24)
* To forgive the person who hurt him (Eph 4:31-32; Heb 12:15)
* To pray for those who hurt him (Matt 5:44-45)
* To help others who are going through similar painful trials (2 Cor 1:3-4)

**1.2 Trials in the past to which we responded well**  
  
For example, when the counselee lost the use of their legs or was sexually abused as a child, but has handled that very difficult situation biblically by embracing a right view of God and forgiving those who have hurt them.  
  
The counsellor’s response: Commend the counselee for depending on God’s grace, and encourage the biblical attitudes and practices that helped him or her to respond in the way they did (1 Thess 5:11,14).

**2. Sins in the Past**

Past sins can also be the cause of much pain for us. We may be experiencing the consequences of those past sins. We may be suffering from guilt over those past sins. We may even be wrongfully embittered toward others, blaming them for the sins. These sins of the past can also be divided into two subcategories. Sins in the past to which we responded poorly and those to which we responded well.

**2.1 The sinful past to which we responded poorly**  
  
For example, a woman who had an abortion when she was twenty and continues to pursue various forms of selfpunishment years later, trying to atone for what she did; or a rebellious teenager that continues to blame his parents for his current sinful lifestyle.  
  
The counsellor’s response: Correct the counselee’s wrong thinking and actions such as...

* Hiding sin, rather than confessing it (2 Sam 11-12; Pro 28:13)
* Adding one sin to another, like lying about it or bitterness (2 Sam 11-12)
* Bizarre or self-destructive hehaviour due to long-term guilt (Matt 27:3-5)
* Paralysing fear of what other people think about him (Prov 29:25; Matt 10:28)
* Refusal to accept the legitimate consequences of past sin (Deut 3:25-26)
* Refusal to accept the full forgiveness of God and others (Gen 50:15-19)

**2.2 Sinful past to which we responded well**  
  
For example, an employee stole from his employer but confessed his crime and made restitution; or someone who had an immoral lifestyle but repented from his sins and embraced the grace he received from the Lord.  
  
The counsellor’s response: Encourage the counselee to continue responding biblically by rejoicing in the cross of Christ every time his or her sinful deed comes to mind, thanking the Lord for His forgiveness and complete removal of the guilt (1 Tim 1:13-16; Rom 5:1, 8:1).

**WRONG THINKING ABOUT FORGIVENESS**  
  
The following has been addressed in more detail in the session on forgiveness, but here I do want to mention it again briefly.

**Refusal To Believe That God Can Forgive Some Significant Past Sin**  
Helpful verses on justification

Rom 5:1, 8:1; John 3:18; 1 John 4:17-18; Ps 32:1-5; Ps 103:10-14  
  
A refusal to believe that God can forgive my sins is a manifestation of pride.   
Teach and help the counselee to understand this, and encourage them to trust Jesus Christ for the full forgiveness of their sins.

**Thinking You Need To Forgive Yourself But Are Unable To**  
The notion of forgiving oneself is unbiblical. God is the judge, not you. If God has forgiven your sin then that sin is fully dealt with. It may also be that the counselee is struggling to admit that they are sinful enough to do the evil thing they did.   
  
Teach the counselee to humbly accept his own sinfulness and to consciously rejoice in God’s forgiveness every time that forgiven sin comes to mind (Rom 7:24-25a).

**RESOURCES**

*Putting Your Past in its Place*, Steve Viars

*The Christian Counselor’s Manual*, Jay Adams

*A Quick Reference Guide for Biblical Counsellors and Disciplers*, Joel James