

STEPPING INTO A SESSION WITH JAKE

Let us say that Jake's counselor has asked me to come in and work with Jake concerning his tragic and sinful past that is still affecting him today. It would have happened that while sharing the gospel with Jake his counselor would devote a good bit of time addressing the origin and reality of suffering in reference to who God is and what he is doing. We will also assume that for the first time Jake was willing to see God in a different light, and he then responded to the gospel in faith. This clarity and new found faith is a crucial back drop to the work I would do with him about his past. Even though Jake's perspectives have begun to change as a result of salvation, he still struggles a great deal with sorrow, fear and guilt about many things in his past. He is clearly still stuck in it. And, he has habitually learned to handle suffering, sin, memories and flashbacks the wrong way.

As Viars (2011) encourages, I will avoid the wrong perspectives, "the past is everything" and "the past is nothing," and also the imbalanced approaches of "truth only" or "compassion only" in helping Jake with his past. In preparation for this time with Jake, we will say that I met him earlier on in counseling, revealed my role of oversight, worked to connect with him at church, expressed friendship, spent some time with him and sat in on a couple of sessions.

The first task is to gain Jake's willingness to discuss in more detail certain events he has classically tried to escape or forget. Jake will likely have a great deal of anxiety about doing this. By giving him an idea of what we will and won't be doing and by getting him to admit how he has handled the past thus far is neither glorifying to God nor working, he begins to consider the possibility.

Reading with Jake Psalm 119:45 about freedom, Romans 12:2 on true transformation and Psalm 51, Proverbs 28:13 and James 1:9 on dealing with personal sin God's way also helps. Discussing that there is no way to do what these verses talk about, without giving the facts, facing reality and bringing God's truth to bear in a specific way, seems to make sense to Jake. I explain that we will not be seeking to relive experiences, as if there are healing benefits to doing so—there is not. I assure Jake that we will only discuss things enough to get the facts, to see each event and each response for what they are from God's perspective and to determine God's help and God's way of proceeding. I tell him that if very difficult memories or flash backs arise in our discussion, we will stop and pray and I will help him with his run-away mind, speaking reality and truth to him. Much compassion will be shown to Jake. He has had a difficult time for sure and so he will need the assurance that the Spirit of God will help him (Phil 2:12-13). Spending time on God's promise of His all sufficient grace and power to do what is right helps Jake to relax even more (2Cor 9:8; 2Cor 12:7-10; Phil 4:13).

Asking Jake point-blank if he is willing to do what his Savior wants to deal with truly lay to rest his past God's way helps him to finally pray and ask God for help as we begin. Then Jake voices, "I don't know how to talk about something that is such a big fat mess and a ball of scary confusion to me." Acknowledging this as

a valid problem, I commit to guide him through his story with clear questions and then to help him look at all of it with more clarity and biblically.

We look at Psalm 119:59 on why it is necessary to contemplate our ways, but also talk about the different kinds of past we could biblically divide his into. From here we might use the Sorting Through the Past bucket diagram (Viars 2011) to help us to chronologically place each event, his suffering, hurtful sins against him and sin of his own into separate categories or buckets.¹ In using it, we determine what in his past should be seen as his fully innocent suffering (circumstances out of his control or sins by others). We outline what is innocent suffering mixed with his own sin or sinful responses and clarify what is just his sin but has been confessed, dealt with and repented of. And we outline what is still his guilty past that has not been dealt with yet. This worksheet also helps us to visually divide Jake's past into good responses and poor responses, another distinction that God wants him to make in order to make changes that glorify Him. On this diagram there is also information indicating that there are things that he can and should do about his various past to resolve them God's way, know God's comfort and move toward freedom (Jn 8:31-32). While walking through Jake's past, we have to stop several times to pray when Jake becomes overwhelmed.

Jake's different kinds of past will be dealt with one by one in sessions to come in hopeful and practical ways, using principles from God's word. Once this initial work of sorting the past has taken place, it will allow Jake to clear his own conscience through confession and making things right with others he has sinned against. I call Jake to trust God's wisdom and to personally purpose to deal with each past hurt, sin and event His way. Before continuing on, we stop and I give Jake opportunity to confess anything He would like to God, and to ask for his help dealing with each bucket, and for help to begin changing his responses.

Overall in our discussion, it became apparent that much of Jake's sorrow and turmoil flows out of his disappointment and confusion about those who should have loved him better. The more he talked; his sorrow turned to bitterness that he knows is destroying him. Hopelessness then arose as a result of his belief that his past and hurt will never go away, and yet, he cannot seem to live with it. From there his thought processes landed on the belief that he will never be happy or "normal" and that he will never amount to anything, especially for God.

Jake can see that many of his very wrong choices have been fueled by his ruling desire for human recognition, attention, acceptance and love. He also is recognized that his "inability" or unwillingness to experience pain or fear is a major player in why he has chosen certain sinful paths and why he turns to drugs and alcohol. With contemplation, Jake clearly takes on the victim mentality and resorts to self-pity, which begins to spiral him into even deeper despair—that is, until God's truth and promises are brought in and specifically applied for him.

¹My adaptation of Steve Viars' *Sorting Through the Past diagram* is found at stuartscott.org. Steve Viars' version is found in his book, *Putting the Past in Its Place* (Viars, 2011).

At one point in the session, I begin to help Jake do just that that by applying the gospel to the struggle he now has to believe that things can be different. I draw for him a line with a beginning point and an arrow at the other end that represents his life. We then place a strong dividing line at the place that represents his coming to Christ and place a cross there. Using 2 Corinthians 5:17-31 we talk through in what ways he is a new person, the new life he has been given, his new kind of heart—alive to God, with new power to change. We talk about his new identity by God's adoption forever and a new righteous standing in Christ, no longer under God's condemnation. I show Jake that with true conversion there is no way a person can ever be the same again, not in total. And, that now he is given a new life to grow into and a new sure destiny (Col 1:9-14; 3:1-4). I remind Jake that there is hope in believing what God says and by getting his focus on what God is asking him to do now.

Jake's key thoughts and heart responses that come out of our discussion are extremely important to note and address later with God's truth and applicable homework. I share my confidence (based on the Word of God) that as Jake begins to really trust God and handle the past his way, God will be there to assist him, he (Jake) will become more and more hopeful and he will bring glory to God. But for the time being, I remind Jake that his main focus should be to call on God's help as he purposes to take troubling and God-void thoughts and memories captive and speak truth to his heart. As God's Word promises, the truth shall help sanctify Jake as he chooses to turn to God with it over and over. I can show him how this is true with even ingrained patterns by going over the Changing Ingrained Thought Patterns diagram with him (stuartscott.org). This shows how he can lessen old patterns by creating new ones as he faithfully turns to God's truth and promises when it counts (Ps 119:45).

In a previous session, Jake's counselor would have discussed with Jake specifically how to begin handling his anxieties and wrong thought patterns. He would have shown him the *Renewing a Thought work sheet* (stuartscott.org) that is based on Philippians 4:6-9. With it he would have explained the put-off/put-on principle from Ephesians 4. For homework, he would have assigned someone to help Jake appropriate these principles by isolating a few of his most troubling memories or thoughts and begin working on one or two of them with the Phil 4:6-9 framework. The task would begin with specific thankfulness (focusing on God and/or his help) and Prayer. Then they would take the thought or memory to task with the Scriptures, gaining hope and a different focus (on God and what is real and true). Next, Jake would be guided to confess his wrong thinking and/or accompanying beliefs to God and commit to turning and speaking truth to his heart when it arises again in the future (Psalm 15:2). The final two steps are to craft a new thought and determine new actions in keeping with God's truth that was learned and embraced.

The *Renewing a Thought Worksheet* will be a great help in doing these Phil 4:6-9 things with the thoughts, memories and flashbacks associated with Jake's past. The fruit of it will assist Jake on the spot to think about specific events more truthfully and hopefully, turning to who God is, to what he promises and to what a Godly perspective would be. This will be possible because the renewing work will eventually supply concise new thoughts and verses readily available on index cards for future help and review. Jake's counselor will have to remind him often that God will give Jake the grace he needs to do this relearning and that it will be a process (Heb 4:14-16; 2 Cor 9:8). At times he will fail or the progress may seem slow. Dependence on Christ and perseverance will be key and must be often reiterated. However, if Jake really grabs on to the Philippians 4:6-9 and Ephesians 4 principles for dealing with his past, he can begin to rather quickly experience more peace and to please the Lord more with his thoughts and actions.

I move toward the end of our time together by cautioning Jake that the God-honoring work of renewing his mind is always a spiritual battle, in which he can choose to pray and fight calling on the power of Christ in him (2 Cor 10:3-5). He is also encouraged to allow the Body of Christ (the church) to assist him. It would not be uncommon for Jake to need an extra roommate or homework assistant help in actual times of anxiety, anger or sorrow during the time we are working through the past. Jake must know that they stand ready to help by praying with him and helping him to corral his thoughts and speak truth to his heart as he begins to handle things differently.

As Jake depends on Christ and pushes through fears and flashbacks with new faith, new thoughts and thankfulness, he will come to know a freedom from his past he has never known. I give Jake the homework of memorizing 2 Corinthians 10:3-5), reading *The Victim Mentality*,² and listening to the CD *How to respond to Rejection and Hurt by Wayne Mack*³. I also assign him two of his recent thoughts to renew with his homework helper. Our time is ended with prayer that is full of hope and reiterating commitments.

After our session together, Jake's primary counselor can continue to do the appropriate thing with each item in each bucket we filled and continue work on any sinful and detrimental responses like hopelessness, worry, fear, anger, bitterness, self-destruction and the approval of others. As Jake depends on Christ and follows through, the past will lessen in its dominant role and even become a source of thankfulness and usefulness in Jake's life and ministry (Rom 8:28-29).

² Can be found at oneeightycounseling.com

³ Can be found at noutheticmedia.com