
H. NORMAN WRIGHT

WHEN THE
PAST WON'T
LET YOU GO



HARVEST HOUSE PUBLISHERS
EUGENE, OREGON

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Verses marked NLT are taken from the *Holy Bible*, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996, 2004, 2007, 2013 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

Verses marked AMP are taken from the Amplified® Bible, copyright © 1954, 1958, 1962, 1964, 1965, 1987 by The Lockman Foundation. All rights reserved. Used by permission. (www.Lockman.org)

Verses marked TLB are taken from The Living Bible copyright © 1971. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

Verses marked NASB are taken from the New American Standard Bible®, © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. (www.Lockman.org)

Verses marked MSG are taken from THE MESSAGE. © by Eugene H. Peterson 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2001, 2002. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

Verses marked GNT are taken from the Good News Translation in Today's English Version—Second Edition Copyright © 1992 by American Bible Society. Used by permission.

Italics in Scripture quotations indicate author's emphasis.

In the author's examples that draw on interactions with clients, their names and some details have been changed to protect confidentiality.

Cover by Lucas Art and Design, Jenison, Michigan

WHEN THE PAST WON'T LET YOU GO

Copyright © 2016 H. Norman Wright

Published by Harvest House Publishers

Eugene, Oregon 97402

www.harvesthousepublishers.com

ISBN 978-0-7369-6679-5 (pbk.)

ISBN 978-0-7369-6680-1 (eBook)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Wright, H. Norman, author.

Title: When the past won't let you go / H. Norman Wright.

Description: Eugene : Harvest House Publishers, 2016.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016006054 | ISBN 9780736966795 (pbk.)

Subjects: LCSH: Loss (Psychology)—Religious aspects—Christianity. |

Regret—Religious aspects—Christianity. | Suffering—Religious aspects—Christianity.

Classification: LCC BV4909 .W76 2016 | DDC 248.8/6—dc23 LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2016006054>

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, digital, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Printed in the United States of America

16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 / VP-SK / 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Contents

1. Are We Our Past?	5
2. Memories	19
3. We Are Our Thoughts.	39
4. Emotions and Life—Especially Anger.	59
5. Fear vs. Hope	81
6. Our Brain	93
7. Grieving Past Losses	107
8. Trauma and Our Past	121
9. Putting Past Trauma Behind Us.	135
10. Trapped or Free? We Choose.	151
Notes.	163

Are We Our Past?

The past—our lives are built on it. Perhaps a better word for it is “foundation.” Who we are today is also built on our experiences, as well as conscious and not-so-conscious memories. Some people have used their pasts as launching pads for where they are in present life. They’ve put their experiences and memories to good use. God’s Word says, “When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me” (1 Corinthians 13:11).

It isn’t necessary to dredge up every experience in our lives to move forward. But it is important to understand the connection between who we are today and the influence of our past because they are intertwined. As a seasoned counselor and crisis responder, I’ve seen many people who left parts of themselves behind because they’d served their usefulness. At the same time, other portions of their pasts were still influencing, dictating, or controlling their present life—and not always in positive ways. Many of those I see lack the tools to change or aren’t aware of how much their pasts are robbing them of a vibrant present and future.

The past was never designed to limit our present and future.

When we don’t move on from the past, our lives might be stunted or stuck, which means we’re living as though the past is our present and our future. This is not as it was meant to be emotionally or spiritually. If the past is dictating today or tomorrow, it may be our own

doing or we are hanging on to people and significant life experiences. The past was never designed to limit our present and future, yet this is exactly what has happened to many. To cast off negative anchors and sail forward, we need to consider three factors—our past, our present, and our future—and how they interconnect. As believers, we're called to grow in Christ by stepping forward in faith, but sometimes our past acts like a restraining anchor. Anchors have their place and can be useful, but they need to be the right kind of anchor.

One of the small ponds I fish in has massive weed growth as summer approaches. A bell-shaped anchor works well since it doesn't catch the weeds. An anchor shaped like a grappling hook can gather up to twenty pounds of weeds. There have been times when it was almost impossible to lift that anchor. I was stuck.

There are different responses to the past. Some believe it is of little consequence. It has no influence or power in current life. The problems of the past have nothing to do with our choices today. What happened back then has no impact on today or tomorrow. They give it little if any regard in their life. Problems stay in the past and have no influence on today.

Others believe the past is everything, and we should examine every experience under a microscope to get all the nuances. Any failure or problems today can be attributed to the past. Our past wounds haven't totally healed, so they impact our present and our future. We're driven by our past and our need to confront it. Today's poor choices are not our fault. Consider these two possibilities in more detail:

Some people will never get beyond the pain from their past. It will wreak havoc in their personal and professional lives because they will keep cursing their pain, and it will keep cursing them back. They will choose to believe they are inseparably attached to their past without realizing they are, in fact, making a choice to hold on.

They will hold on to it in one of two ways. Either they will give in to it with a self-loathing that ensures perpetual misery and failure, or they will wage an angry and desperate

war against it in an effort to bury its devastation in self-denial. Either way, they will never surrender the past pain. They will hold on to the idea that they shouldn't have had to go through the pain and that life is not fair. And they will, therefore, miss out on the brand-new ending that could in fact be theirs.

Then there's a group of people who will have taken a different path. They will realize their past isn't really their past. They will come to grips with the fact that their past pain is still impacting them and choose to rise above it. . . They will surrender their pain. Instead of ignoring or denying it, they will choose to be emptied of it, and in a glorious miracle, God will actually use the pain of their past to help redeem others, in effect, allowing them to find purpose in the pain.

This choice isn't easy. You have to choose to do something you think you can't do. It requires a resolve that can only be found deep within your soul. But this choice does nothing less than determine your destiny.

It's the choice to let go of your desire to have life go the way you planned it. It's the choice to find hope in your hurt. It's the choice called surrender.

There is strength in letting go. There is a radical power in surrender.¹

I've talked with those who quote Paul's statement in Philippians 3:13-14: "Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of [righteousness]. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus." They focus on the phrase "forgetting what is behind" as meaning we need to do just that. Forget it. Don't waste time on it. Move on. We don't need to give it any attention—except that's not what Paul meant. Paul was simply saying that none of his former righteous deeds could be used as reasons he should be accepted into God's family on his own merit. Salvation is based on God's grace. His former actions

were not the basis for his salvation. That's the part of the past he was choosing to forget.

Jimmy Evans describes it this way:

The Apostle Paul was able to forget the past, not because of his desire to be an emotional martyr or his ability to erase his memory. Rather, he could forget his past because it was reconciled in Christ. The people who had harmed him had been forgiven; the events of his upbringing were dealt with, and every other significant thing in his past had been successfully resolved by the power that only Jesus Christ could give.²

The past is not the past until it has been reconciled in Christ. We have to face the past to confront the present. It isn't easy; it can be painful. Many people are reluctant to "face the unacceptable," as Dr. David Hart describes:

Many people fear that if they face the unacceptable they will become it. The exact reverse is true. If you do not face it, you will become it. It will always be lived out in one way or another. The turning point comes when something in us decides that the unacceptable is really meant for us, and we begin to look for its meaning.

If, on the other hand, we employ our usual means not to face what is meant for us—and each of us has his own particular escapes—the terror of the unacceptable not only remains with us, but is also always being lived out as a real disturbance in our lives. We then need constant reassurance that "it is not really so," a precarious and unreal base on which to live.³

You and I are products of the past as is everyone. But many live in the expectation of the future. For many, these two times are permanent. Do you ever wonder why we waste so much time not living in the present? "Many are distracted by the *there and then* rather than the *here and now*."⁴

Consider the thoughts of a man whose past could have destroyed him:

We bear the imprint of the past as it is, not as it might have been. What actually happened is irreversible, and so are the consequences.

In that sense we are powerless. We can spend the rest of our days reviewing and wishing and imagining and scheming, but we will never be able to alter what has already happened. The past is simply there, influencing everything we do. The best we can do—in fact, the only thing we can do—is remember the past and respond to it.⁵

Jerry Sittser puts it beautifully:

The past is out of reach; we can neither return to it nor reverse it. It holds power over us because it is unchangeable, rolling over us like waves, one consequence following another. It creates the conditions of the present, whether we like it or not. Still, we have the power to choose how we remember and respond to the past, which enables us to engage the present moment in a redemptive way.⁶

Wouldn't it be wonderful if there was a way to fill the emotional deficits of our pasts and our lives without continuing the risk of experiencing again the disappointment and losses? Well, there is. And it's actually risk free.

I've often heard counselees say they wish they could either erase the past or restore what went wrong. Many wish they could overcome what they consider a wasted past. The past is a part of our life, and it can be used to make the present different.

It starts with redemptive memory, which enables us to remember the past differently—not as an ideal to which we would like to return or as a regret we would like to reverse, but as one chapter in a larger redemptive story we continue to live out in the present moment. God is in the past,

however ideal or horrible; he rules over the past and promises to use the past, *as it is*, to work redemption. He makes all things serve his plan and fulfill his redemptive purpose.⁷

What it comes down to is that, for many, the baggage of the past can be summed up in one word: hurt. It could have been physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual. I've had a number of counselees say, "Norm, I really don't want to look at all the hurt. What good does it do? I'm past it and ready to move on. I don't want to dredge it up again." But that's why so many people are stuck in their past. Hurt does not stand alone or exit by itself. Hurt is like a cell that mutates and expands. It's like a splinter that constantly festers.

Often it is difficult for us to admit that our hurt occurred. I've heard a number of reasons why some don't want to face their old wounds.

- Some don't want to admit that what happened to them actually happened.
- Some believe if they admit to the hurt and pain of the past, they are in some way different or damaged and not useful to others. They want to see themselves as okay, but they don't. They definitely don't want others to know to avoid being judged or offered unwanted advice.
- Some are afraid to confront the painful past. That's understandable. There is fear that experiencing the pain again might be too much to bear.
- There is also the fear that confronting the past may require change, which opens the door to failure.

The reality is that to move from being a yesterday person to a tomorrow person, we need to admit we were hurt, face it, describe it, and tell our stories. This also means facing what our hurt has turned into—anger.

The word "denial" is overused and probably misused as well. But many of us were taught to deny our feelings. We also deny because, at the time of our trauma or hurt, we needed help to cope. We weren't

prepared to experience what was occurring or the feelings that were activated. We pretend what is happening isn't happening and, even if it did, it doesn't matter and won't happen again.

We learn to tune the pain and hurt out like adolescents tune out parental lectures. Think about it. When we experienced our hurt, we were probably too hurt, too shocked, or too young to handle or understand what was occurring. Here's the problem: It's quite easy to turn the pain and hurt on, but it's a lot harder to turn them off. The more we engage denial, the easier it is to resort to it. Denial leads to rationalization and excuses:

Denial is a general anesthetic. When you numb one emotion, you numb them all. When you flush away your bad feeling, the good ones go down the drain, too. Consequently, it is impossible to *genuinely* feel bliss or any other positive emotion while pushing down pain from the past. Lost joy, excitement, and peace of mind are part of the price you pay for your one-way ticket away from unpleasant realities.

Even though denial is so easily activated and even though you have so many convincing reasons to maintain it, your denial defense system eventually stops working. The feelings you buried periodically rise up from their graves. Memories of old injuries and injustices come back to haunt you, and when they do, your internal defense mechanisms alone can no longer protect you.⁸

Many of us have pasts so wracked with pain that our pattern of life is devoted to playing it safe and, thus, not run the risk of being hurt again. We find ways to create a safe distance and avoid losses, as well as build walls to keep others out. The ways we manifest this vary. We may be aloof, defensive, negative, sarcastic, cynical, or very selective in what we share. We may relate with some people, but we don't make ourselves vulnerable. This brings to mind a phrase in *Why Am I Afraid to Tell You Who I Am?* by Father John Powell: "I'm afraid to tell you who I am because if I tell you who I am you might not like who I am and that's all I've got."

Conversely, our pain may cause us to respond in a totally different way. We may be so desperate for closeness that we go to any extreme to have this false or exaggerated intimacy be a part of our life. We make choices that aren't healthy.

The hurts of the past keep us from the joy of the present and the future.

Regardless of the approach any of us take or the type of wall we build, the result is the same. We end up feeling lonely, isolated, trapped in a holding cell of our own creation. We wanted to keep people from getting close enough to hurt us. We believed that was what we had to do to survive. But when all is said and done, when all the barriers to closeness have been constructed and cemented into place, we realize we have also kept people from getting close enough to love us, to care about us, comfort us, encourage us, and provide us with the sort of emotional support we need to lead a full and fulfilling life. Once again, we experience pain when pain is precisely what we were hoping to avoid.⁹

I like what Stephen Viars said about four possible ways of looking at our past. We have an *innocent past*. This past is “comprised of the times when you suffered because someone sinned against you or because of trials you faced as a result of living in a sin-cursed world.” And this is when we responded *well*.

We also have an *innocent past* when we responded *poorly*. Often we are caught off guard. “We usually aren't prepared for mistreatment, injustice, or abuse. Even when we expect such treatment it hurts. Too frequently, our response to such treatment displeases God” and others. We use sarcasm, revenge, the cold shoulder.

There is also the *guilty past* when we responded *well*. “The guilty past is made up of those occasions initiated by our own wrongdoing. The problem would have never occurred were it not for our sin [not responding properly].”

Finally, we have a *guilty past* when we responded *poorly*. “Sometimes we strike out twice. Not only did our sin initiate the conflict but our next choices made things worse.”¹⁰

Our Past

So, how do we view the past? Do we see it as something more positive in our life or more of a negative? Do we use it as something that has shaped our life for the better or has it been more destructive? Do we see it as a friend or is it one of our worst enemies?

Any hurt we've experienced has to be resolved. When we don't, it festers and stays alive in a detrimental way. Any hurt or trauma that is unaddressed becomes a negative in our life. Viars wrote:

You probably have distinguishing features—surgical scars, birthmarks, whatever they might be. They are just part of who you are.

Your past is like that. It has marked you, and in some cases, marked you deeply. If you are like most people, you probably don't think about it very much. Your past is a silent companion that accompanies you wherever you go.

What was God thinking? He could have made us without the capacity to remember. Every day would literally be a new day with no memories, no past and no baggage.

Would that make life better? If you could walk through a device similar to a metal detector at an airport but one that would erase your past and its effects on you today, would you do it? And would you be better off?

Some people seem to think so. They describe the past with phrases such as “toxic past,” “wounded inner child,” or “damaged emotions.” In many cases they do so with good reason.

But does it mean that the past, in its entirety, is a bad thing? Would we all be better off if we could completely erase our memories and the impact our past has on our lives today?

Not if we allow God's Word to guide us.

The Bible gives us several ways our pasts can be among our best friends.¹¹

James had been coming for counseling for several months. One day during his session, he said, “I’ve been searching for the right words to describe how I’m feeling and what’s going on inside of me. Sometimes I leave here and think I just didn’t really describe what’s going on inside of me. This week as I was reading Scripture, I found the words. I was reading 1 Samuel 17 about David. In verse 11, I found it: ‘On hearing the Philistine’s words, Saul and all the Israelites were dismayed and greatly afraid.’ That describes me exactly.” I’ve heard many people describe their lives in this way.

I find it interesting that David’s response to the challenge drew on what he’d done and learned in his past.

David said to Saul, “Your servant has been keeping his father’s sheep. When a lion or a bear came and carried off a sheep from the flock, I went after it, struck it and rescued the sheep from its mouth. When it turned on me, I seized it by its hair, struck it and killed it. Your servant has killed both the lion and the bear; this uncircumcised Philistine will be like one of them, because he has defied the armies of the living God. The LORD who rescued me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear will rescue me from the hand of this Philistine.”

Saul said to David, “Go, and the LORD be with you” (1 Samuel 17:34-37).

David used his past experiences in a positive way. He had a choice just like we do as we look at the past: “What have we learned that we can use today in a positive way?” or “What can we take from the past that will hinder us?” David was also a man who experienced multiple traumas, but he drew on what he’d learned to succeed in the present. He benefited from his past.

Do you remember the story of Joseph? (See Genesis 37–50.) Joseph was favored by his father and at odds with his older brothers, who were filled with jealousy. One day they beat him up, threw him into a pit, sold him into slavery, and let their father believe Joseph was dead.

Joseph had quite a past—one filled with hurt, rejection, trauma, and

injustice. And it continued. As a slave, he was falsely accused, imprisoned, and forgotten for a long time. When he was finally released, he helped the Pharaoh and was elevated to second in command of the country. When his brothers came to buy food, Joseph revealed who he was. He said, “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives” (Genesis 50:20).

Joseph didn’t try to deny the past. He didn’t pretend his brothers had never hurt him deeply. Joseph had grieved the past and worked through it with God’s grace so he didn’t transfer the pain to his present or future.

I believe two of the most important words in the Bible are “But God.” This phrase is used throughout Scripture as a turning point, a line of demarcation between peril and rescue, chaos and control, fall and redemption, hurt and healing.

- The psalmist in Psalm 73:26 NLT: “My health may fail, and my spirit may grow weak, *but God* remains the strength of my heart; he is mine forever.”
- Jesus in Matthew 19:26 NLT: “Humanly speaking, it is impossible. *But with God* everything is possible.”
- The apostle Paul in Acts 13:29-30 NLT: “When they had done all that the prophecies said about him, they took him down from the cross and placed him in a tomb. *But God* raised him from the dead!”

Once we were dead in sin, *but God* made us alive. Once we were captive to our past, *but God* made us free. Once we were unworthy, *but God* promised to spend eternity unwrapping the riches of His grace in kindness toward us.

A New Way

There’s no way around the past. No matter how hard we try, we can’t erase it. Our goal is not to become a person who doesn’t have a history—that’s impossible and useless. The goal is to find a new way

of working with the past so it doesn't continue to negatively impact today and our future. The goal is to fight the inner urge we all have to return to the past.¹²

A Helpful Exercise

One tool I've used to help people handle the negatives in their pasts is to help them identify and clarify how their past has controlled them. People sometimes resist some of these statements of admission. Yes, they are quite specific, and sometimes we may need to revisit the statements in order to recall similar situations in our lives.

Take a piece of paper and write down each statement, allowing plenty of room for writing. You may even want to use a separate page for each question. Once you have completed a question, read it out loud as is or put it in the form of a prayer and ask God to continue His healing work in your life.

Statements of the Past

- In the past I was hurt by [name of person] and hurt in this way:
- What he or she did still hurts me in this way:
- What happened was wrong for these reasons:
- The way I've suffered since then is...
- Here is how it continues to impact me:
- Here is what I would like to hear from him or her:

Now, here are some questions to help us move from the past to the present and then to the future. We may find it beneficial to discuss these with our trusted friends.

1. What are some personal habits you would like to modify or eliminate? In what way will this help you become more of a today and tomorrow person?
2. Consider your relationships with friends, relatives, and

coworkers. How would you like these to improve or develop?

3. What are some changes you would like to make at home, work, and church, as well as personal, including physical, mental, and spiritual?
4. What are two problems you would like to resolve in the next six months?
5. Describe the feelings and emotions you would like to experience each day.
6. What positive affirmations will you say to yourself just before you go to sleep and the first thing when you awaken? Keep paper and pen by your bed to keep track of how you are feeling and thoughts that come to mind. Ask yourself about the significance of these responses.¹³

Don't be discouraged if you draw some blanks at first or if your responses are minimal. If you've been stuck in your past, it will take some time to shift your thinking.

Some people have found it helpful to write a monthly letter to themselves describing what they did and experienced the previous month.

These snapshots can expose your inner self. You may be required to face the ugliness, selfishness, and meanness of your own actions. Then what? In this case, there are no second chances. You are left only with a bitter memory of failures or the guilt of the good intentions you had but failed to live up to. Thankfully, God promises to forgive us when we confess our failures. He will absolve us when we repent, confess our guilt, ask for forgiveness and, when possible, make right what we have done or failed to do.

Pat Layton, in her book *Life Unstuck*, suggested six reasons for looking at the past in order to move forward.

1. *God heals what is revealed.* Healing the past begins with sharing your story with someone you trust... When we share our past... we begin the healing process to life unstuck.

2. *Covering up versus cleaning up...* When we cover up, we end up stuck.
3. *We pass on what we have not cleaned up.* We must consider the importance of the past and recognize the role it plays in the future and what it may be able to tell you about yourself. In your passage through life, you want to be fully in charge of the route, the events, the destination; in order to do so, you need a clear view of where you have been.¹⁴
4. *The Holy Spirit gives us the strength to make peace with our past.*
5. *Biblical truth is the key to life unstuck.* The truth contained in the Bible transforms us, but we also need to know there is another *reason* God gave us His Word. “The Bible is not an end in itself, but a means to bring men to an intimate and satisfying knowledge of God.”¹⁵
6. *Freedom comes from surrender.* Allow this journey of looking backward to be the way God begins His amazing healing in your life.¹⁶

When we give our pain to God, He sets us free.

Remember, there is no perfect solution. We may wish our lives will turn out to match our dreams and that there will be complete healing and positive changes. We can't change others or all the factors existing in our environment. We need to carve out a new normal for us. We need to focus on making internal changes. Look for what is possible and realistic rather than the unobtainable ideal.¹⁷