Skeletons in the Closet

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43
44
45
46
47
48

15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
25
26
27
34
35
40
39
41
36
42
37
49
50
52
53
54
55
56
51
57
58
59
46
60
61
62
63
64
65
66
67
68

CONTENTS

LESSON 1

DEFINE IT

09 Study Guide

19 Devotion 1: Forty-Six

21 Devotion 2: Light Switch

23 Devotion 3: My Defining Moment

25 Devotion 4: Long-Term Memory

27 Devotion 5: To Know Him is to Love Him

31 Devotion 6: The Making of a Gathering Pastor

LESSON 2

FORGET IT

35 Study Guide

43 Devotion 1: Set It and Forget It

45 Devotion 2: Forget the Past

49 Devotion 3: Stop Hiding

51 Devotion 4: Living Water

53 Devotion 5: Mind Your Mind

55 Devotion 6: Who I Used to Be

LESSON 3

REMEMBER IT

59 Study Guide

69 Devotion 1: Hakuna Matata

71 Devotion 2: The Past Passed

73 Devotion 3: Climb Every Mountain

75 Devotion 4: Five-Year-Old

77 Devotion 5: Timehop

79 Devotion 6: Extreme Measures

LESSON 4

STAND ON IT

83 Study Guide

89 Devotion 1: Own It

91 Devotion 2: Stand On It...Or Not

95 Devotion 3: Amazing Grace

97 Devotion 4: Running the Race

99 Devotion 5: Chaplain Award

101 Devotion 6: Seven and One Half

15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
25
26
27
34
35
40
39
41
36
42
37
49
50
52
53
54
55
56
51
57
58
59
46
60
61
62
63
64
65
66
67
68

PREFACE

John chapter four introduces us to the Samaritan woman (a.k.a. the woman at the well, and probably a host of other phrases that should not be put in print). She went alone to draw water just like any other day. However, something happened. That day she met Jesus. That day changed her life. Jesus revealed her past and redeemed her future.

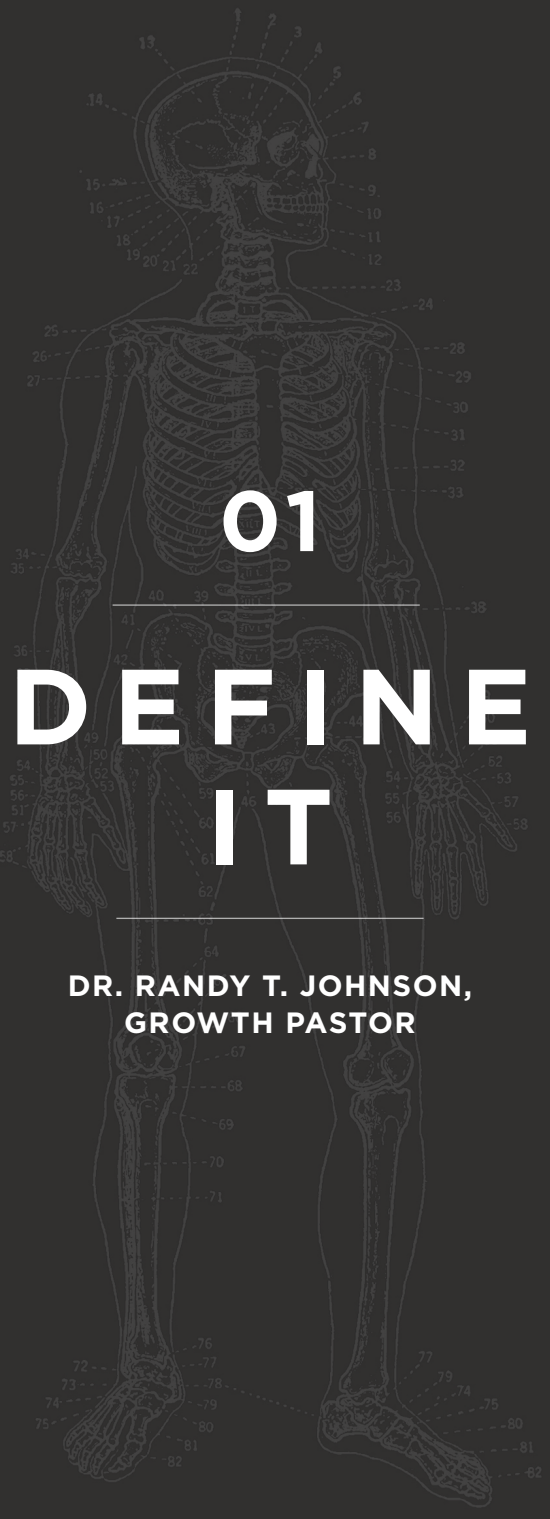
Phillips Brooks describes the process well, “The only way to get rid of your past is to make a future out of it. God will waste nothing.” Your past has helped develop who you are today. That can be negative or positive. The decision is yours.

Skeletons in the Closet covers four basic sections concerning what to do with your past:

- **Define It**
- **Forget It**
- **Remember It**
- **Stand On It**

Skeletons in the Closet consists of four study guides for personal or group discussion and twenty-four devotions to help you peek back at your past and watch God use it for good.

“Leave the broken, irreversible past in God’s hands, and step out into the invincible future with Him.” Oswald Chambers



01

DEFINE IT

DR. RANDY T. JOHNSON,
GROWTH PASTOR

I love to see or experience an Aha moment! Oprah Winfrey describes it this way, "I always love those moments when I sit down to talk to somebody and they say something that makes me look at life or a situation in a completely different way, and I say, 'Aha! I get it!' Light bulb...and the little hairs on your arm stand up. That is an Aha moment."

US Weekly reported that Oprah Winfrey used the phrase so much that the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* (2012 edition) added the expression by defining it as "a moment of sudden realization, inspiration, insight, recognition, or comprehension."

What kind of Aha moments have you had?

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John chapter 14 records the story of Jesus talking with the woman at the well. The story has several twists as Jesus goes out of His way to talk with not only a Samaritan but a woman. He regularly created Aha moments.

John 4:1-6 says, ***"Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John (although Jesus himself did not baptize, but only his disciples), he left Judea and departed again for Galilee. And he had to pass through Samaria. So he came to a town of Samaria called Sychar, near the field that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there; so Jesus, wearied as he was from his journey, was sitting beside the well. It was about the sixth hour."***

Did Jesus "have" to pass through Samaria? Why and why not?

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It was the sixth hour (noon). It was the middle of the day. It was the chore of the women to go to the well and get water for their family. Because of the heat of the day, the women would not put this chore off until later in the day. It was a morning task. Only a woman who was an outcast would be at the well at the sixth hour.

This woman had a history. She had skeletons in the closet. She was not too different from all of us. She had chapters in her autobiography that she did not want others to read. She, like us, had a "past." Like her, one of the first things we need to do is to recognize our need.

1. Recognize the need.

Jews did not respect Samaritans; men viewed women as less valuable. However, Jesus was different. He loved and loves everyone. He went to a Samaritan woman. Actually, the story shows her resume is even less honorable than was first expected.

Before someone can be saved, they need to know they are lost. Jesus went out of His way to meet with the Samaritan woman at the well. He did not preach or speak down to her. He used an object lesson and thoughtful questions to help her realize that she had a need.

John 4:7-15 says, ***"A woman from Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, 'Give me a drink.' (For his disciples had gone away into the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, 'How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman***

of Samaria?' (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, 'If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.' The woman said to him, 'Sir, you have nothing to draw water with, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob? He gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock.' Jesus said to her, 'Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.' The woman said to him, 'Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water.'"

In the object lesson, what did "thirsty" represent?

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In the object lesson, what did "the water" represent?

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What was the woman at the well's need?

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What do you think of when you see the phrase ***"gift of God?"***

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Who are the “Samaritan women” of today or in your life?

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Jesus gently approached the woman. It appeared He had a physical need for water, but actually she was spiritually trying to survive in a desert. Her thirst was so subtle until Jesus pointed out her need.

It is not enough to recognize the need or realize we have a problem. We need to find a solution. What is the cure for this disease? What can quench the thirst?

2. Realize the solution.

Once Jesus helped the woman admit that she had a need, He directed her to the solution. Jesus was and is the solution. In the process, He shows that He is the Messiah and God.

John 4:16-26 says, ***“Jesus said to her, ‘Go, call your husband, and come here.’ The woman answered him, ‘I have no husband.’ Jesus said to her, ‘You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’; for you have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband. What you have said is true.’ The woman said to him, ‘Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship.’ Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship***

him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.' The woman said to him, 'I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ). When he comes, he will tell us all things.' Jesus said to her, 'I who speak to you am he.'"

How did the woman respond to Jesus mentioning her past?

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How would the woman think Jesus knew of her marital history?

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How would the woman know of the promised Messiah?

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Because Jesus is God, He knew and knows all things (omniscient). The same situation happened with Nathanael. When Philip came to him stating that "Jesus of Nazareth" might be the Messiah, Nathanael gave the famous line, ***"Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"*** He then went to see Jesus. John 1:47-49 explains what happened next, ***"Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and said of him, 'Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!' Nathanael said to him, 'How do you know me?' Jesus answered him, 'Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.' Nathanael answered him, 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!'"*** The only way Jesus could have known what happened to Nathanael was if He was God (knowing all things). Nathanael knew it, and it was his Aha moment.

Likewise, the woman at the well was amazed that Jesus knew her history; it was her Aha moment.

3. Act upon the decision.

The woman recognized her need, realized the solution was standing right in front of her, and then acted upon her decision. Sin brought the thirst that could only be quenched by the Good News that the Messiah had come. That belief needed her to put on some scandals and take some action.

John 4:27-30 says what she did next, ***"Just then his disciples came back. They marveled that he was talking with a woman, but no one said, 'What do you seek?' or, 'Why are you talking with her?' So the woman left her water jar and went away into town and said to the people, 'Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?' They went out of the town and were coming to him."***

Why did the disciples marvel that Jesus was talking with a Samaritan woman?

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Why do you think John pointed out that ***"the woman left her water jar"*** when she went away?

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How did she use her story to point others to the Christ?

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It is interesting that we do not know the name of the woman at the well. Her name is not important because she represents every person. We all are born with a void in our life; we have a problem. Nothing can fill the void; it can only be filled with a person who is Jesus Christ. Once the problem and solution are acknowledged, an action is required. Knowing the truth is not enough.

Do you have an Aha moment with Jesus?

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Describe your Aha moment.

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Dan Delzell said, “No one knows God simply by virtue of being alive. It takes an ‘Aha’ moment so to speak. It requires divine revelation, which brings about an understanding of grace and salvation. This is how a person is welcomed into the family of God. So have you had your Aha moment with God, or not? I didn’t ask if you are religious, or if you experience spiritual longings and some measure of inner peace. Those realities are felt by multitudes of people whether they have had their Aha moment or not. It’s the difference between relying upon Christ’s death on the cross, versus striving to make yourself acceptable to your Creator by your own deeds. Before our Aha moment, we are clueless about what ‘grace’ really means. There is a

spiritual fog of sorts which clouds our thinking in the area of religion. We still think of good religion as man's attempts to earn God's approval. One way to sort through it is to imagine what you would say if God asked you why you should get into heaven. If you point to your efforts as the basis for your entrance, then it doesn't sound like you have had your Aha moment. Without spiritual conversion, all man can do is try to act religious. But that common approach won't connect you to God…Only Christ provides eternal victory for immortal souls. And only the Holy Spirit can produce your Aha moment."

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FORTY-SIX

DEFINE IT, DEVOTION 1

Roger Allen | *Recovery Director*

"As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy.'" 1 Peter 1:14-16

My salvation story came later in life than most. Saved at the age of forty-six, the change in my life was profound. Clearing the junk that had accumulated through the years of selfishness and vain pursuits, clearly paid dividends. To many (including myself), the transformation was credible. The change in my life opened the eyes of many around me. It did not matter if you believed or not, there was something different about me now. Many that I had known for years wondered when it would wear off. Others wanted to know more of the exciting change they saw within me. In front of them, they had the transformation they themselves sought. It was an exciting time.

A few years later, I realized there was a change in how I responded to the things of God. I was serving faithfully in the church and still attending Bible studies, but something was not quite right. I seemed to have lost the joy that was constant when I first believed. Disturbed by what was happening, I sought answers through Pastors and other leaders in the Church. Swayed by the emotion of "not feeling" as if my eternity was secured, I was becoming lukewarm. I was going through the motions with no conviction or enthusiasm. Prayer seemed difficult at best.

Then one Sunday, the Pastor was speaking on forgiveness from those you had hurt. I needed to lay it on the table, bare your soul,

and ask for forgiveness. Wrestling with God, I refused to obey. To disclose my past as an unsaved man was more than I was willing to do. I had too much to lose. The world would never understand. I wrestled for days on my decision whether I would be obedient to Him. My emotions overwhelmed me as I became a defeated man. I was broken. I finally relented to the Holy Spirit's urging. This was the beginning of my search for His holiness and my obedience.

It has been over seven years since that day, and I look back in awe of what Christ did for me. The illumination of God's will in my life to be obedient has forever changed the course of my life. The desire to seek His holiness has impacted not only myself but those around me. Dr. Richard J. Krejcir wrote in *"The Holiness of God"* (an article from *Church Leadership*) that,

"God calls us, not to conform to the world, but to Him. This requires conviction, and the willingness to peruse through difficult times and people who have opposing ideas. We do this because we desire to because of what He has done for us, not because we feel obligated, or forced. Holiness is also a trust that many do not see, a trust that He is there, and that we can have comfort and confidence in Him in all aspects of life. Otherwise, we remain chained to the despair of loneliness and self-destruction."

Romans 8:28 says, ***"And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose."***

Having trust is a game changer!

LIGHT SWITCH

DEFINE IT, DEVOTION 2

Isaiah Combs | *Worship Leader*

I like to say, "My life was the church and the church was my life when I was a kid." If the doors of the church building were open, my family and I were there. I even lived across the street from the church for a few years. I believe wholeheartedly that I was saved when I was five years old in that church. My Dad lead me to Jesus in his office which has since been ripped out to make room for nursery improvements. Most of my good and bad memories as a kid happened at that church. I would go through the motions and get involved because it was the only thing I knew.

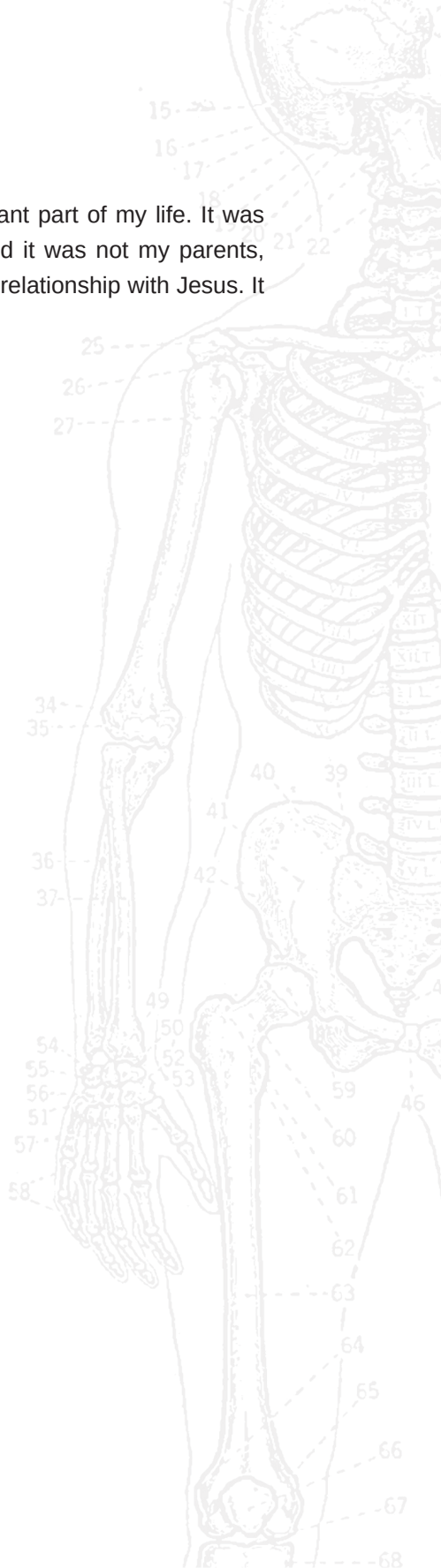
However, it does not matter how you grow up or how great your parents are. You still have to have your own personal relationship with Jesus. I call this finding your own Jesus.

Through my teen years, like most kids, I was rebellious, and when I finally got my chance, I ran from God. At 18 years old, I joined the Air Force and went to figure life out on my own. Even though I knew I was saved, I still was not living the life that God had for me.

It took eight years for me to finally see the light. I was 26 years old when I finally gave in to God and stopped running. I call it my Jonah moment. I was in the belly of the great fish on my knees finally giving myself fully to God and what He had for me. I found my own Jesus. I found out what His love, forgiveness, grace, and mercy meant to me.

The great fish spit me up on the shore, and I ran to my Nineveh. I have not looked back since. I promised God that I would go back home and do anything I could to serve Him and to be used by Him.

Finding my own Jesus was a very important part of my life. It was my “Light Switch” moment when I realized it was not my parents, brothers, grandparents, or anybody else’s relationship with Jesus. It was mine.



MY DEFINING MOMENT

DEFINE IT, DEVOTION 3

Debbie Gabbara | *Assistant to the Gathering Pastor*

I had been running from God for a long time. Although it was 28 years ago, I remember it like it was yesterday. It was a long slow drive home from work on a snowy night in February. I worked in an office during the week and then worked at our business on the weekend. I was newly married, and our blended family gave us five kids. The kids were always fighting, and we were always fighting about the kids. The "happily ever after" was not all that happy for any of us.

It was on my mind to go to church that Sunday. Maybe that would help. But I was already tired, so like I had been doing for way too long, I reminded myself how busy my life was and told myself that I deserved at least one day to sleep in for as long as the kids would allow. The radio was on in the car, and I was wandering through the stations. "Jesus rose from the grave, and you, you can't even get out of bed." All of a sudden, my thoughts were jolted by the words coming from the radio.

It had been a very long time since I had knelt at the altar in a little church and asked Jesus to come into my heart. I know without a doubt that Jesus came into my life that day. His love flooded my heart and soul. But somehow I had spent ten years living my life without giving Jesus much thought, and I was a wreck.

The slow-moving traffic kept me crawling along for what seemed like forever. I could not get the words to that song to stop running through my head. "Jesus rose from the grave, and you, you can't even get out of bed."

The song was called, “Asleep in the Light.” As a girl, I had invited the Light of the World to come into my heart, yet I had been “asleep” and ignored God for years. Suddenly, I could not live without Him another minute. I pulled my car into a parking lot and begged the Lord to forgive me and let me come back to Him. I made a mess of my life on my own, and I needed Him desperately. I found Jesus again that night. It was real, personal, and the most powerful overwhelming presence of God I have ever known. I had given my heart to Jesus when I was a little girl; I gave Him my life that snowy night in February.

My life was forever changed that night. I was rescued by a Savior that had never stopped loving me. My family was still a broken mess, but I was determined to walk with Jesus. With Him, we had a chance to make it.

We went to church that Sunday, I took my children and began to pray for my husband. My family needed to learn about Jesus. He is the only one who can save us from our sins and redeem our lives. I wanted them to experience God’s forgiveness, steadfast love, and faithfulness. God was there; He had always been there, waiting for me to let Him be a part of my life.

“For you, O Lord, are good and forgiving, abounding in steadfast love to all who call upon you.” Psalm 86:5

LONG-TERM MEMORY

DEFINE IT, DEVOTION 4

Richie Henson | *Production Director*

Each day, our brains are flooded with mounds of new and differing information. Some of it is sensory, like all the cars, trees, and the buildings we see while driving. Others are more intellectual in nature, new ideas we come across while reading or skills we develop through training or conversation. No matter how "busy" you feel on a given day, there is no doubt that your brain is under constant bombardment. I think that is why God designed long-term memory the way He did. As part of God's great design, our brains consolidate information we receive during the day and items that are repeated multiple times make their way into our long-term memory. Our brains preserve these memories and store them throughout our brain ready to be recalled when the time comes. This is an amazing function that God has placed in us, but like most things in this fallen world, it can be a stumbling block in our walk with God.

I grew up in the church, but my relationship with Jesus did not become my own until I was 17. Since that time, I have been trying my best to lay down my life and pursue the purpose God has for me. However, there are days when all I can think about are memories of my past life that plague me. There was a time in my life when I was full of hatred, and I took it out on everyone around me. I remember fights at school or with my parents that got out of hand. It makes me wonder if I can ever be the person God wants me to be. It makes it hard to feel that I could ever change.

I think the woman at the well probably lived this experience. Jesus called out the sin she was living in so that she could understand her need for Jesus to save her. I believe the woman at the well got saved,

but I also know that her long-term memory was filled with actions she could never take back. It can be a struggle to live in the present when your memory banks are filled with the regrets of your past.

I believe Paul is a prime example of someone who worked to combat this. He was haunted by a recent past full of hatred towards Christians, but he was able to overcome his past by the power of God to be the greatest leader of the early church. Paul gives us a glimpse into how he did this in Philippians 3:13, ***"Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead."*** Our brains are designed to remember the big events from our lives. There are times where this can be painful as we consider our poor choices and actions. However, Jesus did not save us to live in our past, and He saved us to strain forward to what lies ahead. Your past is exactly that, past. I pray we all would work to leave it there.

TO KNOW HIM IS TO LOVE HIM

DEFINE IT, DEVOTION 5

Holly Boston | *Women's Director*

Take a few minutes and read John 4:1-45. In this story we find a Samaritan woman performing an ordinary task, and she ends up having an extraordinary encounter with Jesus. She goes to a well to draw the water she needs for the day and enters into a conversation in which Jesus offers her ***"living water"*** (verse 10) that will satisfy her thirst completely. Ultimately, this unlikely woman receives Christ, becomes God's vessel for the Gospel, and is used to transform many in her town (verse 41).

There are many truths taught from this one story: salvation is for all, Jesus knows our past and still loves us, Jesus meets us where we are, and too many are looking for love in all the wrong places. As I look back at my own story, I realize I have a lot in common with this lady, and I have drawn my own truth from it: to know Jesus is to love Jesus.

This lady was an unlikely recipient of an encounter with Jesus, let alone His gift. Jewish men were not to be seen or to associate with Samaritan women. Samaritans were treated with prejudice and disdain because they were the product of intermarriage between Jews and Gentiles. Jewish people avoided passing through Samaria, but Jesus did not. I was also an unlikely recipient of an encounter with Jesus having been raised in a non-Christian environment and never having heard of Jesus' life and sacrifice for me. But the most striking commonality between this woman and myself is a lack of understanding, stemming from a wrong perspective.

After Jesus offers the woman ***"living water,"*** she responds with these words, ***"Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water"*** (John 4:15). She did not get it! Jesus was offering the ***"living water"*** that would completely quench her spiritual thirst and meet every need she would ever have. She was focused on her worldly, physical needs and Jesus was focused on eternity and the condition of her soul.

In 1995, I met Jesus and received His gift of eternal life. The cares and struggles of this life had broken me, and I needed to be saved. My parents had just divorced, and my own marriage was not the heavenly union I expected. This anxious, controlling woman was becoming more anxious and realizing how little control she really had. Meeting Christ was followed by three years that were riddled with heartbreak and struggle: job loss, home loss, health problems, and a child diagnosed with Autism. In 1999, I called my sister and told her that if this was life with Christ, I am out. Where was Jesus who loves me and would never leave me? How could Jesus offer me rest and peace, take control of my life, and then allow such pain? Two minutes later my brother-in-law called and said: "I do not understand. You gave your life to Christ, and now you are ready to walk away and do not even know Him." He was right. I received Christ and then continued attending my church, which was steeped in legalistic ritual and absent of any instruction on the Word of God.

I immediately enrolled in a Bible study and began to learn the truth about my Savior. I expected Jesus to end my struggles but Scripture says, ***"Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds"*** (James 1:2). He goes on to say, ***"For you know the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing"*** (James 1:2-4). I was stunned to learn that my pain was actually part of His plan and allowed for the

purpose of transforming me. These truths were only palatable when I learned His promises:

"I will never leave you nor forsake you." Hebrews 13:5

"And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus." Philippians 4:19

When I was led by misconceptions and half-truths about my Savior, I felt angry and abandoned. With the understanding I have received from studying His Word and walking with Him, my relationship has grown, and my love for Jesus has deepened. I love Him because He first loved me!

THE MAKING OF A GATHERING PASTOR

DEFINE IT, DEVOTION 6

Caleb Combs | *Gathering Pastor*

"Trust in the Lord with all your heart, And lean not on your own understanding; In all your ways acknowledge Him, And He shall direct your paths." Proverbs 3:5-6 (NKJV)

I have had many "Aha" moments in my life when it comes to my walk with Christ. I think one of the most monumental was watching God direct my path in the ways He wanted me to go, once I finally gave in and let Him. In 2006, I was a 22-year-old newly married immature kid who did not know what I was doing with my life. I had just taken a sales job across the country and decided to move with my wife to a place where we knew no one and had no connections to any sort of church. Growing up, we were both church kids to the core. Being extremely involved in the church was a part of our everyday lives. It was who we were. Yet, even though we went to a Bible college (where we should have been spiritually thriving), we both fell out of the church kid lifestyle. Throughout college and the first year of my marriage, I began to backslide in my walk with Christ. I knew that by following my own path, I had lost my way. I knew this move to Florida was bringing me to a crossroads, and I could go one of two ways. Would I make the Christian faith my own, not just something my parents made me do as a kid? Would I make Christ the center of my life and my marriage? I knew I believed in Christ, but would I make Him Lord of my life? The simple answer was yes, of course, that is what I wanted. Yet my actions up to this point did not portray it. I knew that it was time to make a choice. As a control freak, letting God direct my steps was very difficult. I enjoyed the benefits of having Him in my life, but I still wanted that control. So here I was at the crossroads. Would I give my life to God? Would I let Him be real and active in my life?

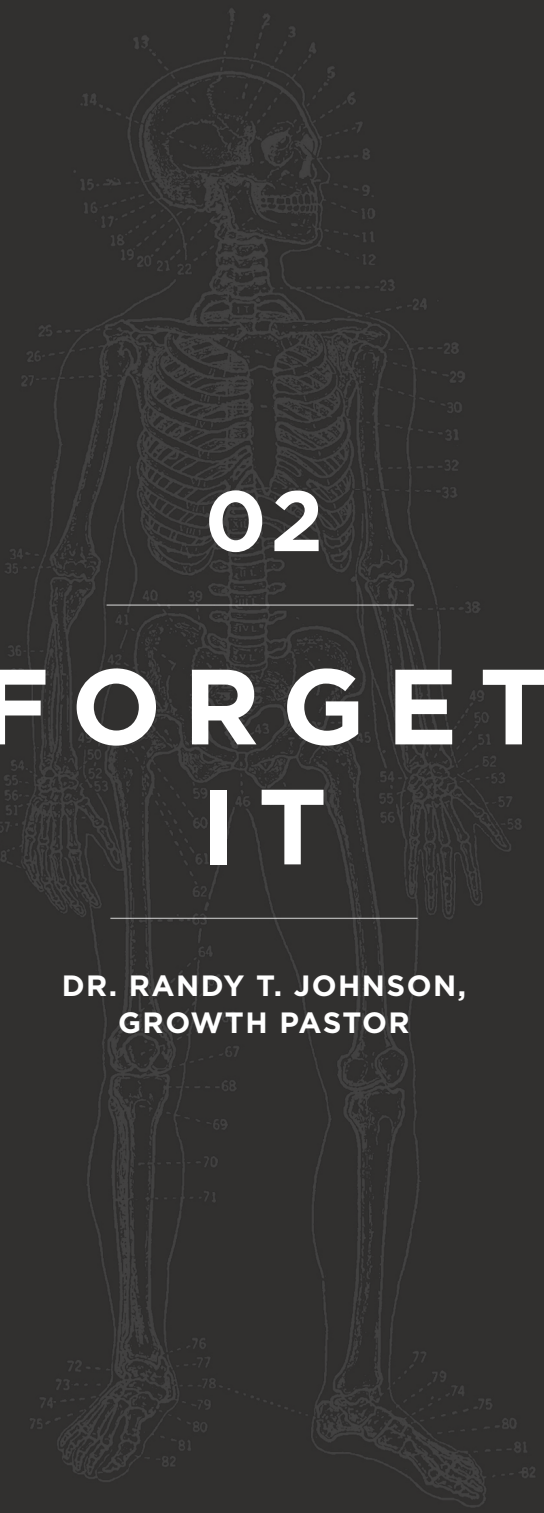
Sierra and I looked at many houses throughout the central eastern coast of Florida and ended up settling on a little beach town called Edgewater. I would be traveling for work, so I wanted to be close to the interstate, and my southern California raised wife wanted to be close to the ocean and not too far from Disney. Edgewater seemed to be the perfect fit. When we found a house just a couple miles from the beach, Chick-Fil-A, and a really good Chinese takeout place, we were instantly sold! My wife and I committed to making church apart of our lives again, which we had let slip over our years in college and beyond. We had attended periodically, but truly getting involved in a church was not something we had done. So when we arrived in Florida, it was a commitment we decided to make. We began to acknowledge our need for God in our marriage and understood we could not do it on our own. We tried a little church down the street on our first Sunday and knew right away it was not for us. I began to get discouraged and prayed, "God I am trying to follow you, but you need to help me here. Please show us where to go and lead us to the place where you want us!" All that was left to do was trust. Wow, did He come through in answering that prayer quickly and specifically!

The following Saturday, I felt an intense and unusual urge to exercise (yes, I realize I need to get this urge more often). Our neighborhood had a clubhouse and gym, so I headed there for the first and maybe the only time in the whole time we lived there. I began to workout and minded my own business. I was not there to talk to anyone, and I was a little annoyed when I saw a lady coming over to start a conversation. Out of the blue, she asked, "Where do you go to church?" At first, I was stunned and then realized I was wearing a Providence Church t-shirt. It was a ministry of a friend of mine in Pontiac, and he always hooked me up with gear to wear. I told her that we had just moved and did not have a church as I went back to my workout. She interrupted me again and said, "You should go to Edgewater Alliance Church, they have a lot of families your age there." I instantly felt in my heart that God was telling me that this was the place for us and

He was leading us there. I later found out that that lady did not even go there. In fact, she was not even a believer! How cool is it that God can use whatever and whoever He wants to deliver a message?! The next day, Sierra and I walked into that church like most visitors do, timid and keeping to ourselves. We enjoyed the service, but what really hooked me was the announcement that today was softball sign up day. Another confirmation that this was the church for me. The service ended, and before we could even exit our row, a lady and her husband came over and asked us if we were new, where we lived, and basically our whole history. She then began to walk us around the auditorium and introduced us to couples. It was horrifying, but I knew it was exactly what God wanted for us (I am forever grateful to you Steve and Michelle for being used by God to connect us!).

It was like an instant connection with these people. We had dinner with several families during the first week. I started softball, and as it turned out, most of the families we had met on Sunday were on the softball team and invited us to Orlando to go to Universal Studios the following Saturday. By the end of the Universal trip, we had made ten new best friends. God instantly grew us close with our new church family, and through growing close to them, we grew in His Word and as a couple. We began serving in the student ministry, ushering, and hosting a small group. God truly directed our paths to this church. Most of the people we met there have become family and lifelong friends. I can truly say I would not be in ministry today if God had not directed my paths to that gym and then to that church.

It is amazing to see God direct our paths when we give up the control. We went into this journey not knowing what the future held, but He knew exactly what He was doing. I encourage you today to let go of your past, your failures, and your mistakes, and trust God for your future. Though you may not know what tomorrow will bring, when you place your trust in Him He will prove faithful and direct your path according to His perfect plan.



02

FORGET IT

DR. RANDY T. JOHNSON,
GROWTH PASTOR

I love reading stories about criminals who make huge mistakes in the act of their crime. I laughed when I read about the guy who pretended to buy a pack of gum. He handed the cashier a $20 bill, but when the cashier opened the cash register, he reached into the drawer, grabbed a hand full of dollars, and took off running. The funny thing is that he "stole" less than $20. He left the twenty and ran off with about ten dollars. If stupidity is a crime, he is guilty.

Another humorous story involved the guy who wanted to steal an ATM. He backed up his pickup truck to the "money machine," hooked up some chains around it, and tried to take it away. However, his bumper was not strong enough. As he drove away without the machine, his bumper and license plate were left on the ground.

What funny "crime" stories have you heard?

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It is clear that the criminals were not interested in all the details. Escaping was the most important factor. They had changed their focus.

The woman at the well had one task. She came to the well to get water. On her sticky note was one task: get water.

John 4:27-30 describes some interesting details, ***"Just then his disciples came back. They marveled that he was talking with a woman, but no one said, 'What do you seek?' or, 'Why are you talking with her?' So the woman left her water jar and went away into town and said to the people, 'Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?' They went out of the town and were coming to him."***

What did the woman leave behind? Why?

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Sometimes when an "Aha moment" happens we forget things accidentally. The woman at the well felt a sense of urgency. Nothing seemed as important as telling others what had just happened and Who she just met. She dropped everything and pressed forward.

The woman at the well was not the only one who responded immediately. Matthew 4:18-22 says, ***"While walking by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon (who is called Peter) and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. And he said to them, 'Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.' Immediately they left their nets and followed him. And going on from there he saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him."***

What did Peter and Andrew leave behind?

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What did James and John leave behind (two things)?

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What do these actions imply?

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I believe these actions were not accidental. When we choose to follow Christ, it may mean we need to leave some things (or people) behind intentionally. They chose to follow Christ; they were focused.

In dealing with the *"Skeletons in the Closet,"* there will be things we need to leave behind or strive to forget. To "forget" may be impossible. The concept is to not go back to that place in life or not to use it against someone. It is the picture of putting an IOU through a paper shredder. The debt will go unpaid, and we will press forward.

There are at least three areas where the principle to "Forget It" applies. There are feelings, emotions, thoughts, and actions we may need to put behind us.

1. Repentance

A step necessary in following Christ is to repent. It is a 180-degree turn from serving ourselves to serving Him. Part of handling our past is to "Forget It" by leaving the old lifestyle behind us.

Similar to the woman at the well is the woman described in John chapter 8. The scribes and Pharisees teamed up in framing a woman caught in adultery. They bring her to Jesus trying to catch force His hand. However, He leans down and uses His hand to write on the ground. The men leave from oldest to youngest. John 8:10-11 records what happened next, ***"Jesus stood up and said to her, 'Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?' She said, 'No one, Lord.' And Jesus said, 'Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more.'"***

What command did Jesus give to the woman?

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The word “repent” is used about 75 times in the Bible.

Acts 3:19 says, ***“Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out.”***

Acts 8:22 adds, ***“Repent, therefore, of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you.”***

What kinds of things are involved in repentance?

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George Mueller said, “There was a day when I died; died to self, my opinions, preferences, tastes and will; died to the world, its approval or censure; died to the approval or blame even of my brethren or friends; and since then I have studied only to show myself approved unto God.”

Are there areas of your life you need to turn over to the Lord?

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C.S. Lewis said, “We all want progress, but if you’re on the wrong road, progress means doing an about-turn and walking back to the right road; in that case, the man who turns back soonest is the most progressive.”

2. Forgive yourself

A second part of handling our past is to “Forget It” by forgiving our self. Grief, remorse, and regret have defeated too many people. Our past does not have to hold us back.

For many or even most people, forgiving yourself is harder than forgiving others. It may be due to our pride.

Paul (a.k.a. Saul, the murderer) must have struggled with his past. Before he could fully follow Christ and impact others for the Lord, he needed to forgive himself. In Philippians 3:13 Paul said, ***“Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead.”***

How can one’s view on their past limit their effectiveness today?

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Leo Buscaglia said, “Love yourself - accept yourself - forgive yourself - and be good to yourself, because without you the rest of us are without a source of many wonderful things.”

3. Forgive others

A third part of handling our past is to “Forget It” by forgiving others. Bitterness can consume us. We should not give others the power to hold us back. We need to forgive them, trust God, and renew our minds.

Colossians 3:12-14 says, ***"Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony."***

What part of this passage catches your attention?

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What area is most difficult for you?

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Is there someone from your past that you need to forgive?

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The woman at the well felt an urgency to drop her water bucket and run back into town. She had life-saving news that everyone needed to hear. Not only would her life need to change, but she started with forgiveness. She was at the well alone, but she did not hold that against them. She went to them to share the Good News. Men left her, and she probably left many men in the wake, but that did not mean anything now. Everyone needed the truth, and the truth would set them free.

George Macdonald said, “Forgiveness is the giving, and so the receiving, of life.”

How does this quote relate?

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SET IT AND FORGET IT

FORGET IT, DEVOTION 1

Ryan Story | *Location Pastor - Burton*

Few people know who Ron Popeil is. Few people would know he founded the company RonCo. However, if I told you that Ron Popeil coined one of the most famous phrases in infomercial history you might realize about whom I am talking. The Showtime Rotisserie is one of the most popular infomercial items, not because of the product, but because of Ron's catchphrase, "Set it and forget it." I have always loved watching all types of infomercials of items. I know that I will never buy any of these items, but I have been watching infomercials for years. I cannot say for sure why but there has always been something about that phrase that has always stuck with me.

We all have a past. You do not have to have a failed marriage, drug or alcohol abuse, or estranged children to have a past. From the person who has been clean for three months, to the person who was in church the first Sunday they were out of the hospital, we all have skeletons in our closets. I grew up in a mess of a family where my wife grew up in a pretty godly and functional house, and we both have skeletons in our closets. Today, I want to encourage you to come to peace with the brokenness of life. The reality is sin is still triumphing over people's lives, the prince of the power of the air (Ephesians 2:2) is still wreaking havoc in our world. Life is hard, and there is some serious hurt out in the stories of all who are reading this. We live in a world that tells us to cover up the hurt, hide the imperfections, and only project that Instagram worthy selfie to the world. If you are someone who has some serious hurts in your life, know that every staff member is here to help pray with you, and we would all love helping you find Jesus in your pain. Today, I want to encourage you to set it and forget it.

Clearly, an infomercial has no real power in our world to change someone's life, but the Word of God does. Colossians 3:1-2 says, ***"If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth."*** While the target market for most people who read devotionals is most likely those who have been redeemed and saved by putting their faith in Jesus Christ and the work He did for us by dying on a cross for our sins, sometimes we may overlook this. The first part of the verse in Colossians is ***"if then you have been raised with Christ."*** If you have not been born again, please take some time to do that. If you have any question about that, feel free to call The River Church's offices. But for those of us who believe in Jesus, we are told to ***"set your mind on things that are above."*** It took me a long time to realize that God has always had a purpose for every pain I ever experienced. It may take time for us to find that purpose, but we will never find that purpose if we are always looking to ourselves, the world, or a substance for the answer. The only answer comes from above. When we set our minds to the godly things, it is amazing how everything else in life seems to just fall into line.

So I encourage you to set your mind to things above and forget what is in the past. You cannot change the past, how you reacted, or what was done to you. I assure you though that our God is too loving not to have a plan. The hardest thing to do sometimes is to trust that God has a plan for our pain.

Remember: Set it and forget it!

FORGET THE PAST

FORGET IT, DEVOTION 2

Gareth Volz | *Seniors 55+ Director*

What do you think of when you hear the term, "Skeletons in the Closet?" For me, that term speaks of things in my past that are hidden away, things I am not proud of, and things that remind me of scary and ugly times in the past. It is those things that still trouble me, and I do not want others to know about them.

In John chapter 4, we read of a divine encounter a woman of Samaria had with Jesus. While Jews routinely went around Samaria to get to and from Jerusalem because Samaritans were half-breeds and considered unclean, John tells us Jesus had to go through Samaria. He waited by the city well for her to come and draw water. She did not come first thing in the morning with the rest of the women because she had a bad reputation, and she was ashamed of her past. However, Jesus knew all about her life and still wanted to meet with her and reveal to her who He was, and what He could do for her to overcome her past life. After meeting with Jesus her life was changed, and she could not wait to share with others that He was the promised Messiah and tell what He had done for her.

God used a woman who was married and divorced five times, and she was now living with a man. This showed me that in spite of my past and some of the ugly, sinful things I have done, God still loves me and can use me if I surrender my life to Him. Even though I have been a Christian for over six decades, I still struggle at times to do what I know is right. I am encouraged by what Paul wrote in Philippians 3:12-14, ***"Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me His own. Brothers, I do not consider***

that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."

Paul forgot his ugly, sinful past, and surrendered his life to Christ and committed himself to do what God wanted him to do. He forgot his past and strained to do what God had for him in the future so that he could realize the ***"prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."*** If he had not done this, he would not have been able to do the work Christ had for him.

Paul is not the only one. Consider the failure of Peter and the other disciples who abandoned Jesus in the garden when the crowd came to arrest Him and demand His death. They had to forget this failure in order to do what Jesus commanded them to do after His resurrection – to take the Gospel everywhere (Matthew 28:16-20).

In the Old Testament we read over and over again how those who loved God, fell into temptation and sinned, and when they repented were used greatly by God to fulfill His purposes – Abraham, Moses, Samson, David, and Jonah.

I am reminded of the chorus I learned as a child:

You ask me why I'm happy, well I'll just tell you why,
It's because my sins are gone.
And when I meet the scoffers who ask me where they are,
I say my sins are gone.
They're underneath the blood on the cross of Calvary,
As far removed as darkness is from dawn.
In the sea of God's forgetfulness that's good enough for me,
Praise God-my sins are gone!

Like the Apostle Paul, forget the skeletons in your closet and strain forward for what God has for you to do. When Satan reminds you of your past, remind him of his future. We have victory in Jesus, our Savior forever.



STOP HIDING

FORGET IT, DEVOTION 3

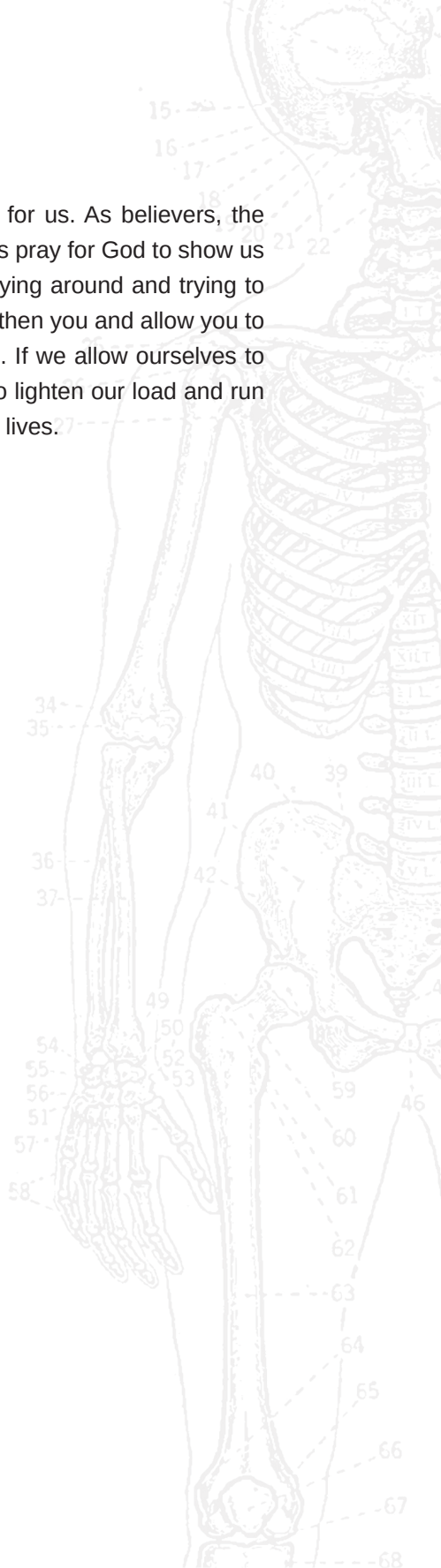
James Mann | *Children's Director*

Anyone who knows me knows I grew up in a Christ-centered house. In 2005, my family and I moved from Michigan to Florida. Christ started moving from the center of my life as it became difficult to find a church to call home. Before I knew it, God was completely out of my life. I still prayed before meals and bed, but I was just saying a rehearsed prayer just to appease my parents. I was dead in my faith. For the longest time, there was this skeleton in my closet. I moved back to Michigan in 2011 and began to try this whole church and God thing again. I did not want anyone to know about this hidden past of living in the world. I avoided telling anyone and in return, became even more lost in the world.

I went on an entire year like this. It was not until a year into going back to church that God made things clear for me. Luke 8:17-18 challenged me, ***"For nothing is hidden that will not be made manifest, nor is anything secret that will not be known and come to light. Take care then how you hear, for to the one who has, more will be given, and from the one who has not, even what he thinks that he has will be taken away."*** For me, God was telling me that all my sins of the past would come to light eventually. If I bring them to light, then I can grow and truly start on the path He has chosen for me.

Something we need to remember is that everyone has something in their life they are trying to hide from the world. Some skeletons are larger than others, but they need to be shared. The only way we can leave our skeletons behind us is by making our past known. Then, instead of hiding these skeletons we can leave them behind us and

continue down the path God has chosen for us. As believers, the most important thing we can do right now is pray for God to show us what these skeletons are that we are carrying around and trying to hide from the world. Ask Him just to strengthen you and allow you to bring them to light and leave them behind. If we allow ourselves to do this, then, and only then, are we able to lighten our load and run after the desires that God has for us in our lives.



LIVING WATER

FORGET IT, DEVOTION 4

Debbie Kerr | *Office Administrator*

John chapter 4 tells of the encounter Jesus had with a Samaritan woman at a well. Each day she would come to the well after everyone else had left. She walked around in great shame and condemnation, considered an outcast not only by the Jews but by her own people. She was known around town as the woman who had many husbands and was currently living with a man unmarried. On this particular day, Jesus was sitting at the well when she arrived. He purposely struck up a conversation with this Samaritan woman, which is something a Jew would never do. He began to speak life to her as He revealed everything she had ever done.

Every day she went to the "well" of the world trying to find something or someone to quench her emotional and physical thirst. As she lowered her bucket down into the well, He explained to her that the water she was drawing would not satisfy and how she needs to taste the Living Water only He can give. Meaning, Jesus is the Living Water, and only He can completely meet her needs so that she will never have to go back to her old "well." She instantly recognized that He must be the Christ, the One for whom they were waiting. She excitedly, ran off to tell the others of her encounter with Jesus. An interesting observation, as she ran off in her new found freedom and forgiveness, she left her bucket of cares and sins at the well with Jesus. That is exactly what He wants us to do with our past.

Paul tells us in Philippians 3:13 (NKJV), ***"Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead."*** The Apostle Paul is another excellent example of

the importance of forgetting a terrible past. We cannot arrive where God wants to take us when we continue to look behind us with an often distorted and condemning view of the past. Even the side view mirror on our vehicles remind us that things behind us are deceiving and distorted. What we choose to focus on determines the trajectory of our lives. Jesus does not want us to look behind us because we are not going that way! It will only slow us down and keep us from being an effective member of the body of Christ. That is why we are instructed to take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ (2 Corinthians 10:5).

Like the Samaritan woman and the Apostle Paul, once we are forgiven of our sins, we are no longer identified by our past. The next time the enemy tries to remind you of your past, remind him of who you are in Christ. You are chosen, loved, adopted, forgiven, and joint heirs with Jesus. The former things have passed away, and all things are becoming new!

Isaiah 43:18-19 says, ***"Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert."***

MIND YOUR MIND

FORGET IT, DEVOTION 5

Jen Combs | *Women's Ministry*

Do you have any skeletons in the closet? Are they the things you do not want other people to know about you? We all do to some extent. Fast forward some years, and you have come to the point in life where you now know the Lord as your Savior. He is ruling and reigning in your life. You serve Him, love Him, learn about Him, and He is the all-encompassing Lord of your life. But then there are those days where you wake up, feeling the baggage that is tied to you. It is like a steamboat that you are dragging around on dry ground that is chained to you. Some days you cannot get out of bed because of it. If you manage to peel yourself up, you look in the mirror and think, it is just too much. What are we supposed to do with our past once we have come to know the Lord?

Can I remind you of how sneaky Satan is? Remember, he comes to steal, kill, and destroy. He is a liar, deceiver, and tempter. A lot of the times you will find that battle to be in your mind. At least it is for me. Satan wants you to wallow in your past, throw it in your face, and not forget that shame and guilt he likes to heap on you.

All of this makes me think of 2 Peter 2:22, ***"What the true proverb says has happened to them: 'The dog returns to its own vomit, and the sow, after washing herself, returns to wallow in the mire.'"*** Some days we are so quick to forget that the Lord has forgiven us, He has taken our guilt and our shame on the cross. We are just like the sow, the Lord cleaned us all up, but we are so quick to return to the mud. We just cannot seem to forget all of the awful crazy that we have done. We wallow in the past, unable to forget it.

One of my favorite verses is 1 Peter 1:13, ***"Therefore, preparing your minds for action…"*** The footnote in my Bible says, "Girding up the loins of your mind." You have to know and understand that Satan wages war on our minds. You must gird up your mind, make it ready for battle, and flee those thoughts. When Satan lobs those fiery darts of shame and guilt, you have to run to Jesus. Take your mind and thoughts to Him.

Philippians 4:8-9 adds, ***"Finally, brothers whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me-practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you."*** Training your thoughts is something, if you practice, the Lord can use to give you peace. He can help you flee the attacks of Satan. Start practicing today.

WHO I USED TO BE

FORGET IT, DEVOTION 6

Katrina Young | *Nursery & Pre-K Director & Family Assistant*

"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come."
2 Corinthians 5:17

As a new believer, I was given the book *Pilgrim's Progress* by John Bunyan. In this book, the main character, "Christian," is weighed down by the burden of his sin. When he came to the cross, the sin and burden fell from his shoulders, rolled down a hill, and disappeared into an empty tomb. The story represents what takes place when we confess our sin to God. He lifts it off our shoulders, takes it away, and remembers it no more.

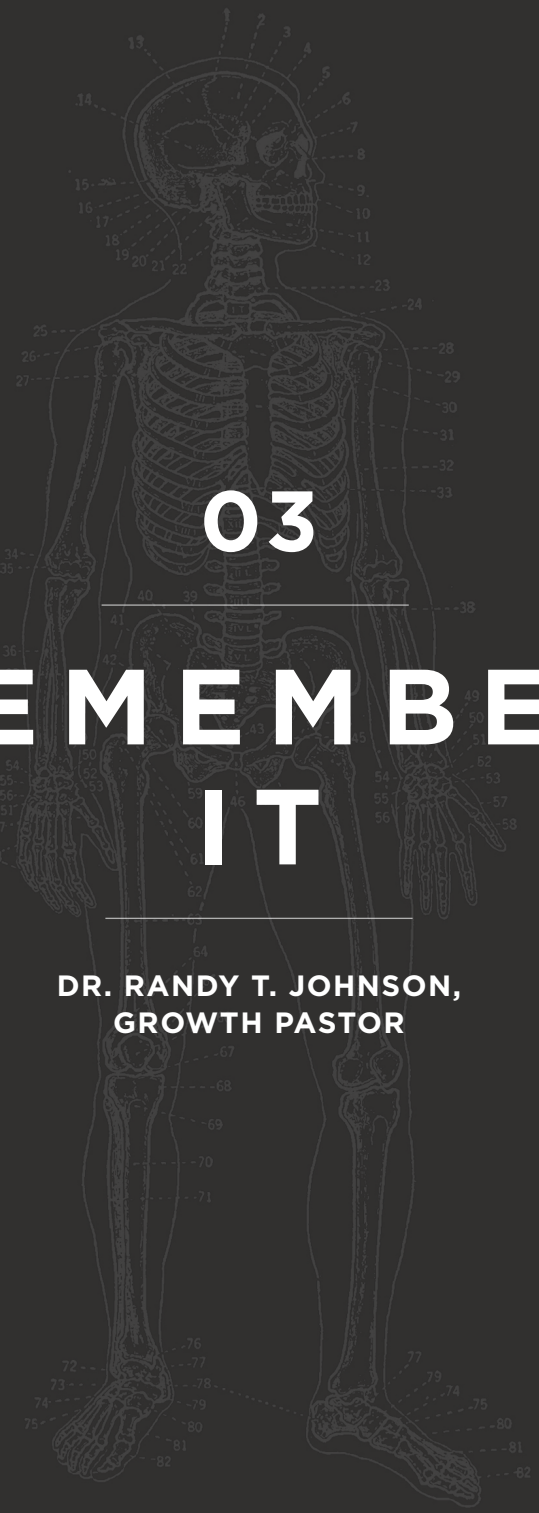
In a few weeks, I will be attending my 40th high school class reunion. I am from a very small town in Indiana, so it goes without saying, my class was very small as well. As little towns go, there is not much that is private in your life. Our class knew each other very well, and if we were not close friends, we still were very aware of the details of each other's lives. "Nothing was a secret!" At this point in our lives getting together is a brief trip down "Memory Lane." Yet, none of us are the people that we once were, and in getting reacquainted, I am certain I am not alone in hoping there is very little memory of who I once was but rather, want them to see who I am today, a child of God.

We are reminded of forgiveness in 1 John 1:9, ***"If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."***

Perhaps the most difficult part of this Scripture is allowing ourselves to let go of our own transgressions and guilt so that we can walk in freedom. Forgiving ourselves can be a bigger challenge because we are aware of the state of our own hearts and minds when we sinned. It is only through His abundant grace that He chooses to forgive us. By reliving the past and trying to carry the weight of our own sin, we can hinder our spiritual growth and prevent ourselves from doing what we are called to do. In the Psalms, King David wrote about God's grace in saying, ***"As far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us"*** (Psalm 103:12). If God does not hold our sin to us once we repent from it, why should we?

My prayer is that as I go through my daily walk, that people will see Christ in me and not the image of who I used to be. As C. S. Lewis wrote, "Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea, until they have something to forgive."

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03

REMEMBER IT

DR. RANDY T. JOHNSON,
GROWTH PASTOR

Ronald, Steve, and Steve met in a garage. The three friends were working on a project. It was 1971, and these three friends were about to change the tech world.

Ronald Wayne was chosen as the peacemaker between Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak. Ronald was given 10% of the company stock but backed out twelve days later. He sold his stock for $500; that Apple stock was worth $72 billion some 40 years later. According to Forbes, Apple is the world's most valuable brand. By the way, the rest of the top ten in order are Google, Microsoft, Facebook, Amazon, Coca-Cola, Samsung, Disney, Toyota, and AT&T. It is amazing how far these companies have grown.

On the website *MacWorld*, they even start with a garage shot picture of the then young men starting their empire. When it comes to the past we need to celebrate how far we have come; we need to "Remember It."

Do you remember your first computer or computer experience?

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Are you an Apple Mac or Windows PC fan (or neither)?

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How can looking back help Apple employees?

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It is important for companies to remember where they began. They need to take time to evaluate, appreciate, and celebrate how far they have come.

The same is true for people. We can get so caught up in the hustle and bustle of life that we miss the progression. We often keep focusing on the next rung on the ladder that we do not notice the elevation change. Unfortunately, the problem may be that we are trying to keep up with the "Jones family" physically, financially, or even spiritually. It can get worse because behind every "model" family we are chasing is apparently an even sharper gang. It can never end; we feel that we always will fall short.

What are some areas of growth for you?

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The woman at the well had an entangled history. It held her back or kept her on the outside. However, her strides of spiritual growth were quick and could go unnoticed.

John 4:39-42 says, ***"Many Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony, 'He told me all that I ever did.' So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them, and he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman, 'It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Savior of the world.'"***

Jesus took her back and reinforced some of her Bible knowledge. She knew of Jacob, Joseph, and the coming Messiah. He took

her back to what she had learned and built on it. He took her from prophecy to fulfillment in just minutes. The Messiah was standing in front of her.

Her response was explosive. She left the water bucket, ran into town, and told everyone who would listen. Her initial interaction with Jesus lasted for only minutes. Jesus stayed two more days. I imagine that they talked again during those two days. I believe she had many regrets and sorrows, but I believe Jesus forgave her past, helped her plan for the future, and took time to celebrate the changes that were already taking place.

Alcoholic's Anonymous has milestone medallions they use to remind themselves and each other how far they have come. It is a form of celebration. It is good to celebrate one day, week, month, year, and decade. The same should be done spiritually. Instead of focusing on five failed marriages and a life of sin, the woman at the well needed to evaluate and dedicate each day to the Lord intentionally. She was not falling back or standing still. She was moving forward. Her only "competition" was herself. She needed and wanted to grow.

How is your spiritual growth compared to five years ago? One year? One month?

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What needs to be done to continue growing in the Lord?

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I do not mean to focus on what we have done in our own strength. I want us to remember how far God has brought us. I want us to realize how our work and walk in faith has grown. I am not a self-made man; I am a God-made-man who is growing in the Lord because of the Lord.

I am reminded of other times in Scripture when viewing the past; it was good to "Remember It."

1. Paul and Timothy

Paul challenged Timothy to remember his spiritual heritage. Timothy was blessed to have a godly mother and grandmother. Nothing is said about dad or his grandfather, but Paul was not encouraging a pity party. He reminded him of God's work in the past to prepare him for this moment.

In 2 Timothy 1:3-7, Paul says, ***"I thank God whom I serve, as did my ancestors, with a clear conscience, as I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day. As I remember your tears, I long to see you, that I may be filled with joy. I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, dwells in you as well. For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands, for God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control."***

Before Paul reminds Timothy of his godly heritage, he takes a moment and looks at his own family line. He thanks God for the faith of his ancestors. This might catch us off guard at first as we know Paul (a murderer formerly known as Saul) had to have a radical conversion in his faith. That was not the fault of his parents.

He was raised knowing of God and the coming Messiah. He chose not to accept Jesus as the Messiah until later in life. He may have encountered Jesus during His earthly ministry, but he hardened his heart and became angry, bitter, and hateful.

Paul had spiritual ancestors. Timothy had a godly heritage. It was good for them to look back and remember it.

Who in your family line has been the spiritual backbone?

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What does it mean to be the spiritual backbone of a family?

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2. David

David reminded himself of God's faithfulness. David was the youngest of eight boys. He would surely have had enough hand-me-downs. He was the forgotten one. When Samuel came to the house of Jesse to anoint the next King of Israel, they had to be reminded of the youngest son, the boy in the fields, David.

I think there are times when we subconsciously transfer the Jacob and Joseph relationship to Jesse and David. There is no record in Scripture of David being Jesse's pride and joy. David was not given a "sling of many colors." If a prophet had come to Jacob's house to pay homage to one of his sons, he would have paraded out Joseph in front of his older brothers. This was not the case with David. He was not a despised "red-headed stepchild," nor was he the prince (or even king) of his father's heart.

In 1 Samuel chapter 17, Jesse sends David to his older brothers with supplies, encouraging words, and as a messenger to see how things are progressing. His brothers are not happy to see him. At this point, Goliath roared. David was appalled. He went to Saul as he recounted of his past. In 1 Samuel 17:33-37, we read, ***"And Saul said to David, 'You are not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him, for you are but a youth, and he has been a man of war from his youth.' But David said to Saul, 'Your servant used to keep sheep for his father. And when there came a lion, or a bear, and took a lamb from the flock, I went after him and struck him and delivered it out of his mouth. And if he arose against me, I caught him by his beard and struck him and killed him. Your servant has struck down both lions and bears, and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be like one of them, for he has defied the armies of the living God.' And David said, 'The Lord who delivered me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine.' And Saul said to David, 'Go, and the Lord be with you!'"*** David downed both lions and bears. Yes, he used the plural form of the words. He remembered how God used him in the past and it gave him the courage and faith to face his giants.

What miracles has God performed in your life?

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Are there times in your life when God spared your life? Why?

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What are some "giants" in your life right now?

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Rick Warren said, "Remember how far you've come, not just how far you have to go. You are not where you want to be, but neither are you where you used to be." Past victories should empower us in confidence and faith to face future challenges. Obstacles are only opportunities for God to show Himself alive, active, true, powerful, and victorious.

In Ephesians 2:1-10, Paul recalled our dreadful past when we walked in our sins (2:1-3). However, it is followed by that glorious contrast, ***"But God."*** He then recounts the amazing blessings that we now enjoy in Christ (2:4-9). Finally, he spells out the expectation of God creating us anew, that we now should walk in good deeds (2:10).

How does the phrase ***"But God,"*** relate to your life? When did it first happen?

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Revelation 2:5 continues the thought, ***"Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent."*** Remembering our past can empower us and should motivate us to do more for Him while we can.

What works or actions do you now need to step forward and accomplish?

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Each of us has our own set of fingerprints. Likewise, none of us has the same past, history, heritage, or story. We should not measure ourselves with or against others. Growing up you probably had the family ritual of standing against the wall while mom took a pencil and marked your height. She would then write the date next to it. It was fun to measure again later and see how much you had grown. We do not have any control over determining our physical height. We can exercise, sleep, and eat well with no measurable difference in our height. Spiritual growth is different. With God, we can alter the scale. We need to spiritually go to the "pantry door" and see the marks. It was frustrating in seventh and eighth grade to go for the mark and not see a difference. How much have we grown since the last time we measured? Is there any measurable growth?

What will you do to ensure a new spiritual "high point" on the measuring stick?

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What goals will you set?

Prayer:

Reading the Word:

Memorizing verses:

Attendance at gatherings:

Inviting others to events or gatherings:

Giving financially to the Church:

Serving regularly and at special events:

Meeting with a growth community:

Rick Warren also said, “Becoming like Christ is a long, slow process of growth.” I agree with him, but I also have found those times of “spiritual sprints” to be refreshing and rewarding. Form some positive long-term habits, but also set some challenging goals for this week or month. Push yourself.

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HAKUNA MATATA

REMEMBER IT, DEVOTION 1

Isaiah Combs | *Worship Leader*

Here is a crazy fact that will make some of you feel old. The Disney movie, *"The Lion King,"* was released into theaters in 1994. That was 24 years ago. I have always loved *"The Lion King"*, and now that I have my own kids, I force them to watch it with me. That was until my 5-year-old daughter began to get nightmares because of the scene that Mufasa dies. It is pretty intense. I would have to agree.

But there is a song in the movie that is really catchy. The song is *"Hakuna Matata,"* and it means "no worries." The meaning of the song and the phrase *"Hakuna Matata"* is that the past does not matter because it is in the past. Once we accept it is in the past, it is gone, and you should forget about it. The song also talks about a warthog, named Pumbaa, who had a stink problem when he was a young warthog and forgetting the past helped him move on into his future. It is a problem-free philosophy. But I do not agree. Remembering your past can help you appreciate where and why you are in your walk right now.

The Bible is very clear about what happens to my sins and my past. Psalm 103:12 says, ***"As far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us."*** We also read in 1 John 1:9, ***"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."*** I am very thankful for the forgiveness of my past, and I am thankful I am not that person anymore. It is good to remember what God saved us from. He will not use it against us, nor should we.

Our past is important. Although I am not proud of my past, I get to use my past all the time to help people going through the same or similar situation and trials in their life. I like to call my past, my testimony. It is my testimony on what God has done and has continued to do in my life. It is nothing that I have done. but it is everything that Jesus has done in and through me.

I still like the song *"Hakuna Matata,"* and I still will let my kids watch the movie. I will remain thankful for my past because it is my testimony. So remember your past and use it for the glory of God. There is someone out there right now struggling, and they need to hear your testimony of what God has done.

THE PAST PASSED

REMEMBER IT, DEVOTION 2

Joshua Combs | *Lead Pastor*

"He told me all that I ever did." John 4:39

The Samaritan woman's testimony is summarized with these simple words. Her life had been one of sexual sin and immorality, causing her to stay away from people and most likely having been ostracized from the women of the town (indicated by her choice to come to the well at the warmer, less busy part of the day). Once she had met Jesus, she was set free from her sin. Her shame was transformed into a claim to the grace of God. Her sin, which was well known, became the very proof that God can save and transform the most disgraced sinner.

I ponder the idea of meeting someone who could tell me everything I have ever done, and frankly, I want to stay away from that person. That is the power of guilt and shame. Jesus, of course, knows everything we have done and proved that in succinct detail to the woman at the well. It was essential for this women to confront the reality and depth of her sin before she could receive the mercy and grace of God.

Our past sins or former life away from Christ are not meant to be a source of jokes, worldly badges of honor, or bizarre spiritual "one-up-man-ship" conversations. Yet, throughout Scripture, we are told to "Remember." It is not for the purpose of leading us into temptation or plunging into despair brought on by guilt, but for the express purpose of finding ourselves in awe of God's grace. When we remember the grossness of our sin, we see the love of God in a more, clear light (John 3:16), we feel greater gratitude for the suffering of Christ on the

cross of Calvary (Romans 5:8), and we realize how far God's mercy has carried us (Titus 3:3-7).

In 1 Corinthians 6:11, the Apostle Paul writes, ***"And such were some of you..."*** It is important for every Christian to remember where God has brought us from. We should not obsess over our sin, but there are times where we must turn and see the long path that the Lord has brought us down. Spiritual pride seems to set in when a Christian forgets where they have come from and where, without the Lord's intervention, we would be now. Take just a moment, remember the mess you were in when the Lord rescued you and thank Him for His faithfulness along life's journey.

CLIMB EVERY MOUNTAIN

REMEMBER IT, DEVOTION 3

Mary Jane Johns | *Worship Leader*

When I was in high school, my life was all wrapped up in music and sports. I sang in a number of musicals. We did *"Brigadoon," "The Sound of Music," "The Music Man,"* and *"The Fantasticks."* It was so much fun getting to know each cast member, the music, and last but not least the dance steps. The time spent learning the music, blocking, and memorizing lines was not lost when it came to the performances. I can still remember the actual feeling of being in character. What sheer joy it was to sing those words and feel those feelings like the real characters.

My two favorite musicals were *"The Sound of Music"* and *"The Music Man."* I do not think I will ever forget the words to the songs. My director at the time was terrific and really left an impression on me. He recently sent me a message reminding me of how great that time in my life was. It was so good to reminisce. No matter how memorable that time in my little world was, I do not need to go back and live those moments again. In the midst of that joy, I also felt an emptiness. It was a very painful time for me. My dad had passed away, and my mom was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis. Our family was experiencing financial difficulties, and I felt a bit lost. Walking through those deep waters was rough. As a sixteen-year-old girl, I was secretly feeling insecure and deeply hurt. I remember getting all wrapped up in those musicals and feeling safe within my character. I was at a crossroads. Instead of my own ambition, I chose to seek God. I chose to let go of my own aspirations and decided that God would be the One that I relied on for strength, wisdom, and direction. Seeking after His heart was a huge decision and a very life-altering moment. Jesus has been and will be my portion and my help. Psalm

46:1 says, ***"God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble."*** I will choose to remember this verse in times of struggle and loneliness.

Philippians 3:12-13 adds, ***"Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead."***

I am living my best life right now in Jesus. With Jesus as your personal Savior, you are living your best life, too! This is our happily ever after. Remembering that time of loneliness, insecurity, and hurt has helped to shape me into the wife, mother, and grandma I am today. Jesus wants us to continually stretch ourselves to be the very best version of ourselves that we can be.

The song, *"This We Know,"* is filled with such powerful phrases:

You are Who You say You are.
You'll do what You said You'll do.
You'll be Who You've always been to us, Jesus.
This we know.
We will see the enemy run.
This we know.
We will see the victory won.
We hold on to every promise you've ever made.
Jesus, you are unfailing.

I love the promise that Jesus will never leave us. When walking through this earthly life, we may flub a line, forget a verse, or sing a bit off key. God's promises are sure and steady. We can stand on it, believe it, claim it, and remember it. By remembering these things, we can climb every mountain.

FIVE-YEAR-OLD

REMEMBER IT, DEVOTION 4

Sierra Combs | *Women's Director*

"Amazing grace how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me." Most of us know those words. We know the tune and sing it every so often in church or in the shower. *"I once was lost, but now I'm found, was blind, but now I see."* If you are like me, maybe you belt it out in the car and add a few soulful runs in there (which is funny, because in a corporate worship setting you will rarely find me doing soulful runs. But if I am by myself in the car, you can just go ahead and call me Mariah Carey). I have been singing this song since I was a child, and the words are so good and so true, but if I am honest, I tend to pay more attention to my fun, soulful singing than to what is actually being sung. Amazing is the grace that saved a wretch like me. Am I a wretch? A quick trip to the dictionary tells me that a wretch is a miserable, despicable, or contemptible person. Its synonyms are words like a villain, criminal, miscreant, and good-for-nothing. Those are strong words. I have known the amazing grace of Jesus since I was very young, and I do not always relate to the above words from back in my BC (before Christ) days. Actually, I do not even remember many of my BC days. Sometimes pride will sneak in and say, "I mean yes Sierra, you are a sinner. But certainly, you were not a 5-year-old miserable villain. That seems exaggerated." Then I am quickly reminded, "Yes, that cute and sweet little gap-toothed 5-year-old was still a wretch in desperate need of a Savior."

Maybe you have a completely different story than mine and can remember your BC days well. You can totally remember the completely wretched state of life before Christ, and the absolute joy that came from Him breaking the chains of all of your bondage and shame. Those memories are a gift, and I pray that you never forget

them. Use them to share your story and to remind people of what God rescued you from. Use them to keep your passion for Christ at the forefront of your mind. He saved you, and that is the most miraculous gift you will ever receive! Or, maybe you are like me. Maybe God stirred in your soul and convicted you of your sin at such a young age that you do not really remember life without Him. This is also a gift. I am so thankful that I have had the Holy Spirit living inside of me for so long, guiding me and convicting me of my sins before I let them grow and follow a path that only leads to major pain and major problems.

I am thankful that while my sin was heavy, my baggage is light. I owe that to Him and am forever thankful. But often times I still forget the gravity from what I was saved. Without Christ, we are all absolutely hopeless. In the book of Ephesians, Paul tells the church at Ephesus what not to forget, ***"Remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world"*** (Ephesians 2:12). This non-Jewish group of people seemed to be forgetting that before Christ had come, they had no hope. They did not even know who the true God was. When Christ came, He opened the door of salvation to not only the nation of Israel, God's chosen people, but also to every other human being on the planet. He gave them and us full access to God the Father and a ticket out of what we all deserve - total and eternal separation from Him in Hell. The Ephesian church, and often times many of us, tend to forget how absolutely miserable our lives were and would have been without Him. Verse 13 goes on to say, ***"But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ."*** He meets us where we are at, saves us from a hopeless existence, and brings us near to God by His shed blood on the cross. That is something I want to cling to and remember every single day of my life!

TIMEHOP

REMEMBER IT, DEVOTION 5

Philip Piasecki

My wife has this app on her phone called "Timehop." Each day it takes posts from all your social media accounts on that day in history and shows them to you. So she is always showing me pictures that she took and posted five years ago, and most of the time the memories are really cool for reflection. I decided that I was going to install the app too, so I could see what I had posted in previous years. Unfortunately, it mostly has just embarrassed me. I cannot help but think, "Why did I post that status!?" However, it is good to see how much I have matured and to see how far I have come over the past ten years. It can be hard to appreciate where your life is at now, without looking back to see from what God has brought you.

This is an awesome concept that we learn throughout the Scripture. It is remembering what God has done for us, and praising Him because of it! It boggles my mind how forgetful we can be as humans. We will go through a difficult time, see God work miracles to get us through it, and then completely forget about how faithful He was after it is over. King David went through so much difficulty in his life (most of it brought on by his own decisions), and God was always faithful to bring him through it. The Psalms are filled with David's praises, remembering what God had done for him.

Psalm 9:1-2 says,
"I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart;
I will recount all of your wonderful deeds.
I will be glad and exult in you;
I will sing praise to your name, O Most High."

When we remember what God has done for us, and praise Him for it, it helps us be more faithful the next time that we find ourselves in the valley. We will remember His faithfulness, and trust that He is always faithful. When we worship and sing God's praises, we remind ourselves about who Christ is. Our God never fails, and I promise, that He is not going to fail you now. Make a habit of looking back and remembering God's faithfulness; I promise it will help you grow in your trust of God for the future.

EXTREME MEASURES

REMEMBER IT, DEVOTION 6

Ryan Story | *Location Pastor - Burton*

I am an extreme guy. It is not in the sense that I am into skydiving while riding a bull, while drinking a Red Bull and shooting off shotguns, while listening to rock metal. That would be an awesome experience, but I am the type of person when I do something, I do it to the umpteenth level. I do not like going half in on something. I do not ride the fence. If I am going to do something, I am all in 100%. If it is getting in shape, cutting sin out of my life, or simple lifestyle changes, there is seldom a middle ground.

If you would like to get the full depth of God's Word, take a moment and read Joshua chapters seven and eight. The quick version of the story has the nation of Israel being lead by Joshua into the Promised Land. God is with them, and the nation of Israel is taking down city after city. God's people just took down Jericho, a major enemy city, and were gaining momentum, moving closer to their God-given direction. The nation of Israel then hit a snag in a battle that should have been a walk in the park. They had 36 men die in the battle at Ai that should have been one-sided. The worst part of this defeat was the reason why Israel lost. The loss was attributed to one man's sin. The Bible says, ***"The hearts of the people melted and became as water"*** (Joshua 7:5.) Joshua and the whole nation of Israel had not experienced defeat since entering Canaan. Joshua has friends, family, and loved ones in pain because of this defeat.

The loss at Ai is one of Joshua's defining moments in his life. Joshua exhibited amazing leadership and confronted the sin that was in the camp. He got rid of that sin. After he went back, he went forward and defeated Ai. These are the parts of the Bible I love the most. They are parts that make you stop and think, "Well then."

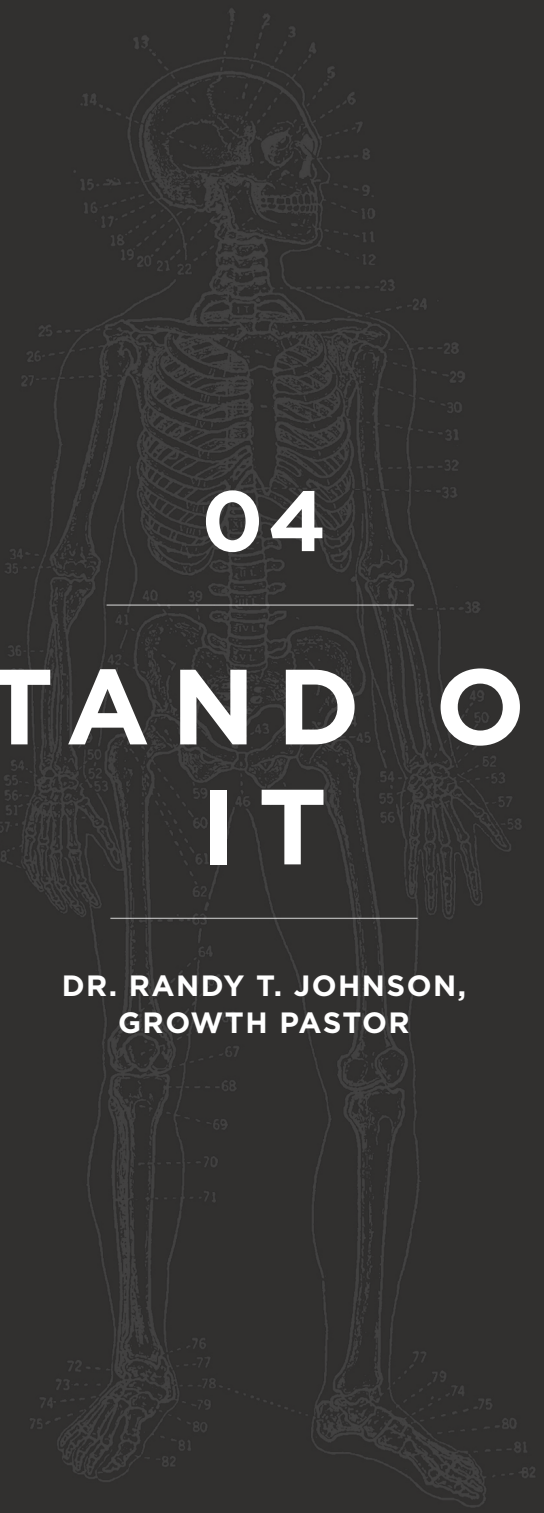
Joshua 8:28-30 tells us what Joshua did when he went back, and God gave him the victory. ***"So Joshua burned Ai and made it forever a heap of ruins, as it is to this day. And he hanged the king of Ai on a tree until evening. And at sunset Joshua commanded, and they took his body down from the tree and threw it at the entrance of the gate of the city and raised over it a great heap of stones, which stands there to this day. At that time Joshua built an altar to the Lord, the God of Israel, on Mount Ebal,"***

While Joshua led his troops into defeat. He had blood on his hands because he was the leader. Leadership evokes a heavy price to pay, but Joshua dealt with the sin. He absolutely destroyed the obstacle in his way from what God had for him. Joshua was not leaving the dead body to be morbid or vicious; He was doing it to show his people that setbacks cannot deter you from moving forward with God.

I think, Joshua built an altar of remembrance after the victory in Ai for two reasons. The first was to make sure that his people always remembered the heavy cost sin has in our lives. There were 36 people who died for a few pounds of silver. Going against God's Word should never be tolerated. We must remember and store what God has said to us. The second reason for an altar was so Joshua could use the defeat at Ai to bring people back to God's faithfulness. Joshua 8:34 says, ***"And afterward he read all the words of the law, the blessing and the curse, according to all that is written in the Book of the Law."*** Joshua's defeat only pushed him closer to remembering how God was faithful to them through Egypt, the wilderness, and now Canaan. Joshua wanted to make sure he took an extreme measure to ensure that no one would ever forget the cost for which they were fighting. Joshua took an extreme stance to make sure every person he knew was able to use this defeat to magnify Joshua's amazing God.

Remember the “defeats” of your past, so you do not repeat them and to remind you of God’s faithfulness.





04

STAND ON IT

DR. RANDY T. JOHNSON,
GROWTH PASTOR

I am a fan of statues. I have visited the Statue of Liberty and the Statue of David in Florence, Italy. Seeing the Christ the Redeemer statue of Jesus Christ in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil is on my bucket list. I enjoy the Rocky statue in Philadelphia and feel a connection with the Fist of Joe Louis in Detroit. I would be remiss not to mention the Spirit of Detroit.

I like learning about the history or intricate details of a statue. There are a number of statues in Gettysburg that have war heroes riding horses. It is taught that the number of hooves the horse has off the ground has meaning. If all four hooves were on the ground, the soldier died in peace. If one hoof was raised, he was wounded in battle but lived, and if two hooves were raised, he died in battle or as a result of his wounds. Statues can reveal more than we first notice.

If a statue was made of you, how would you want to be portrayed?

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The foundation of a statue can also be of interest. Not only does it need to be strong enough, but it can also bring significance and meaning. The World War II memorial of Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima invokes pride in a foundation of freedom.

Skeletons in the Closet has focused on what to do about your past. We all have a past, and it still affects (for good and bad) us today. We have already seen how we need to define it, forget it, and remember it. Now it is time to stand on it. We need to step up and stand on the foundation (our story) that has brought us to this point in our life.

So much has been learned from the woman at the well. The story concludes in John 4:39-42, ***"Many Samaritans from that town***

believed in him because of the woman's testimony, 'He told me all that I ever did.' So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them, and he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman, 'It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Savior of the world.'"

What was the woman's testimony?

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The woman's testimony was her story. It was her life, her history. It had ugly, shameful, and embarrassing elements to it, but she used it to tell others of the Messiah. She stood on her story. She did not need someone else's story. She did not need to clean up her story or her life before she could tell what Jesus did for her. She said, ***"He told me all that I ever did."*** Some people would have tried to hide, but she stood on the news. She saw past her history into her future.

Billy Sunday said, "Some persons have lived manly or womanly lives, and they lack but one thing - open confession of the Lord Jesus Christ. Some men think that they must come to him in a certain way - that they must be stirred by emotion or something like that." Come to the Lord as you are.

How can our history be His story?

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The woman at the well used her story, and many came to know the Lord personally. Paul tells Titus that we actually all have a similar story. Titus 3:3-8 says, ***"For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another. But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. The saying is trustworthy, and I want you to insist on these things, so that those who have believed in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works. These things are excellent and profitable for people."***

How does he describe our past?

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How can our past be changed?

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What are we to devote ourselves to now and for the future?

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Charles Spurgeon understood that salvation was not the ending point when he said, “Conversion is a turning onto the right road. The next thing to do is to walk on it.”

As Christians, we all have the same story: we were lost in sin, but God saved us. Everyone starts off 100% lost. We all totally need Christ. We all need to do a 180 degree turn from ourselves to follow Him.

Our sins and vices may have been different. The circumstances that revealed how lost we were are probably unique. The influence of our parents plays a part. This is what makes it our story. We need to use it for others.

John chapter 9 gives another story. The man born blind said it so well, ***“He answered, ‘Whether he is a sinner I do not know. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see’”*** (John 9:25). That was his story. The Pharisees wanted to argue with him, but it was his story. Ironically, the only one who spiritually could see was the man born blind. Everyone else focused on him and did not see the Messiah walking right by them. I wonder, if the man was not born blind would he have ever “seen” Jesus?

In Galatians 1:13-17, Paul tells his story, ***“For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers. But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone; nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia, and returned again to Damascus.”***

How does Paul describe his past?

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How does Paul describe his conversion?

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How could Paul's story help others?

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Sam Storms has said, "This is the glory and miracle of grace, that God, through the Holy Spirit, is able to transform a stubborn, rebellious, and unbelieving will into a passionate, obedient, believing will without violating the integrity of the individual or diminishing the voluntary nature of one's decision to trust Christ for salvation."

I often quote men like David Jeremiah, Charles Stanley, Chuck Swindoll, C.S. Lewis, D.L. Moody, and Charles Spurgeon. However, I want to close this study with a quote from not only a layman but a "professional wrestler." Lex Luger said, "One of the things I do is try to get a positive message out there in the local schools and tell my story. I also do a lot of faith-based speaking, sharing my story and testimony, to help show what God has done in my life and what he can do in others' lives."

OWN IT

STAND ON IT, DEVOTION 1

Ryan Story | *Location Pastor - Burton*

When I was a Student Pastor, I said, “It was my fault, I have failed to set that expectation as your leader. I apologize.” Go find any students I had in Student Leadership and ask them about that statement. They will cringe. Over the last three years, I started doing a Student Leadership class meant to help push high school and middle school students to be leaders for Christ in their homes, schools, and church. Every once in a while, expectations are not met with doing homework, inviting students to events, attendance, and other factors. In one of my favorite leadership books, a retired Navy Seal says, “Leaders must own everything in their world. There is no one else to blame.” I realized that blaming students for things was not teaching them or myself any type of lesson. I realized that any shortcoming that came from this group was on the leader, myself. Now, when I would say this it was not in a passive-aggressive, “whoa is me” move, I genuinely realized that the only person I had the right to put the blame on was myself. What came to pass was something that I did not expect. The students who bought into what we were trying to accomplish in Leadership drew closer to me and wanted to work harder to set the bar that we were trying to establish with Leadership.

In life, I feel I have been able to connect with more people in my shortcomings and my weaknesses than my strengths. I have taught many Growth Communities with adults, and I realize when I say, “Man I suck at being a husband” or “I struggle keeping my patience with my two boys,” is the moment more people are drawn closer together. People connect with people because of weaknesses more often than strengths. I love the story in John chapter four, and I have tried to

figure out how this uneducated, unsophisticated, unrefined woman was used in such an extraordinary way. We can conclude that it was because Jesus wanted to be her (and our) answer. However, I feel there is more. In John 4:29 the lady at the well says one of the most vulnerable and yet powerful statements out of anyone who has come into contact with Jesus. ***"Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?"*** Jesus called this woman out for the darkest part of herself, and after accepting that Jesus was the Christ, she began proclaiming to the town that Jesus knew all her issues. Why do I think that she was able to connect with her town so well in the name of Jesus? I think the woman finally was owning her brokenness and letting God do something with it.

Too often I see believers walking around with brokenness without ever truly giving it to Jesus. We get called out and convicted by the issues of our past, and we never truly give it to Jesus. We just walk around broken. We as believers need to take ownership of our lives and give our brokenness to God and let Him use it to help others. Often we like to own our mistakes and never give them to the real leader who can do something about our issues. Imagine a world where the church stopped walking around acting like we have everything all together and looked at a broken co-worker and talked about our struggles with our marriages, children, or other things. The Church is meant to be there loving those far from God, and yet we struggle with being honest with our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ that we have pain and problems. We have to get to a place where we are owning our testimonies and admitting the good, the bad, and the ugly. Being open with your testimony is hard, but imagine what God can do with your story if you are willing to stand on what God has done with your life.

STAND ON IT...OR NOT

STAND ON IT, DEVOTION 2

Carole Combs | *Women's Ministry*

There once was a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rains fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house (and they will), but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. There once was a foolish man who built his house on the sand. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it. Why? It is because it did not hear or do the words of the Lord (Matthew 7:24-27). As Jesus spoke these words to his hearers along the shores of the Galilean Sea, it was an obvious picture to His listeners. Of course, why would anyone build a house on the sand? The sand will only erode when the winds and the rains come. But Jesus wanted the people to look much deeper into their souls. He wanted them, as well as you and I, to see where or upon what we are building our houses (our lives).

Yes, this world will be stormy and will make us feel like we have just been physically beaten up at times. However, where you and I have built our foundation is vital for our house to keep standing during these storms of life. Jesus told the listeners that it was a wise person who built upon they rock. That rock is Jesus. Everything that appears like a rock is false. This world we live in has many temporal and shaky foundations. They may appear to be stable, when in fact, they are just a pile of sand. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. Do not be led away by diverse and strange teachings (Hebrews 13:8-9). It is completely foolish (I am not calling you this, God's Word is using this description) to trust in or build upon anything but the rock, Christ Jesus.

The woman at the well had tried so many avenues in her life to try and find stability. She even tried people hoping they were the answer to her incompleteness and instability. I had a woman tell me that her husband was her rock. Her statement scared me for her. People are mortal and sinful. If you or anyone are trusting in a person to be their stability or rock, they will be disappointed and will keep looking because they will fail you. Hebrews 13:5-6 says, ***"'I will never leave you nor forsake you.' So you can confidently say, The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?"*** The woman at the well had an encounter that day with the true rock. She realized that everything in her life that she built upon continually crashed around her. It was not the people in her life; it was not the things she wore or the home decor. This is a big one for many; it was not even her children or grandchildren. She realized that everything in her life was temporary and she was standing before the eternal rock, Christ Jesus!

On what are you personally building your foundation? Are you like the woman at the well that has tried basically everything in this world to be satisfied and complete? Have you ever had a personal encounter with Jesus? It does not have to be at a well. It can be right where you are right now. Religion has told people that they have to "clean up" before they can come to God, which is not true. He waited for the woman to come to the well. He knew she was coming. He is waiting for you. She left the well with a firm foundation. She no longer was on a path of sinking sand because she was standing on the rock, Jesus. Many Samaritans from that town believed in Him (Jesus) because of the woman's testimony (John 4: 36).

She may have had many skeletons in her closet. What did she do with those? What are you supposed to do with them? I am pretty sure skeletons are dead! The moment you trusted Christ as your Savior, your past and present sins are forgiven. Psalm 103:12 says,

"As far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us." It is only your enemy, Satan, who likes to throw the dead things back into our face. The woman at the well, you, and I must stand on the promises of God. I could not help but think of this song, *"Standing on the Promises of God."* I know it was written in the twentieth century, but I can just visualize the woman at the well breaking into song after her encounter with Jesus.

I stand amazed in the presence
Of Jesus the Nazarene,
And wonder how He could love me,
A sinner condemned, unclean.
How marvelous! How wonderful!
And my song shall ever be:
How marvelous! How wonderful!
Is my Savior's love for me!

These words of this song should resonate in the hearts of every believer. He loved her, and He loves you! You are forgiven. You are chosen. You are a child of God. The past has no hold or control over you. The woman at the well moved forward with her life on a solid foundation, and you can move forward as well. So, the next time you hear those skeleton bones rattling in your heart and mind, stand on the promises of God and throw a dog a bone!

AMAZING GRACE

STAND ON IT, DEVOTION 3

Wes McCullough | *Production Director*

Do you know anyone unfamiliar with the song *"Amazing Grace"* by John Newton? It seems even among the unchurched this song is known and sung. It is arguably one of the most famous songs ever written. While most have the lyrics committed to heart, they are unaware of the story of the writer or the circumstances that brought him to these words.

Before he was a theologian and preacher, John Newton was in the Royal Navy and then a sailor in the slave trade. His language was beyond profane, and he lived without respect for others. He rejected the faith of his parents and mocked those who lived out their faith. His biography describes him to be quite a wretched individual.

In 1748, Newton's ship was caught in a violent storm that led him to call out to God for mercy. That moment was the turning point for him, and he eventually left the slave trade and pursued God's calling on his life.

Romans 3:23 says, ***"For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."*** Each of us has lived in sin. We have made mistakes and have our own personal testimony of how God has forgiven and redeemed us. Some testimonies are stories of incredible transformation from God-hater to God-lover while some are that of a lifelong Christian. Each testimony will be used by God.

John Newton put his "skeletons" into a song, and it has been ministering to souls for nearly 250 years.

Amazing grace! How sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch; like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.

'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears relieved;
How precious did that grace appear
The hour I first believed!

The skeletons in your closet provide a perspective of God's gift of amazing grace. In 1 Peter 4:10 it says, ***"As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace."*** Do not hide your skeletons. Stand on them and use them to show others that no sin is beyond God's redemptive love.

RUNNING THE RACE

STAND ON IT, DEVOTION 4

James Clouse | *Student Pastor*

I have a confession to make. Growing up in the youth group at the River Church was an amazing journey. I gave my life to the Lord in the Summer of 1995 after hearing Pastor Jim speak on salvation. This was new to my ears. I had never heard of salvation before or about having a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. So when it came time to pray, and we bowed our heads and closed our eyes, I peeked. Why? Well, there was this cute girl who was putting her hand up to pray, so I did, too. Yes, I was one of those kids. I have even called my Youth Pastor from my middle school and high school years to apologize for being one of those kids because as a Student Pastor now I understand his pain. But when it came down to the time to talk and pray with a leader, I meant every word of what I said to God.

I went on from there to live a life for Christ. I served in AWANA, went to the camps, joined the leadership group, and did all the things I thought was right. One day on a missions trip in Mexico my 10th-grade year, I was sitting in the van on the way back after a hard day and told God that whatever I did in life I would do it for Him. I dedicated my life to Him right there in the van. Was this salvation? No, I had already done that. But the Christian life is not just a one thing, one prayer deal. It is an ongoing race or journey.

1 Corinthians 9:24-27 says, ***"Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air.***

But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified."

I understood then in that van that I did not want to run my life aimlessly. I knew that my life was God's and that I wanted Him to use me in any way He saw fit. I stand on that foundation that Christ continues to work on me every single day.

Church, how is Christ working on you today? Has Christ shown you through this book that while you may be a Christian, you are not running the race but rather standing and watching? How is God telling you to condition your soul more to serve Him better?

CHAPLAIN AWARD

STAND ON IT, DEVOTION 5

Noble Baird | *Community Center Director*

At times, it can be hard to look back at our past, let alone talk about it with others. For some of us, we are ashamed of our past and not too proud of the things we have done. Yet, there are others who look back and are not ashamed, but at the same time, there may have been some wasted opportunities. Then, there are some who look back and can confidently say they had no regrets. If I am honest with myself and you, I fall into the first category, ashamed and not proud of the things I did. For years, I attended church and Christian school. It included going to chapels, Bible class, and then serving on Sundays in the children's ministry. However, I was just checking off a "Christian" box in my life, and I was a completely different person at school with my friends and schoolmates than I was on Sundays at church.

In John chapter 4, Jesus meets with the Samaritan woman at the well. As the passage continues, we find that the woman has a past she is ashamed because of her multiple divorces and being married while living with another man. Yet, Jesus came to her and offered her the hope that had been missing in her life. Jesus told her that He is the Christ and that through Him she could have forgiveness and did not have to hide in the shadow of her past, but live in the new life through Him. Jesus not only forgave this woman for her sins and what she has done in the past, but He gave her hope. It was the hope she was missing. She had been searching for hope in all these different men and situations.

I will never forget the end of my freshman year in high school, at our awards ceremony. There was an award given every year to the

student from each grade that reflected Christ and a love for serving Him, the Chaplain Award. To my surprise and the surprise of every classmate that knew me, I was given this award. Out of all the freshmen in my school, I was chosen. This shook me to my core. I had no idea why I was chosen. Yet, as I went up front to receive the undeserved award, I was reminded of a passage in Revelation 3:15-17 where the church in Laodicea is being judged for their character and actions. Starting in verse 15 it read, ***"I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth. For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched pitiable, poor, blind, and naked."***

Receiving that award changed my life. I realized that I needed to get my act together and stop having one foot with Christ and the other in the world. I was truly lukewarm for Jesus. Although my change did not happen overnight, I knew that it had to happen. So, as we wrap up this series on Skeletons in the Closet, I want to challenge you to take a step back and look at your life. I was hopeless and living my life for Christ and this world. I thought I could do both but quickly found out that was not the case. I encourage you to take a step back and look at your story, actions, and friends. Are you all in for Christ or are you simply fooling yourself and living lukewarm?

SEVEN AND ONE HALF

STAND ON IT, DEVOTION 6

Jayson Combs | *Family Pastor*

On January 1, 1997, I asked Laura Dubey to be my girlfriend. I was a 17-year-old junior in high school. She was a 14-year-old freshman. On June 4, 2004, we married. If you are quick with your math, you added it up to a seven and one half year dating relationship. You may first say that is cute that I married my high school sweetheart. You may view that as something special. I will also say those things, but as a fifteen plus year vet in youth ministry, and a guy who regularly says that a long-term specific dating relationship in high school is stupid, this serves as a problem.

As a Youth Pastor for that many years, I have found disaster in long-term dating. Whether Christian or non-Christian, it usually (almost always) brings a sinful carnage of hurt and scars. Every year I would take a month and teach on student dating. I would teach what the Bible says and does not say (1 Thessalonians chapter 4, 1 Corinthians 6:18, and Ephesians 5:3 are a good place to start). The questions then would always be asked, well what did you do?

Do you have a story that you would not recommend for others? Is there a story where you watched God bless and bring you through, but that you hope and pray those that you love do not follow? If so, how do we deal with this? First, I think it is okay to share our weakness. I do not have to pretend I am perfect. I do not have to pretend that I always did things God's way. Too many times the Church looks like a place where we cannot show any weakness. I am thankful that God, even through things that are dangerous, protects and guides. I do believe the Word (Romans 8:28) that God uses all things together for good to those who love the Lord.

As I give people my story, I always point them to the Word. In Titus 2:11-12 we read, ***"For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age."***

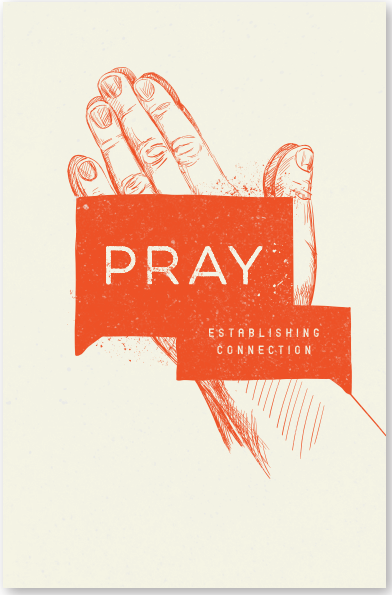
My hope is that my story will point others to renounce ungodliness and not celebrate it. My hope is that my story points people to live a life of self-control, not recklessness. I pray that my story points people to the amazing God so that we may live a life that He has for us.

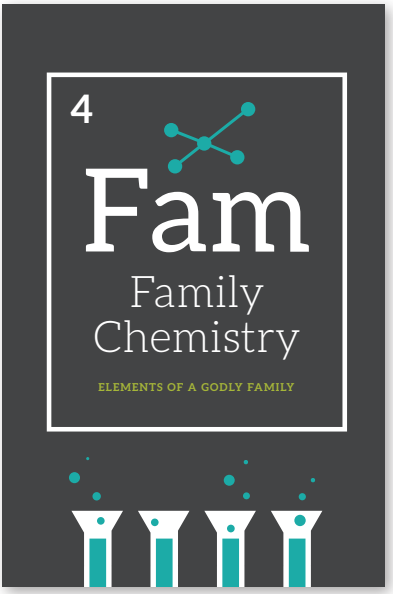
I believe I can use my story to point people to Jesus. But I also believe if they do not find the truth in His Word and how He tells us to live, they will not find Jesus.

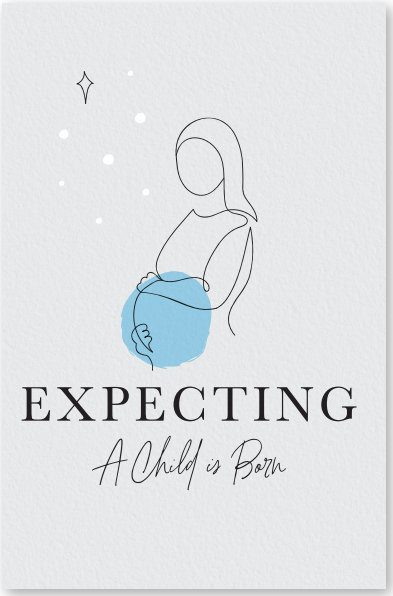
I have heard people say I would not change my story one bit. I would agree with that, but I would also say, "It is my story, not yours. Live your life to follow Jesus."

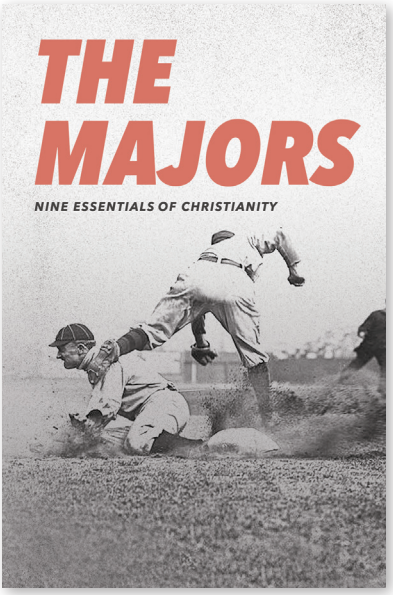
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BOOKS BY THE RIVER CHURCH









OUR MISSION

Matthew 28:19-20: ***"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."***

REACH

At The River Church, you will often hear the phrase, "we don't go to church, we are the Church." We believe that as God's people, our primary purpose and goal is to go out and make disciples of Jesus Christ. We encourage you to reach the world in your local communities.

GATHER

Weekend Gatherings at The River Church are all about Jesus, through singing, giving, serving, baptizing, taking the Lord's Supper, and participating in messages that are all about Jesus and bringing glory to Him. We know that when followers of Christ gather together in unity, it's not only a refresher it's bringing life-change.

GROW

Our Growth Communities are designed to mirror the early church in Acts as having ***"all things in common."*** They are smaller collections of believers who spend time together studying the word, knowing and caring for one another relationally, and learning to increase their commitment to Christ by holding one another accountable.

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