

What Missionaries Ought to Know about Healing of Memories

You may have had a difficult experience at some time in your life and its effects are still with you. This may have been something that was apparent to others present, such as physical or verbal abuse in your family. It may have been hurt that no one else realized, such as being laughed at for your answer in first grade. Sometimes people need God's spirit to bring healing to these damaged emotions, healing of memories.

The story of Joseph, a third culture kid and cross-cultural worker, is found in the last ten chapters of Genesis. As a teenager his jealous brothers hated him so much they couldn't even say a kind word to him, they plotted to kill him, and they actually sold him into slavery. The emotional baggage from these experiences was apparent in chapters 42, 43, and 45 where Joseph was unable to control his weeping when he saw those brothers decades later.

You may have experienced similar things at some time in your life, and the emotions related to them still influence you years later. You may have prayed about the situation and tried to forget about it, but the feelings are still there—the emotional part of forgiveness has not taken place.

Following are steps that can lead to healing of these memories. God does not give you amnesia about the events; however, he can remove the damaged emotions the memories arouse. You may be able to walk through these steps yourself, or you may find it helpful to have someone else guide you through them as a friend.

Thank God for gifts given.

The first step is to thank God for the gifts he has given you. This is not an ego trip or bragging. It is simply a matter of recognizing that God has blessed you with good things in life. He may have given you athletic ability so that you can kick or throw a ball more accurately than others. He may have given you intellectual capacity to grasp abstract concepts that most other people cannot understand. He may have given you musical talent for a particular instrument or a voice that can sing beautifully. He may have given you a face that others in your culture see as beautiful or handsome. He may have given you a personality that others like to be around or the ability to relate so well that people want to be your friend. The list goes on and on.

When talking with his brothers more than two decades after they had mistreated him (Genesis 45), Joseph pointed out that God had sent him on ahead to save their lives. He noted that God had made him “father to Pharaoh, lord of his entire household, and ruler of all Egypt.” He said to tell their father about the honor given to him in Egypt. These were not boasting, just statements of fact. He told his brothers not to be angry with themselves because God used what they did for good in his life—and in theirs.

Think of yourself made in God's image and thank him for making you. If you are going through these steps alone, it is best to actually write down the good things God has given you.

If someone is there with you, talk about gifts together and rejoice in what God has given. People with the severest damage to their emotions may be the ones who most need someone else with them. These others

may be able to identify gifts or blessings taken for granted—overlooked because the person is so focused on the damage.

Ask God about healing.

The second step is to ask God what he wants to heal in you. Sometimes we want to be healed just to have fewer tensions or to live up to what someone else expects of us. Our motivation must be to become more like Christ, and we want to be sure that we really want to be healed—regardless of what other people think.

Sometimes God seems to delay the time of healing. Although Joseph was in charge of the prison, he still wanted to get out (Genesis 40). After he interpreted the dream Joseph asked the cupbearer to mention him to the Pharaoh when things improved. The cupbearer forgot—and Joseph waited two more years.

Sometimes God does not heal. Paul, another cross-cultural worker, asked God for something three times, and God never removed the “thorn in the flesh.” God just told Paul that his grace was enough—that God's power was made complete without removing the thorn (2 Corinthians 12).

Share the memory with God.

The third step is to share the memory with God, the painful memory that keeps you from being healed. Rather than concentrating on the current problem such as fear of people (because you were abused as a child) or difficulty speaking in public (because you were laughed at in first grade), go back to the memory of the original event causing the problem.

We have no record of Joseph doing this, but he certainly could have done so. He had those memories available as we can see in his comments to the cupbearer (Genesis 40), “For I was forcibly carried off from the land of the Hebrews, and even here I have done nothing to deserve being put in a dungeon.”

Paul had had many painful memories, such as being beaten, stoned, and shipwrecked, and he shared not only with God but with believers in the church in the chapter just before he wrote about God's grace being sufficient (2 Corinthians 11).

When you share that memory with God, the emotions associated with it will be aroused again. This is to be expected. Remember that you are looking for the healing of these damaged emotions. They have to be brought to the surface again even though the experience is painful.

Replace the hurt with love.

The fourth step is to replace the hurt with love by forgiving those involved in the painful memory as God would forgive them. Even though the people causing that hurt may no longer be alive, you must forgive them unconditionally—not dependent on the other person's changing and becoming worthy. When you do this, you can focus not on the hurt, but on change and growth.

By the time he revealed who he was (to his brothers) 22 years after they hurt him, Joseph had forgiven them. He told them not to be distressed and angry with themselves (Genesis 45). Seventeen years later (39 years after the offense), at the death of their father, his brothers still thought that Joseph had not really forgiven them, and they asked for his forgiveness. Joseph wept as he realized they had still not accepted his forgiveness.

Showing that he had replaced the hurt with love, he reassured them and spoke kindly to them. He told them not to be afraid, that he would provide for them and their children (Genesis 50).

Replacing the hurt with love requires both deciding with your mind to forgive and letting God help you with the emotional part of forgiveness—healing damaged emotions. This is not “forgive and forget.” The memory remains, but the associated emotion changes and does not affect your thoughts and actions.

Become thankful for the memory.

The fifth step is to become thankful for that painful memory. Because you believe that all things work together for good, now is the time to look for the good in this situation. For example, your abuse as a child may have made you particularly compassionate toward other abused children and made you very effective in helping them. Or being laughed at in first grade and your not speaking in public may have encouraged you to develop other methods of communication, such as writing or painting.

Joseph did this when he revealed himself to his brothers. He pointed out that God had used their hurtful act to save lives, to preserve their family (Genesis 45). He reiterated this seventeen years later when he told them, “You intended to harm me, but God intended it to save our lives” (Genesis 50). If they had not sold him into slavery, they all (including him) would have died along with thousands of others in the famine in that part of the world.

This thankfulness is what Paul wrote about in 1 Thessalonians 5 where he said, “Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.” We can

do this with joy not only because it is God’s will, but also because we know that he works for good in all things.

Thank God for healing.

Finally, you thank God for healing and go ahead acting as the healed person you are. Remember that the healing is from God, and we accept it by faith. When God has given you this gift, you can go out and pass it on to others while keeping it yourself. Since he has set you free, you can help to set others free, setting in motion grace and love to everyone.

When sending out the twelve their first time to spread the good news, Jesus said, “Freely you have received, freely give” (Matthew 10:8). The root word for “gift” appears three times in this statement so that it literally says, “Giftwise you have received, giftwise give.” Since you have received this wonderful gift, you can go out and give it to others.

Conclusion

Some, or all, of these steps may need to be repeated as other memories surface. The Spirit may bring some of these up at unexpected times, and God stands ready to heal.

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