

Part Three

The Bible and Everyday Experience

Chapter 9

A New History

A Tale of Two Histories

In this chapter we begin to look at the practical implications of the Bible's approach to putting God first. According to the Bible everyone on earth needs a new history. Your history and my history are rooted in Adam. And what kind of history is it? It's a history of failure. It's a history of disgrace. You can white wash it. You can polish it up for everyone to see. But it is embarrassing and disgraceful anyway. And other people usually know that, no matter how cool you try to act.

I remember a situation when I was about 17. A singing group came to my high school from a college I was interested in. The lady who was directing the group had a Ph.D. in music. But I wasn't impressed with the singing group. I didn't think they were all that great. And I was talking to people by the water cooler about how Ph.D.s often lose touch with real life. I was going on about how she wasn't all that hot and so forth. Then I turned away from the water cooler to discover that she was standing right behind me. If you can relate to that, and I suspect you can, your history is just as disgraceful as mine.

When we look at things from the perspective of the Bible we learn that the whole of biblical history is our own personal history as well. 1 Cor 10:1-2: *“For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers, that our forefathers were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea.”*

Although Paul was writing to the Corinthians, who were mostly gentiles, he talks about “our forefathers.” Our history is rooted in Moses and the Exodus. And that means it’s also rooted in Adam and David. It’s rooted in failure and in disgrace.

The story of Old Testament Israel is your story and mine. It’s a history of unfaithfulness. It’s a history of failure. Much of the Old Testament is rated “R,” and there is a reason for that. It is telling the story of the human condition through the one people that might have had reason to boast that they were faithful to God. In the sex and violence of the Bible we see the destructiveness of sin, we can see the consequences of following a path of evil. The Old Testament is the story of your spiritual ancestors and mine. And it’s a story of failure and disgrace.

The good news is that Jesus Christ went over that ground and redeemed it. The stories of the Bible are really about us. Everything Jesus did and said is really about us. When we realize that Jesus purposefully and intentionally lived out the experience of each of those Old Testament characters, we suddenly realize that He is the most important reality in the world. Everything that anyone has ever done is summed up in Him and in His experience. Just as our history is rooted in Adam, so our history is also rooted in Jesus Christ.

2 Corinthians 5 is very clear on this. There is something about the mighty act of God in

Jesus Christ that affects everyone that lives or who ever lived. 2 Cor 5:14-15: *“For Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.”* Think back on everything we have covered in this book so far. All die at the cross because in Jesus Christ the entire human race is represented, the entire human race in reality died there.

“And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him.” By nature we all live for ourselves. We all live to carry on our history, our legacy. But when we get a new legacy, a new history, we live for the One who made that history. If you get a new history in Jesus Christ you do not have to live for your history any more. You don’t have to cover up for those mistakes. You don’t have to hide them, keep secrets and all the rest of that. Your old history is no longer a part of you. It is no longer a threat.

2 Cor 5:17: *“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!”* Do you remember how Jesus is seen as a new creation in the New Testament? In Christ the entire Old Testament is summed up, it all comes together at the cross. But Paul extends the concept to all of us. In Christ we reap that whole history, including His undoing of Old Testament history. When we identify ourselves with Christ, we become a new creation ourselves. In Jesus Christ all of us have an alternative history, a totally different way of looking at reality, a way that is filled with transforming power.

The Power of History

Why is this so important? Because our history tends to program both our present and our future. Let me give you an example. The phrase “digital divide” recognizes that if you live in an inner city “ghetto,” or if you live in a rural area that does not have reliable internet access, you are likely to be much less familiar with the latest technology. What has happened to you in the past determines who you are and what you can become.

Some kids growing up today are computer saturated by the time they are thirteen. Others have never touched a computer. And if knowledge of technology is the key to the best jobs in the next generation, many children are being pre-programmed for either success or failure. There will be children; black, white, Hispanic, and Asian; who because of where they were born will be programmed for a different destiny than those who live ten miles away. According to the Bible, every one of us has a history that history programs us to be what we are today. We can’t just act as if it wasn’t there. The powerful message of the New Testament is that in Jesus Christ we are offered an alternative history. We have a choice. We can take a history that was not ours and apply it to ourselves.

When you are raised on computers, you are a different kid than one who is not. If you are raised in the ghetto, you have different hopes, different dreams, different aspirations than if you are raised in Buckingham Palace. Where you were raised and how you were raised determines a lot about your future. But in Jesus Christ we all have an alternative history. We all have the chance to become a child of the king. That changes everything. If you know that you are the child of the king, your thoughts are different, your hopes and dreams are different, your plans are different, your actions are different. You live in the light of a special legacy.

The usual path to change is to try to become what you are not. The Bible calls this “works righteousness.” “I’m going to be good today, not like yesterday.” In works righteousness you try to become what you are not. The New Testament the path to change, on the other hand, is based on the concept, “Become what you are.” It is recognizing who you are that changes you. When your defining history has changed, when you see Christ overruling your history, you realize that you can become a different person than you were before. You can become what you are!

History and Addiction

This strange way of speaking holds the key to meaningful change. Life is made up of vicious cycles. Most child abusers were abused children first. Most alcoholics have a history of alcohol use somewhere in the family. It’s a vicious cycle from generation to generation. This is the root of addiction. We become what we already are. We are programmed by our family history. And the mistakes that our parents made not only affect us, we pass them on to the generations beyond us.

If you go to a counselor that deals with addictions and ask for the key to positive change, the ultimate answer will be something like this: You’ve got to break the chain of the generations. You have got to break the cycle of addiction. You’ve got to break the link between your past and your future. If you don’t do that you are doomed to be just like your parents. Does something inside of you say, “No way! I’m not like my parents!” In one sense you are right, but in another you are wrong. Let’s take a closer look at the generational pattern of addiction.

Let's say that in the first generation the father is an alcoholic. He comes home at night screaming drunk, bangs through the door and crashes face down on the floor. Let's say that is the last you hear from him until morning. Those are the good days. The bad days are when he comes home awake and starts beating up your mom. And when he is finished with her he takes it out on you. What would go through your mind as a little child? "I will never be like my father. I will never do that." And in one sense that child is probably right.

The problem is that while there is plenty of hatred for alcohol in an alcoholic family, the addiction itself is nevertheless passed on. You grow up with the desperate need for some way to set your life straight, to feel like a person, to balance the pain with some pleasure. So in the next generation that child who will never be like his father may develop a sexual addiction of some kind. The addiction is still there, the pain is still there, the anger is still there, but the drive to feel better is now expressed in a different way.

In the case of sexual addiction the sexual drive may be gratified outside the home, through prostitution or affairs, but all too often it may be gratified inside the home through pornography or even sexual abuse. How do the children feel when they see the consequences that affairs, pornography, and sexual abuse bring into the home? They are devastated. And what do they say to themselves? "I will never be like my father (or mother, or both)!" And they too will be partly right.

So now you come to the third generation. By this time the family members may be sick of alcohol. They may be sick of sexual abuse and so forth. So they manage to bottle up their drives, and "do the right thing" by sheer force of will, but the addiction is still there. The chain has not been broken. So members of the third generation may express themselves through

anger instead. The father and the mother are raging at each other. Raging at the kids.

Addicted to anger. And what are the kids saying? “I will never be like that! Ever!”

Do you know what often happens in the third or fourth generation? “I will never be like my great-grandfather. I will never be like grandpa. I will never be like my father.” Time and again I have found that the fourth generation ends up going into ministry or one of the other helping professions. The thinking goes, “I don’t know how to solve the troubles in my life, but maybe if I go into ministry (or become a counselor, a doctor, a social worker), I will be forced to become a good person. Perhaps in the process of rescuing others I can find healing for myself.” But it turns out that religion and psychology are not the answer either. Abuse and addiction can be even more damaging when clothed in the natural credibility of religious or professional garb.

I realize it is painful to even mention such things, but knowledge is power. You have to know you are hurt before you can be healed. Jesus said, “I did not come for the healthy, I came for those who are sick.” If you do not know you are sick, you are probably not going to go to the doctor. You will spend your life running away from something deep down inside that can’t be fixed. That’s the chain of abuse and dysfunction.

The New History

The only way to break this generational cycle is through a new history. The only way to break this chain is to no longer be a child of your father and mother, but to become a child of God through Jesus Christ. His perfect history becomes your inheritance, straight down from heaven. And from now on you run the race of life with your eyes fixed upon Jesus Christ (Heb

12:1-2).

Paul understood exactly what I am talking about. Notice how he expressed it in Philippians 3: 3-11. This is a long text, but I want you to see it in its full context. I will intersperse brief comments in parentheses: *“For it is we who are the circumcision, we who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh-- though I myself have reasons for such confidence* (Paul actually had a pretty good history, but keep reading). *If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day* (proud of it), *of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin* (awful history-- check out Judges 19-21), *a Hebrew of Hebrews* (awesome); *in regard to the law, a Pharisee* (very good); *as for zeal, persecuting the church* (can’t top that); *as for legalistic righteousness, faultless* (wow, give me a piece of that history). *But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ* (maybe coming to Jesus is hardest for people who are pretty good, and Paul was such a person). *What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ--the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection. . .”*

Paul very clearly teaches the concept of two histories here. There is the old history and there is the new. And no matter how good the old history was, you still have to walk away from it, because the new history is much, much better. It has life-changing power, the power of Jesus’ resurrection. There is no other way to break the power of the past. The crucial

question is, “How do you do this? How do you take hold of the new history?” Paul speaks directly to this in Rom 6:3-14.

Romans 6:3-7: *“Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. If we have been united with him in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection. For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be rendered powerless, that we should no longer be slaves to sin-- because anyone who has died has been freed from sin.”*

Paul here is taking the cosmic, universal thing that happened at the cross, and is applying it to everyday life. This is the transition we also have to make as we apply the gospel to our everyday lives. Paul says that the way to be free from sin, to be free from the old history and the old ways is to die (baptism is the physical illustration of this for him). You get rid of the old history by dying to it. The way to break the chains with the past is to bury the old history and live on the basis of the new one. But how do you do that in everyday experience? How can you die for real and at the same time live a new life? It is critical that we grasp the key to this paradox of the New Testament experience with Jesus.

Rom 6:8: *“Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.”* There are two sides to this. Something is dead and something else comes alive. That's what this new history is all about. The chain to our past history is broken and the new history is activated by relationship with Christ. But perhaps you are thinking, “I thought I did that years ago. I tried that, I've been there, I accepted Jesus Christ and I am still struggling with this stuff.” If you are

thinking that, Paul hasn't overlooked you, see verse 11.

Rom 6:11: *"In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus."* Sometimes we accept the new history we have in Christ. We walk away from the old history. We think it is all buried and done with. And then the old man (or the old lady) pops up out of the grave and starts running your life all over again. Maybe that happens off and on for you every day. What does Paul suggest you do then? Shove him back in. Stuff that old man back in the grave. How? By "counting yourself" dead to sin all over again.

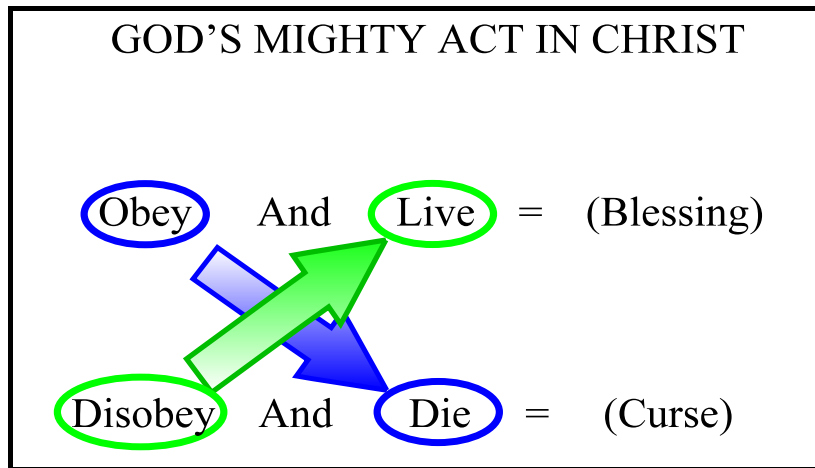
Rom 6:12-14: *"Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness. For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace."*

This is one of the most fantastic, powerful passages in all the Bible. Paul is saying that if sin is your master, you can't change your history. You are caught under the shame and the condemnation of the law. When you feel put down or rejected, every fiber of your being longs to feel better, longs to have a sense of worth. To alter the mood you may reach for chocolate, for alcohol, for a cigarette, or even a sexual plaything. But when you are finished with your "medication" you still realize that nothing has been fixed. The sense of failure and inadequacy is still there.

But if you are under grace, you have a new history in Jesus Christ. At the ultimate center of everything that matters, you are accepted, you are OK, regardless of where you have been or what you have done. The grace and acceptance of God become a mighty work in you

that lifts you up and gives you a fresh start every day. Not because you deserve it, but because God, in His grace, provided it for you in Jesus Christ. It is an act of God just as mighty as the Exodus. And like the Israelites at the Red Sea, you don't have to earn it. When you make mistakes, when the old history rears up its head inside, you can "count yourself" once again dead to sin and alive in Christ. If a part of your body reaches out to do the wrong thing, you can offer that part of your body to God each day. Sin will not be your master when you are living in the grace of God every day. Although there are daily battles to fight, the new history overcomes the old history.

Do you remember the law of Deuteronomy? Obey and live, disobey and die. God respected that law when He sent Jesus. But notice the wonderful thing He has done. Through a mighty act of God an incredible reversal takes place. We have disobeyed, but Jesus Christ has obeyed. Jesus Christ obeys where we failed and then He dies, taking on Himself the curse we deserve. And so His obedience and His death produce life for those who have disobeyed. That is the incredible exchange of histories. He took your history. He took my history. He is the second Adam, the second David, the second Moses. He is also the second Paul. He lived my history. He redeemed my history. As a result I am free to walk in newness of life. Notice this beautiful statement from the pen of Ellen G. White, a favorite author of mine. "Christ was treated as we deserve, that we might be treated as He deserves. He was condemned for our sins, in which He had no share, that we might be justified by His righteousness, in which we had no share. He suffered the death which was ours, that we might receive the life which was His." *Desire of Ages*, page 25.



As we think about this great reversal, a question comes to mind. How is it possible for one person to die and all others to go free? It doesn't seem like an even match somehow. But follow me for a moment. Who is greater, an artist or his/her art? The artist of course. Why? Because the work of art was in the artist's mind long before it was in stone or on canvas. Destroy the art piece and the artist could produce another.

This was brought home to me around 1970 when a fellow wandered into Saint Peter's Cathedral in Rome with a hammer under his jacket. He headed straight for Michaelangelo's Pieta, which some consider the greatest piece of sculpture ever created. It is a magnificent image of Mary holding Jesus in her arms after He died on the cross. The man used his hammer to begin breaking that incredible sculpture apart. After he was wrestled to the ground and taken to jail, they called in the greatest artists of Italy to put the statue back together again. After several weeks of careful work the head of that group of sculptors broke down in tears one day and said, "If only Michaelangelo were here. He would know what to do."

You see, a piece of art was in the artist's mind before it was ever in stone, before it was

ever on canvas. The artist is truly greater than the art. This leads me to a second question.

Who is greater, the Creator or the creation? The Creator, of course. Jesus is greater than the entire universe. Why? Because He created it all. The Gospel of John tells us that not a single thing came into existence apart from Him (John 1:3).

That means that Jesus Himself, the very one who died on the cross, is equal in value to the entire universe. Do you begin to see the value of the cross? When Jesus died on the cross His death was equal in value to the loss of the entire universe. It is equal in value to every sin that was ever committed or ever could be committed. When Jesus died on the cross, He provided a full and complete atonement for the entire universe. That is infinite value.

And when you see the tender care with which Jesus handled children and the outcasts of society, when you read the parable of the Lost Sheep, you realize that Jesus would have chosen to die even if it were just for you or me. That means that the cross assigns infinite value to every human being. And it is that kind of awareness that breaks the back of addiction and dysfunction. We will explore this sense of value more deeply in the next chapter.