

## ***Fearless***

### 3. Skeletons in Your Closet

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My childhood best friend absolutely lost his way during his high school years. He became a well-known drug dealer and made as many enemies as one could during high school and the year after we all graduated. After coming to the end of his rope, he attended a church service one night, came to Christ and was dramatically changed. He enrolled in a Christian University and was working full time on staff at church by the time our 10 year High School reunion came around. Yet, when it came time to go, he refused to go to the reunion. We argued about this for almost a week. He simply did not want to face all of the people of his past because of the way he behaved all through high school. I kept saying, "You're a pastor now. I think they will give you a pass." Well, Jeana and I went. Would you believe that almost everyone I talked to asked me about my friend and how they hoped that he would come because they couldn't wait to hear about how he had gone from a drug dealer to a pastor? It was a missed opportunity. Big Time. His fear of rejection because of his past consumed him.

In November 1816, in the monthly British journal [\*The Eclectic Review\*](#), an idiom was used for the first time in publishing history. The phrase that the writer used was one that we are all familiar with today, 'Skeleton in the Closet.' The phrase literally means that a body was hidden in a closet and kept as a secret for so long that all that remains is the skeleton. The saying is understood to mean that a person committed a secret deed that they are intent on keeping to themselves for fear that if their past sin is found out, it would be damaging to their reputation and could hinder them from having a productive future.

Because of social media in our culture today, keeping a skeleton in the closet is almost impossible. We have witnessed in the last few years people like Bill Cosby, for instance and whom I loved, being brought down by skeletons in his closet. Some careers have been ruined for things that celebrities said when they were young, many years before they were famous. Anyone running for political office in our culture today needs to know that not only will their skeletons be revealed, but the media will even go back a few generations and dig up the skeletons in the closets of their parents and grandparents.

It's no wonder why people fear being authentic about their past. But what about God? What does He think? God doesn't seem to be much bothered by our pasts. He seems much more concerned with our potential to change the lives around us due to our transformation. The Lord takes our past and redeems it into a fountain of hope for those who are far away from Him.

I wonder how many in this room today are allowing your past failures and sins to keep you from moving forward in life? I wonder how many in this room today are allowing the black mark on your past to keep you from taking steps in your career, your relationships and even leadership in the church. I wonder how many in this room are scared to death that others around you might find out you are not perfect. If my wonderings hit home with any of you today, there is good news. We are going to move forward today and I believe that you can walk out of here with a new perspective and hope for your future.

I love reading the story of Paul's conversion. If anyone had skeletons in the closet, it was Paul. Paul was a passionate Jew who hated the people who followed Jesus. He saw this new religion as undermining the faith of the Jews. Paul felt like it was his personal duty to destroy Christianity. Yet, one day Paul was converted in dramatic fashion as he was on his way to the city of Damascus to arrest some Christians.

*Acts 9:1-6 Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest<sup>2</sup> and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem.<sup>3</sup> As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him.<sup>4</sup> He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"*

*<sup>5</sup> "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked.*

*"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied.<sup>6</sup> "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."*

So, we see here that Paul was changed in an instant. He was literally floored by the grace and mercy of Christ. Now, immediately after Paul's conversion he faces opposition to his past.

*<sup>10</sup> In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!"*

*"Yes, Lord," he answered.*

*<sup>11</sup> The Lord told him, "Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying.<sup>12</sup> In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight."*

*<sup>13</sup> "Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem.<sup>14</sup> And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name."*

In other words, Ananias is asking, "Lord, are you sure you've got the right guy? You know his past, right? You have heard of his reputation, right? You know that he has murdered some of your followers, right? Are you sure you have the right guy?"

*<sup>15</sup> But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel."*

So how do we see our Lord responding to this criticism of Paul? To Jesus, the past is the past. That's it. It's that simple. It's over. What Christ is concerned about is our willingness to allow Him to accomplish his purposes in our life from this day forward.

Ananias wanted Paul's past to be the yardstick in which his future was measured. Jesus was not hearing any of this. When Jesus transforms us and forgives us, it's a brand new day, no if, ands, or buts. It's a new day. Let me add this, today can be a new day, as well. Today can be a new starting point for you. If you don't like the trajectory of your life, change it. Let's start anew. Everyone in this room needs to embrace this truth today.

**Your Past does not define who you are today.** My family loves to tell the story of when I was about to start Kindergarten. I wanted this change in my life status to be known to everyone and, thus, I shall no longer be called Jim, Jimmy or especially Jim-bob. I was a big boy now. I'm heading to school soon. So, everyone who called me Jim, Jimmy or Jim-bob got a lecture from the 4 year old me. "That's not my name. I am James." I couldn't care less what I was called in the past. Today was a new day and I will be called James!

I wasn't the first one in history to have a name change. In the Jewish tradition, someone's name describes their character. The bible makes it a point to mark transformations with a name change. That's why we see men who have been transformed by God, given new names.

After Jacob wrestled with God and had a conversion moment, he came to be known as Israel. After putting his trust in Christ, Cephas became known as Peter. In our text today, Paul is called Saul and after he is transformed, the world knows him as the Apostle Paul.

Paul understood this truth deeply. That's why he penned these words to the church in Corinth that was known as the Las Vegas of its day. He wanted the people to not allow their crazy past to define who they were now that Christ had transformed them. **2 Corinthians 5:**<sup>17</sup> *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!*

Another truth we need to embrace today is that **your Past does not define your future.** Many consider Lincoln to be the greatest President in the history of the United States. He led the country through its greatest moral and military crisis. He essentially saved the country from destruction and directed it toward restoration. However, he never let his past define his future. Here is a timeline of his failures and his bounce backs:

1816- His family was forced out of their home. He had to work to support them.

1818-His mother died.

1831-Failed in business.

1832-Ran for state legislature – lost.

1832-Also lost his job – wanted to go to law school but couldn't get in.

1833-Borrowed money from a friend to begin a business. By the end of the year, he was bankrupt. He spent the next 17 years of his life paying off this debt.

1834-Ran for state legislature again – won.

1835-Was engaged to be married, sweetheart died and his heart was broken.

1836-Had a total nervous breakdown and was in bed for six months.

1838-Sought to become speaker of the state legislature – defeated.

1840-Sought to become elector – defeated.

1843-Ran for Congress – lost.

1846-Ran for Congress again – this time he won – went to Washington and did a good job.

1848-Ran for re-election to Congress – lost.

1849-Sought the job of land officer in his home state – rejected.

1854-Ran for Senate of the United States – lost.

1856-Sought the Vice-Presidential nomination at his party's national convention – got less than 100 votes.

1858-Ran for U.S. Senate again – again he lost.

1860-Elected president of the United States.

He had many great accomplishments that solidify his place in American history and reveal the greatness of his comeback. His Gettysburg Address is the most quoted speech in American history. The Emancipation Proclamation freed all slaves and stands as one of the greatest acts of moral leadership in history. His reelection in 1864 confirmed that his continued leadership was vital to the country. His approach and attitude toward the defeated Southern states helped reunite the nation. Without Lincoln, the United States would look very different today. What he accomplished, considering his many setbacks, marks his comeback as one of the greatest of all time.

As I read through Lincoln's biography this past summer, it became very clear to me that Lincoln's past failures built into him a resolve that was unlike any other man who lived in his time. Lincoln channeled his past failures and allowed them to be his strength during times of adversity.

That leads us to our 3<sup>rd</sup> point today: **Past failures can be channeled into strength for tomorrow.** Paul spent the first few years after he came to Christ trying to convince people that he was in fact a changed man. Paul, after years of doing good works, could have allowed his past to stay in his past. Instead though, Paul recognized the power of a changed life. At a certain point, Paul starting using his past failures and sins to describe the power of God. Paul decided to not allow his past to be a black mark on his record, instead, he channeled his past to bring God glory. Paul used his past sins to point to the incredible grace and love of Christ.

At the climax point of his ministry, Paul had an opportunity to speak in front of the King of the region. Many throughout history speculate that Paul thought that if he could convert the king, he could convert the nation. So, when Paul had this one shot, this one chance, he shot his best bullet. You would think that Paul would talk about the miracles he performed or the revelations he had received from Jesus. Instead, Paul channeled his past and found strength from God.

**Acts 26:** *<sup>9</sup>“I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. <sup>10</sup> And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the Lord’s people in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. <sup>11</sup> Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. I was so obsessed with persecuting them that I even hunted them down in foreign cities.*

Paul simply shared his testimony, his past, and his skeletons in the closet. Why? Because Paul’s shady past was proof that there is new life for anyone in Christ Jesus. Just as Jesus was resurrected, Paul’s life and character were resurrected through Christ.

Our story of God’s grace in our life is powerful. Human pride keeps us from wanting anyone to know that we are not perfect. In actuality, our proclamation of our imperfectness unleashes the power of God to change other people’s lives while renewing us as we remember how much we are loved by God.

You might not realize this today, but almost all of us have been impacted by a man who decided to channel his past failures and sin into music that has been an instrument for thousands of people over the last couple hundred years as they came to Christ. This past fall I read John Newton’s biography. John was nurtured by a devoted Christian mother who dreamed that her only son would become a preacher. She died, however, when John was a child, and he followed his sea-captain father to a sailor’s life. John didn’t care for the discipline of the Royal Navy. He deserted the ship, was flogged, and eventually was discharged. He then headed for regions where he could "sin freely." He ended up on the western coast of Africa, working for a slave trader who mistreated him. Newton's life during that period bore the appearance of a modern Prodigal Son's: "a wretched looking man toiling in a plantation of lemon trees in the Island of Plaintains-- clothes had become rags, no shelter and begging for unhealthy roots to allay his

hunger." After more than a year of such treatment, he managed to escape from the island, in 1747.

The following year his ship was battered by a severe storm. Newton had read *The Imitation of Christ*, and during the life-threatening voyage, he became a Christian. Ironically, Newton then served as captain of a slave ship for six years. Even though Newton came to Christ, it took Newton some time to fully commit his ways to Christ. In the meantime, he committed some horrendous acts.

Eventually, Newton became a transformed man and began to preach passionately all throughout England. He gradually came to abhor slavery and mentored William Wilberforce who led the charge in Parliament against slavery. Newton later crusaded against it and was extremely influential in England's abolition of slavery. Newton, known as the "old converted sea captain," attracted large audiences as he shared openly about his Skeletons in the closet. For many year's he told his story of being a slave captain and how God's amazing Grace saved a wretch like him.

He began writing his own songs, many autobiographical in nature, including "Amazing Grace!" I don't know about you, but that song has been instrumental in my spiritual journey. The song has also taught many generations to embrace our past that has been redeemed by the mercy and grace of God. In his old age, it was suggested that Newton retire because of bad health and failing memory. He replied, "My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things: That I am a great sinner and that Christ is a great Savior!"

Our past does not need to hold any of us back. We need to allow God to use our past to change other people's futures. If you are here today and you haven't been able to move on from your past, let's talk for a moment about how to make that transition. More than likely the reason we can't move forward out of our past is because there is some unfinished business. It's been my experience that the hang ups of our past stem from one of these three areas. So let's talk for a moment about making a move towards a new day. There are 3 possible moves to make.

First, maybe you need to **ask for forgiveness**. Even though you have come Christ, maybe there are some people from your past that you still haven't asked them to forgive you for the wrongs you did to them. So there is still this open wound from your past. Each time you want to move forward, you feel emotionally or relationally stuck. Maybe it's one of your children, or your former spouse, or a parent or your sibling or an old friend. If this is you, circle this point and ask God for the words and strength to ask for forgiveness.

Second, **forgive those who have wronged you**. Un-forgiveness will rob you of joy and peace. Not one human being that I know has joy and peace while at the same time remaining bitter at someone who has hurt them. I can promise you this, you are paying the price for this UN-forgiveness, emotionally, physically and most definitely spiritually. If this describes you today, I want to offer two steps that you can take. First,

read the book *Total Forgiveness* by R.T. Kendall. It absolutely changed my life. I became a different person after reading that book. Second, set up an appointment with one of our counselors. We have their info at our information desk.

Third, **forgive yourself**. Every time you go to take a step forward, do you remind yourself of your past? If Christ has forgiven you, you are forgiven. Since He has forgiven you; forgive yourself. This is an area that the enemy throws in my face all of the time and, to this day, I have to still remind myself, that was the old James. I am forgiven.

People will throw up your past in your face. When this happens, don't put your head down, cower away, or feel the rush of old shame. Instead, recognize that this is your queue to share the gospel, not to retreat.