



Past Hurts & Stolen Joy

by Donald W. Welch, Ph.D., LCMFT

photo: m. emerson

The marriage weekend seminar concluded with a Sunday morning worship service that was underway. It was a sweltering hot Midwestern day with temperatures reaching the high 90s. Before stepping to the pulpit, it was evident that the Holy Spirit was up to something that day... the healing of wounded hearts.

There was no question – prayer around the altar was imminent – the service would conclude with many seeking emotional healing. As several came forward, a couple who had openly struggled during the two-day seminar made their way to the altar. Without hesitating,

Stephen began pouring out his desperate story, asking, “How do I get control of my anger?” He was trapped in a vicious cycle of being unable to manage his anger outbursts. For years, he had attempted without success to rid himself of the bondage of the abuse he suffered during his early childhood years.

As I knelt quietly next to this couple, it didn’t take long to discern that Stephen’s mistreatment and abuse by his family had so inflicted his emotional DNA development that he needed either God’s miraculous touch (a full and complete release from his past –

John 10:10), a therapeutic treatment, or, most likely, a combination of both. Stephen’s pain echoed David Seamands’ provocative words in *Healing for Damaged Emotions*.

“Such scars have been buried in pain for so long that they are causing hurt and rage that are inexplicable. And these scars are not touched by conversion and sanctifying grace, or by the ordinary benefits of prayer. In the rings of our thoughts and emotions, the record is there; the memories are recorded, and all are alive. And they directly and deeply affect our concepts, our feelings,

our relationships. They affect the way we look at life and God, at others and ourselves.”¹ There are many “Stephens” out there desperately asking, “What do I do when my relationship with God doesn’t appear to reduce mental health problems?” Others will say, “No matter how much I seek God’s help, past pain continues to terrorize my relationships.” And many Christians say, “God is at the center of my life, yet chronic depression unsympathetically steals my joy like a burglar in the night.”

What should we do in the midst of all of these defeats? Do we give up praying and seeking God’s healing?

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Should we consider seeking help elsewhere? Absolutely NOT! In all things, we should begin with prayer and end with prayer. We shouldn't lose heart; we must continue seeking Him! God's healing power is available for healing the wounded heart.

Although many people think of mental health issues as being related to specific behaviors or conditions with which only certain people struggle, we may want to consider mental health as a wider concept that includes the emotional and spiritual well-being of us all. If this serves as an adequate approach, what do we do when we feel like emotional wholeness is out

of reach? For example, you pray, you read your Bible, and even fast – making sure your life is right with God. But there is still no healing!

Fortunately, the Bible encourages Godly counsel. For some, this may warrant a formal relationship with a therapist. Couple this with prayer, and you have a dynamic equation for potential and full release from damaged emotions. Nevertheless, we shouldn't mistake therapy as a substitute for God's healing power – it's just that counseling may play a key role in opening up emotionally locked doors, thereby assisting you in embracing God's grace.

Take for instance the following statement: It's biblically sound and therapeutically reasonable to believe that all healing arises from God. Therapeutic tools never supersede God's grace. Even the most dramatic of healings are a gift from God. For example, biomedical (prescription drug) treatments are discoveries and truths that originate from God's healing power.

Therefore, is it reasonable for the church to combine social sciences with spiritual healing? More candidly, should we take another look into how theology and psychology may partner when it comes to our emotional and spiritual well-being? Simply put, is

there room for both fields in our church? I, for one, am in full support of how psychological treatment may assist the local church in increasing our ability to embrace God's incredible grace.

As pastor, former religion professor at one of our Nazarene universities, and current PLNU psychology professor and marriage and family therapist, I find combining theology and psychology very helpful in opening up spiritual and emotional veins of health. Having made this my life's work, I've witnessed the healing power of biblical truths as they are enriched with mental health insights.

My parents are to be thanked in part for this life passion. As a young kid, I remember witnessing my father and mother – two terrific lay leaders in the San Luis Obispo Church of the Nazarene – frequently counseling my dad's college students, couples and neighbors. I can easily remember walking through our kitchen and catching snippets of my parent's counseling discussions. They would actively listen to their friends by giving eye contact, repeating back word-for-word what was being said, and simply reading the Bible and praying with them. This combination of biblical principle application and common sense psychological skill implementation

created opportunities for healing. As the counseling sessions progressed, my parents began addressing the core issues surrounding their friends' problems.

This is the secret and a first step toward health: knowing where the pain is coming from – either as sin or an emotional hurt. Admitting the need for emotional help can open the way to healing (Exodus 20:15). Unfortunately, we may be too quick to shrug off emotional problems, naming them as sin rather than realizing they are past emotional issues that need healing. One way that therapists get at these emotional scars is by carefully

looking at one's genogram, which is a fancy word for family tree. I'm always amazed while guiding a couple through this exercise at how emotional health can be reestablished simply by becoming aware of how learned and perhaps inherited behaviors are strangling the relationship rather than nurturing it.

Most pastors I know tell me that perhaps the church's greatest task is skillfully dealing with difficult people – people who are sick with pain. If we ignore emotional pain and diagnose it as "sin," we may be setting ourselves up for increased relational challenges. However, if we soften sin as just a mistake, we

skew the great work of God. It's very important to be discerning. Sin is sin. It must be dealt with for healthy living. Yet, emotional problems may not necessarily equate to sin. What may be needed is some form of emotional bleeding out of the past – a therapeutic catharsis – where the person finds freedom from the past. Becoming this type of "change breaker" can be one of the more enriching experiences of life.

Never underestimate God's gracious healing. He may choose to utilize both theology and psychology as His means for complete healing. ☺

1 Seamands, D. (1982). *Healing for Damaged Emotions*. Wheaton: Victor Books, p. 12.

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