

We all have a past. [Silence]

For some, the past represents regrets over what *you've done*...

[Scroll Words] lying, cheating, stealing, abortion, abuser, anorexia, bulimia, promiscuity, alcoholism, addiction, pornography

For some, the past represents the hurt and shame over what *was done to you*...

[Scroll Words] abuse, adultery, incest, abandonment,

For some, the past represents experiences that simply leave you asking God, "*Why?*"

[Scroll Words] death of a loved one, illness, natural disasters, suicide, depression, divorce, bankruptcy, cancer,

[Silence]

We all have a past; and whether your past includes

- regrets for what you've done, or
- hurt and shame over what was done to you, or
- an experience that simply leaves you scratching your head and asking why;

today I want you to understand that *your past does not define your future*.

As a result of those past experiences, many people go through life asking God, "Why did I have to go through...?"

As I stated last week, how we answer this question often shapes our image of God. And if our answers are not drawn from scripture, then we have a faulty image of God. So before I share some thoughts on the question why let me challenge you to think about your vision of God's character as it relates to this question.

For some people who go through certain life experiences and for some of their comforters; the image of God's character that they envision is one of a God who is aloof, uncaring, silent, mute, impotent, angry, vengeful...

Again, we often mischaracterize God based upon the perceived answers to our questions for God. Many times, others in our life try to answer for God thereby creating false perceptions of God. And many times the answers we find lack a biblical foundation and as a result our view of God is unfounded.

I want to challenge you to think about the answers you give others, or that others have given you, when you talk about a life experience. Unfortunately, too many people paint a picture of God that is unbiblical.

One of the answers that always cause me to cringe is often heard following a death. People, often meaning well, say that God needed an angel in heaven and that is why the individual died. That statement is wrong on so many different levels, but I want you to think about this in particular: 'what does this statement say about the character of God?'

What it tells me is that God is selfish and randomly inflicts pain on humans just to satisfy his needs. That is certainly not a biblical image of God.

I bring this up because you and I need to understand the character and nature of God so that when we talk about life's experiences with other people that we don't misrepresent God.

There are many stories in scripture that could serve us well in learning that our past does not define our future. But for today I want to focus on the story of Joseph which is found in the book of Genesis. Joseph is one of those who suffered at the hands of others and went through a series of experiences that would just leave most of us scratching our head and asking God, 'Why?'

Let's just review Joseph's story briefly (you can read it in its entirety later today, Genesis 37, 39-45). <http://bible.us/gen37.1.niv>

Joseph was one of 12 sons of Jacob. He was his father's favorite as demonstrated by the coat of many colors that his father gave to him. Joseph was also a dreamer. And one of those dreams involved Joseph's brothers and his parents bowing down to him. (Now there are some dreams you share and there are others- like this one- that you just don't share. But not Joseph.)

Needless to say, Joseph's brothers had a little animosity toward Joseph. So on one occasion while his brothers were watching their flocks, Joseph's brothers devised a plan to do away with their brother. After being talked out of killing him outright they sold Joseph to a band of travelers who took Joseph to Egypt.

In Egypt, Joseph was sold into slavery. Now, Genesis 39:2 makes this statement about Joseph, "The Lord was with Joseph...."

After being mistreated by his brothers and sold into slavery; I wonder if Joseph felt like God was with him?

I think most of us can say that at some point in our past we've been through experiences where we wonder if God is with us. Like Joseph, we've been despised, discarded and sold out; leaving us to wonder if God even has any idea what has happened to us.

Here's an important lesson we need to always remember; nothing happens in our life outside of God's presence. God is always with us. It is God's promise to us. Even in the worst experience of your life God was there.

As hard as that is to fathom in some of the hellish situations that people inflict upon others; God is never absent from our life. David, whose past left much to be desired, expressed in Psalm 139:7-12... <http://bible.us/ps139.7-12.niv>

For David, and for us, we can be assured that no matter where we are; God is present. And it is because God is present in that circumstance of life that we can believe God can redeem our worst situations.

In the prophet Joel, God makes a promise to his people. (Joel 2:25-27) <http://bible.us/joel2.25-27.niv> God can redeem even the worst situation so that our past does not define our future.

Let's get back to Joseph for a moment. Joseph, because the Lord was with him, prospered in the house of his Egyptian master. But Joseph's story takes a sudden detour once again, and it has nothing to do with Joseph doing anything wrong; as a matter of fact it is because Joseph is a man of integrity that he winds up in prison.

You see Joseph was a good looking guy! He caught the eye of his master's wife who wanted Joseph to sleep with her. Joseph wouldn't do it! And so Potiphar's wife cooked up a story that ended with Joseph being carted off to prison. (Many of our life experiences which are a part of our past are the result of evil which others perpetrate on us. And I want you to understand that God does not cause those things which happen, they are the outcome of a fallen world where sin is rampant.)

Look what it says again in Genesis 39:20, 21: But while Joseph was in prison, the Lord was with him...

If you ask me, I think at this point I'd be asking God, "Why, if you are with me, do I keep ending up in these situations?" (Have you ever wondered that?) Joseph could have given up, despaired, even cursed God; but Joseph held on to the dream that God had given him.

Joseph eventually goes from prison to being the right hand man of the Pharaoh. Talk about a rags to riches story, Joseph lived it. And in the end, Joseph saw that God had used it all to place him at the right place and time to save his family- yes, the 10 brothers who had sold him into slavery.

Here is something I want you to hear: God never wastes an experience in our life, but God uses it to become a place from which we can be a blessing to others.

Joseph recognized that when he said to his brothers; 'what you intended for evil, God has used for good.' Genesis 50:20 (Sounds like Romans 8:28)

Rick Warren, writing in his book, *The Purpose Driven Life* (Day 31) says that: 'God never wastes a hurt!' And he goes on to say that often out of the deepest hurt in our life come the opportunity for us to minister to others through shared experiences. (Read 2 Cor 1:4 <http://bible.us/2cor1.3-4.niv>)

Now most of us would rather not go through some of the experiences that we've gone through; but here again is the truth I want you to walk away with today: your past does not define your future.

Too often we let the past define who we are; and the truth is we are not what happened to us, we are not our sins, we are not what others have done to us.

Rather, we need to learn that we are who God says we are: his children. We are forgivable, changeable, moldable and most importantly, loveable!

If we are going to move beyond being defined by our past the most important thing we need to accept is that the past cannot be changed.

I was listening to a sermon about marriage recently and I think the most profound thing I heard said was in regard to a line in the wedding vows that should be key to every relationship.

It is an almost overlooked line, but it has a real biblical basis is 1 Corinthians 13 where Paul says that 'love does not keep a record of wrongs.' In other words, we don't live in the past and the past is not to determine our future. What is one of the hardest things for couples to learn in a marriage; to stop looking back at what happened and start focusing on what will happen in the future.

Have you figured out the line from the marriage vows? It's these four simple words: 'from this day forth.' Marriage should not be defined by what happened in the past but by what will happen from this day forth.

From this day forth, I am going to walk away from my past and begin to live according to whom God says I am.

In 2 Corinthians 5:17, Paul defines us as 'new creations. The old is gone, the new is here!' (the new creation is based on our relationship with Jesus) Paul expressed this reality in his own life in Philippians 3:13-14 <http://bible.us/phil3.13-14.niv>

I meet a lot of people who think that their past keeps them from being able to be used by or loved by God. We're going to pick up on that thought next week as we move into the question for God; Why do you love me?

If you have a hard time seeing and experiencing yourself as someone loved by God, or you know someone like that, may I encourage you to be here next Sunday as we delve a little more into the character of God and how understanding the biblical answers to our questions for God can change our lives.

The past has passed. Leave it where it belongs- in the past, so that we can make peace with the present and walk into the future with hope.