

Redeeming the Bad Memories of Your Past Sins



By Robert D. Jones

Besieged with dark memories, Holly did little more each day than cope. Her past sexual sins and attempted suicide troubled her daily. Having learned of these things shortly after their marriage, her husband Jim sought to respond in supportive ways. Yet her choice to have concealed her sins only multiplied her guilt. Day and night a depressive cloud hung over Holly as she painfully recalled her past. The fact that she committed these sins as a Christian only doubled her misery. She knew better, and she hated her life.

Todd too was troubled by his past. His failing hardware business brought mounting debts, and his get-rich schemes yielded little more than financial misery for Janet and him. Anger tantrums became nightly events. His increased drinking and expanding rage only distanced Janet and the kids more, issuing finally in a bitter divorce. "Why did I say those things about her, in front of the children? I know they weren't true," he later admitted to his pastor. "I'm the one who ruined our marriage, not her. And there's nothing I can do about it now."

Is there help and hope in Christ for Holly and Todd, and for others who suffer from their past? Do the memories of your past nag and

haunt you? Perhaps it was one big sin, or maybe some chronic pattern of wrong behavior. These memories can plague and cripple you.

If you struggle with your past, you are not alone. Listen to this assessment by a seasoned pastor, D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones:

The problem here is the case of those who are miserable or who are suffering from spiritual depression because of their past—either because of some particular sin in their past, or because of the particular form which sin happened to take in their case. I would say that in my experience in the ministry extending now over many years, there is no more common difficulty. It is constantly recurring and I think that I have had to deal with more people over this particular thing than over anything else.¹

God in His Word provides solution to this haunting problem, a powerful and life-changing solution beyond any that we could imagine. What is God's answer?

Our Goal: Not Memory Erasure, nor Memory Denial, but Memory Transformation

Let's begin by defining our goal. Most people I interview who suffer from past memories simply want them to disappear. "I just want to

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¹ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Its Cure* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), p. 66.

forget the past. I wish it would all go away.” What they want, simply put, is memory erasure.

If eradicating the past is one’s goal, the world offers a menu of escapes. You can dull your memories by drug or alcohol abuse. “I drank to forget the pain,” Todd later confessed. Holly settled for a combination of therapeutic memory healing and prescription tranquilizing medications. In more serious cases, beleaguered people opt for electroconvulsive shock treatments or demon deliverance ministries. What all these have in common, of course, is a rid-the-memory agenda.

On the other hand, some would-be helpers seem to deny the problem and urge a different goal, a just-forget-the-past agenda. Some Christians appeal to Philippians 3:13 (“forgetting those things which are behind”), exhorting people plagued by past memories to “just forget about your past,” or “just put ‘em behind you and get on with your life.” That was the counsel Holly received from one radio preacher. “Ask God to help you put the past behind you. When bad thoughts arise, just pray and press on with reading your Bible, going to church, and serving Jesus. Forget those things that are behind you. Don’t dwell on the past; live for the present.”

While sounding attractive, such a just-forget-the-past agenda is misleading and insensitive to suffering people. For one thing, it misinterprets Philippians 3:13. In context Paul is not talking about forgetting his past sins. He recalls his past way of trying to get right with God based not on Jesus but on religious achievement. Paul does not tell people to “just forget about your past thievery.” Moreover, the counsel is pastorally unkind. While prayer, Scripture, church, and Christian service are vital parts of God’s answer, the just-forget-the-past approaches fail to embed those rich disciplines in their gospel context. They offer little positive help for hurting people who feel unable to shut off the bad memory flow. Further, this agenda settles for too little. It misses God’s greater goal for us: Christlikeness.

The good news, however, is that if you belong to Jesus, then God has something better for you. God does not want to *remove* your memories; He wants to *redeem* them. God wants to *transform* them into something good,

something beneficial, something that will help you become more like Christ.

Do you see the hope this breeds for Christians? Your bad memories of your past sins—even the heinous ones—can provide opportunities for life-changing growth. You do not need to avoid, run from, cover over, or get rid of your past. You can reinterpret it God’s way. God’s goal is neither memory erasure nor memory denial, but memory redemption.

A Biblical Perspective on Memories

How can God redeem your recurring memories of past sin? Before unpacking the key steps in this solution, let’s briefly consider how God wants us to think about “memories.”

First, realize that God was “in” your past. He was not asleep or on vacation when you did or said the sinful things that now trouble you. Whether you committed those sins before or after you became a Christian, the sovereign God was on site. He now designs to turn your past into something good. This is the perspective Joseph powerfully models in Genesis 50:20, when he reflected on his brothers’ treacherous sins: “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good.” (See also Gen. 45:5-7; Acts 17:25-31; Rom. 8:28-29; Eph. 1:4,11; and Jer. 29:11).

Second, realize that while your past might *influence* your present beliefs or conduct, it does not *determine* them. You are not a victim of what you did or what happened to you. You are not doomed. Instead, as a fully human person, you are an active interpreter and responder to your situation. You are fully responsible for your present choices no matter what memories linger (see Gen. 37-50; Prov. 4:23; Mark 7:14-23; and James 1:13-15).

Third, your memories result from your act of *interpreting* your past (see Gen. 50:20; Rom. 8:28-29; Num. 11; Ps. 78:11, 106:13; and Ezek. 16). What you actually remember are not the past events per se, but the past events as-you-interpret-them. They are not bare facts, but interpreted facts. As such, they are capable of reinterpretation. Herein lies hope. God can help you put the right interpretation—a biblical spin—on your past and make your past even a good thing for you.

Soon after moving from Illinois to West

Virginia, I lost my eyeglasses. Being lazy, cheap, and too proud to admit visual decline, I went several years without replacing them. Eventually, after an eye exam and some loving pressure from my wife, I broke down and bought a new pair. The result? Suddenly I entered a new world. Interstate billboards I had passed for years instantly became legible. Little items enlarged. Colors brightened. Contrasts cleared. The glasses had corrected my vision defect and allowed me to see things accurately, the way they really are.

The same is true of your memories. As you put on the Bible's glasses to gain a Christ-centered perspective, you see your past differently. Like Joseph, you can draw positive conclusions about God's all-powerful, all-wise and all-loving purposes.

Redeeming Your Memories: Three Benefits in 1 Timothy 1:12-17

How do we interpret our past sins so that they might be redeemed? The Apostle Paul's real-life example can direct us. Nearing the end of his ministry, Paul writes to Timothy to fortify his fearful young friend Timothy with God's strength. In 1 Timothy 1:12-17, Paul recalls his own call to ministry, a call that came to him while he actively opposed and persecuted the church of Jesus. Listen to his testimony:

I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that He considered me faithful, appointing me to His service. Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners--of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display His unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on Him and receive eternal life. Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

Notice that Paul doesn't hide his sinful past; he presents a biblical interpretation of it. He doesn't flee, avoid, or forget his past; he looks at it through God's lens. The passage ends on a positive note. Jesus saves and transforms not just little sinners but big sinners, like Paul, and God gets exalted in the process. Viewing his past through a biblical lens results in deepening repentance, heightened gratitude for grace, and broader effectiveness in helping others. Let's examine each of these benefits in turn.

Benefit #1: Deepening Repentance

Simply put, remembering the ugliness of your past sins deepens your repentance. In the above verses, Paul recalls how evil he was. He blasphemed God, a heinous, capital offense for a Jew. In his initial anti-Christian zeal, Paul persecuted Christ's church. He was a violent man, overseeing and encouraging the physical beating and stoning of disciples like Stephen in Acts 7. Yet Paul does not avoid recalling them or try to forget them. Instead, he reminds himself, and Timothy, of his wickedness.

What value comes from being conscious of your past sins? For one thing, it will drive you to seek reconciliation and even restitution with those you have mistreated (if you have not done so already). Perhaps certain sins hound you simply because they remain unresolved. The nagging nature of past sins might signal the need to repair the offense or reconcile a relationship. Further work could be needed.

Sandra's relationship with her mother demonstrated these dynamics. For some twenty years, Sandra grappled daily with guilt about mistreating her mom. It began when she rudely rejected her mother's sensible counsel about college, career, and marriage choices. Subsequent efforts to rebuild the relationship failed, and the guilt compounded. "I can't believe how hardheaded I really was back then," she admits in retrospect. It was only when Sandra repented and sought her mother's forgiveness that her struggle resolved. The bad memories in turn have slowly shriveled.

Being conscious of your sins can also sensitize you to temptations in those same areas. Like a child once burned by a stove, you will be more careful next time, quicker to watch and

pray about this area of past weakness. Remembering your past sins will deter you from repeating them. "As a dog returns to its vomit, so a fool repeats his folly" (Prov. 26:11). The repentant, former adulterer will avoid the first step that once led him down that destructive path.

In Romans 6 Paul expands on this dynamic, reminding us of God's saving grace in Christ. Union with the crucified, risen Christ gives us a clean new record and a brand new life. Yet, in the course of this gospel encouragement, he recalls our past sin: "What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death!" (Rom. 6:21).

Why does Paul stir up our memories of past sins? Doesn't that seem counter-productive? Bible scholar Leon Morris observes, "We should not miss the force of his *now*. While they were the slaves of sin they were not ashamed. . . . To be without shame is a mark of a sin-dominated life. But when they became

God's love. We must believe His cleansing forgiveness and drink the living water He offers.

Yet the same Bible also describes a legitimate sense of lingering shame we should have about our past sins. The prophet Ezekiel saw this kind of shame as good fruit: the godly fruit of repentance in response to God's promised grace in the new covenant. Ezekiel 16 promises, "However, I will restore . . . your fortunes along with them, so that you may bear your disgrace and be ashamed of all you have done in giving them comfort" (16:53-54). Commenting on this text, John Taylor provides some famous examples: "Paul remembered that he had persecuted the church (1 Cor. 15:9; 1 Tim. 1:13); John Newton remembered his slave-trading days. The value of such memory is that it keeps a man back from pride. Not even the justified sinner should forget that he has a past of which he is right to be ashamed."⁴ There is no contradiction between a present enjoyment of justification and a proper sense of shame about past sin. Both mark the maturing

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Christians they came to see sin for the evil thing it is and their past deeds for the shameful things they were."² John Calvin contends from this verse that only those "who have learned well to be earnestly dissatisfied with themselves, and to be confounded with shame at their wretchedness" truly understand the Christian gospel.³

Yet someone objects: "It's not right for Christians to feel such shame. Shame is bad." Contemporary psychologies (even some "Christian" versions) concur. But that simplistic conclusion misses the depths of God's Word. Of course, believers in Jesus must be convinced that in Christ there is no condemnation (Rom 8:1). We must bask daily in the sunlight of

Christian.

Ezekiel continues, "Yet I will remember the covenant I made with you in the days of your youth, and I will establish an everlasting covenant with you. Then you will remember your ways and be ashamed. . . . Then, when I make atonement for you for all you have done, you will remember and be ashamed" (Ezek. 16:60-63). Again, Taylor observes, "Israel's reaction will be that she will be shamed by God's goodness into a state of repentance and self-loathing (cf. Ezek. 20:43), and will therefore acknowledge God in a way that she has failed to before."⁵

Listen to the same truth later in the book. "There you will remember your conduct and all the actions by which you have defiled yourselves, and you will loathe yourselves for all

² Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), p. 266.

³ John Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul The Apostle to the Romans and Thessalonians* trans. R. Mackenzie, in David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance, eds., *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 135.

⁴ John B. Taylor, *Ezekiel: An Introduction and Commentary*, in *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries*, vol. 20 (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1969), 142.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 233.

the evil you have done” (Ezek. 20:43). There is a godly form of self-loathing that is the fruit of new covenant grace.

Or consider the famous new heart/new covenant promise in Ezekiel 36:22-32. God promises to save, cleanse, and bless His people. The result? “Then you will remember your evil ways and wicked deeds, and you will loathe yourselves for your sins and detestable practices. I want you to know that I am not doing this for your sake, declares the Sovereign LORD. Be ashamed and disgraced for your conduct, O house of Israel!” (Ezek 36:31-32). Far from being a bad thing, godly shame is affirmed.

What do the apostle Paul and the prophet Ezekiel teach us? Properly remembering our past sins, with shame and self-loathing, will deter us from repeating them and help us better receive and relish God’s saving grace. By recalling our past sins through the lens of Christ’s mercy, God produces in us ongoing repentance and deepening humility.

and to seek (and receive) her forgiveness, the shameful memory lives on. Yet God has redeemed it. To paraphrase the famous words of Genesis 50:20, I meant it for evil, but God meant it for good! From this perspective, I gladly thank God for the lessons my memory brings. It reminds me that apart from Jesus I am a hard-core sinner. It tells me that being a biblical counselor does not immunize me from the dangers of blatant insensitivity. It teaches me to treat strugglers with sensitivity, and to guard carefully the delicate life data they confide to me.

Benefit #2: Heightened Gratitude to God for His Grace

The second way our sinful memories can be redeemed is by letting them heighten our gratitude to God for His saving mercy in Christ.

Returning to Paul’s example in 1 Timothy 1:12-17, we find that he not only recalls his past sin, but he also praises God for God’s grace.

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Years ago I counseled a woman who came to a small group meeting I was leading. Mary’s growth assignments included writing a prayer journal of her progress in fighting against the problem we identified. Before the small group started, she privately slipped me a copy of her journal so that I might read it the next day, before our counseling. Mary then asked me, innocently, what we were going to do in the group that night. I looked at her, and with a straight face, replied, “I thought we would read and discuss your journal together with the group.”

To this day I shudder with shame. While I never intended to share her journal with the group, my sick “joke” displayed inexcusable pastoral insensitivity. You might imagine Mary’s hurt. To violate her trust and to treat so flippantly the fine china of her secret journal was a grievous offense. “Reckless words pierce like a sword,” says Proverbs 12:18, and I had gashed this Christian sister.

While God helped me to quickly repent

More importantly, he does both, at the same time, in the very same passage. “I thank Christ Jesus our Lord” (verse 12). “Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy. . . .” (verse 13). In the same breath, Paul recalls his heinous sins *and* he give thanks to Jesus! There is no contradiction here. Viewed rightly (i.e., redemptively), our sin magnifies God’s mercy. “The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus” (verse 14).

Moreover, listen to his “trustworthy statement” in verses 15-16: “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. . . . I was shown mercy. “He ends majestically in doxology, “Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen” (verse 17).

The apostle’s balance is brilliant. On the one hand, he does not forget or avoid his past. There is no memory erasure or memory denial here. He freely admits he was a blasphemer, a

persecutor, and a violent man. On the other hand, he does not dwell on these facts. He dwells on Jesus' saving work and on God's mercy in sending such a Savior. Paul does not wallow in the past; he lets his past highlight God's grace. The very sinner Jesus came to save and continues to save is a real sinner with a heinous past.

Paul is not the only sinner in Scripture. In Luke 7:36-50, Jesus visits the home of Simon the Pharisee. In the midst of their discussion a notoriously sinful woman enters. Boldly she proceeds to wash Jesus' feet with her tears and hair, and to kiss and anoint his feet with perfume. Simon protests, saying that Jesus must not allow such a "sinner" to defile Him. Jesus responds with a simple parable:

"Two men owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he canceled the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?" Simon replied, "I suppose the one who had the bigger debt canceled." "You have judged correctly," Jesus said (verses 41-43).

Jesus then applies the illustration by rebuking self-righteous Simon and commending the sinful woman (verses 44-46). His bottom line concisely reinforces our main point: "Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little" (verse 47).

What motivates this woman's deep love for Jesus? His great forgiveness of her! Our Lord teaches that those who have been forgiven much (like her) love much, while those who view Jesus' mercy as a little thing (like Simon) will show Him little love.

In other words, big sinners need a big Savior, and big sinners saved by a big Savior give Him big praise!

What happens when we let our past memories springboard us to higher views of God's grace? It energizes our praise and solidifies our Christian confidence. Few texts are more comforting than 1 Timothy 1:15, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst." Can you feel the apostle's thrill as he recounts the saving work of Jesus?

As shameful and loathsome as our sins may be, we must never fixate on them. As the Scottish minister Robert Murray M'Cheyne used to put it, "For every one look at your sin, take ten looks at Jesus Christ." We must focus on Jesus the Savior of our sins, the One who fully and forever forgives our sins and cleanses us from all unrighteousness. As we commune with the crucified, risen Savior we find mercy and help. By exalting God's grace, we can convert our bad memories into beneficial memories.

In his brief but delightful book, *The Cross Centered Life*, C. J. Mahaney echoes this Christ—exalting truth from his own life. During his high school and college years he was immersed in the drug culture and was rebellious toward God. Then God saved him. Now, living in the same locale, C. J. regularly faces present reminders of his past. Tragic, you say? Hardly. Listen to his testimony:

Many people today try to run from the past. I suppose I could try to as well, by leaving the hometown that holds so many reminders of my sinfulness. But I consider living here a gift from God. The regular reminders of my past are precious to me. Why? Because, like Paul, I never want to forget the great mercy shown to me.⁶

How can past sinful memories be a *gift* from God? What can make them *precious*? The transforming grace of God.

One husband I know learned this only after his divorce and remarriage. He and his new wife came to me for counseling. As we discussed their conflicts, it became clear to all three of us that he had dragged into this second marriage the unresolved guilt of his first. With this realization, our initial agenda shifted. After examining his sins against his ex-wife and repenting before God,⁷ he chose to write her a

⁶ C. J. Mahaney with Kevin Heath, *The Cross Centered Life* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2002), p. 13.

⁷ For a thorough treatment of resolving past and present conflicts, I highly recommend Ken Sande, *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997); and Ken Sande with Tom Raabe, *Peacemaking for Families: A Biblical Guide to Managing Conflict in Your Home* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 2002). The first resource is general; the second addresses marriage and family relationships.

confession letter. He admitted his failure, sought her forgiveness, and spoke of God's grace. Then he added these words, "I often think of my failures in our marriage. But this is helping me to learn to thank God for His forgiveness. I can't erase what I did, but I can let God use it to make me grateful for His grace." Grateful for grace, he was learning to let his past sin become a present occasion to exalt Christ's mercy.

Nor is this truth confined merely to the *forgiving* grace of God. Paul applied it to God's *empowering* grace in 1 Cor 15:9-10:

For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.

example for those who would believe on Him and receive eternal life."

Did you notice the purpose language in this passage? Why did Christ display His unlimited patience toward Paul? "As an example for those who would believe...." Paul saw his life-of-sin-followed-by-forgiveness as a pattern for what God will do for others. God's forgiveness of his horrid sins breeds hope for Paul's hearers. The "I'm a sinner but God saved me" theme became part of Paul's life message. In Timothy's case, Paul knew that this was part of the encouragement Timothy needed to confidently preach the gospel—to give hope to other sinners by using Paul's example.

What effect does this have on ministering to other guilty sinners? For one thing, you can understand experientially their problem. You know sin's shame. As a sinner—a blasphemer, persecutor, and violent man—Paul has "been there," along with other serious sinners. You can

Your bad memories can broaden your effectiveness in ministering to fellow sinners.

Paul's recollection that his apostleship was undeserved merely highlights God's work in calling him and energizing him in this ministry.

We see in the above passages what these truths do for individuals. Can you imagine what happens when a whole congregation of past sinners grasps these truths? When a group of greatly forgiven sinners assemble, grateful for grace, their corporate worship pulsates and rich testimonies flow. May God fill us, His church, with an increasing appreciation of His grace toward us sinners!

Benefit #3: Broader Effectiveness in Helping Others

God leads you in reinterpreting your past sins in yet another way. Your bad memories can broaden your effectiveness in ministering to fellow sinners.

After describing himself in 1 Timothy 1:15 as the worst sinner, Paul declares in verse 16, "But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display His unlimited patience as an

relate. Blessed by God, your sinful past can sharpen your sensitivity and increase your compassion.

Furthermore, having connected with the fellow sinner, you can then give him hope by holding out your life as a display of God's hope. Your sins did not end your life; neither must they end your friend's life. Finally, you can lead him to Christ and Christ's answers. You can tell him how, in your personal experience, God mercifully forgave you and even retrained your mind to reinterpret your memories.

Similarly, the entire opening section of 2 Corinthians 1 demonstrates this perspective. Paul recalls God's help in his life, and views this help as that which enables him to serve the Corinthians:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. (2 Cor. 1:3-4)

God's compassionate comforting of Paul allows him to comfort others with compassion as well.

While Paul does not mention in this text his struggles with ugly memories, he is acutely conscious of his tendencies toward sinful self-reliance:

We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. (2 Cor. 1:8-9)

Paul's experience of God's grace toward him, amid his own sinful temptations, gave him confidence in ministering to the Corinthians. He concludes the section in verses 10-11 by anticipating the ministry impact that God's deliverance of him would have on others.

Jason learned a painful life lesson when an adulterous choice cut short his promising career in vocational Christian ministry. Churches in his denominational circles typically bar the door to future pastoral staff positions for those who sin in these ways. "I know God has forgiven me. But I feel so defeated. How can God use me now after what I've done?" Yet grasping Paul's perspective bred hope. Jason's past sins did not end his present and future ministries to people. Despair yielded to vision as he thought of many

around him facing the same immoral temptations. Along with deepening his repentance and heightening his appreciation of grace, God has begun to use him to help others who have similarly sinned, as well as those on the edge. Having reconciled with his wife, they have helped other couples, in sensitive ways, to walk down God's path of confession and forgiveness, and rebuild their marriages. God redeemed Jason's earlier trespasses to make him an effective servant of Christ. His newly redeemed memories now aid his ministry.

Conclusion

Dear friend, you may not be able to prevent sinful memories from arising. Painful thoughts might still intrude without invitation. Yet, you need not labor to erase them or panic to escape them. They do not have to destroy you.

Instead, in Christ, they can be redeemed. You can learn to reinterpret them biblically. As 1 Timothy 1 teaches, a gospel-centered remembrance of your past sin will (1) *deepen* your repentance, (2) *heighten* your gratitude to God for His saving grace, and (3) *broaden* your effectiveness in helping others with wisdom and compassion. In the same way, may God redeem your nagging memories so that you might go deeper, higher, and broader, for His glory and your good.