



P.O. Box 66540
Albuquerque, NM 87193
505.890.6806
E-mail: irm@liferesource.org
Website: www.liferesource.org

Presentation Transcript
Identifying Past Losses
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Good afternoon everybody. Beautiful afternoon here in sunny New Mexico. We're working on a series on *Overcoming Loss*. And this is the third one of the series out of four. The title of this one is *Identifying Past Losses*. It's material that we covered at the Feast of Tabernacles in Sandestin. This is the first one – it was a workshop – so it's never been recorded before – now that I think about it.

I'd like to review a little bit so that we can all get up to speed on where we are. In the first presentation that we did – which was a sermon there – we talked all about losses and how the Bible talks about what happened to Adam and Eve – how they lost everything, because of the bad choices they made, including one of their children. We read about how God turned Job over to the devil, and the first thing he did was inflict huge loss on him. He lost all his kids. He lost his wealth. He lost his health. He left him his wife, because she was a negative influence on him – she's the one that said, "Curse God and die!" How would you like to be the one that was left for that reason? The point of that is: how we respond to losses in life is very important.

We talked about the fact that anxiety and depression are both about losses. Depression is a maladaptive way of dealing with losses of the past and anxiety is the anticipation of future losses – usually because of losses we've incurred in the past, as well.

The Bible talks a lot about bitterness. And that is usually because somebody has lost something, and they're upset about it, and haven't resolved the issue.

So we, pretty much, made that point in the first sermon and brought that to mind. The point I made there is that all psychology – from Freud forward – has always been about dealing with losses. So they are kind of on the same page with the Bible as far as that goes.

The second one: we called that *The Work of Overcoming*. And you'll remember we met the lady who tried everything – she prayed, she fasted, she studied, she donated to the poor, she went to church – she prayed for five years and nothing happened. We pointed out that her problem was not an exterior problem and those are all exterior activities she

was doing to try to overcome her problem. And yet, when she did the inner work – we quoted the scripture where Jesus said, “What we say, or what we do, that defiles us...it all starts in the heart.” That’s where the problem is, so that’s where you have to go if you want to solve it. And He’ll help us do that, but, if we dance around that one and just pretend everything is okay, or think that we can set chairs straight at church and solve our internal problem, He’s not going to go there with us. So we talked about doing the *inner* work. And usually that inner work is the work of resolving past losses that we’ve incurred of every kind. You think about losing a home to a tornado, or losing a mate, or something like that, but there are other losses that we suffer – early in life, too. Maybe our mother and father are stressed about finances, so we don’t get the attuning that we need as an infant. I mean, there are all kinds of things that happen in life that are difficult. And God kind of designed life to be like that, so that we have something to work on – something to overcome. I always tell my clients, who never come in blaming their parents for their problems, but I tell them that their parents did have, usually, a part to play in that, but now that they’re an adult, their parents can’t do anything about it. They are the only ones that can resolve the issue, because the issue is an issue of the heart – the inner person.

We also talked in that sermon about how nobody likes to feel the pain of loss or the anger that that incurs. So we defend ourselves against those feelings. We consciously say, “I’m not going to think about that,” or we unconsciously forget it and we repress it. So for us, as Christians, who want to learn to overcome the losses that we have incurred and the problems that result from them... If you’re depressed, say if you had a bad childhood, after awhile that starts to build up and build up, and it takes more and more energy to keep all that out of conscious awareness, and pretty soon you can’t get out of bed in the morning. By the time we’re forty or fifty years old, it’s hard to navigate life anymore, because of all the stuff that accrues. And so it makes it very hard to be a good Christian. The reason for that is, we have failed to do the inner work of the stuff that happened to us. That sounds like an accusatory statement, but there are lots of reasons why people don’t do that, and they aren’t all their fault. So I’m not meaning to judge anybody. I’m meaning to show the way out of that – not to put people down.

That’s kind of where we left off. So today we’re going to talk about how to get through those defenses and find the things that are causing the depression or the anxiety or bad behavior. I think I left a little bit out of my intro there, because we talked about how badly the lady was behaving, because she didn’t get the attention she needed from her parents and picked up their anxiety about money issues early on, and how she became what she considered to be a very selfish and shallow person, and was inflicting a lot of anxiety on her kids and on her husband and all of that.

How do we get through the defenses to find out what’s really causing the problem, if we are busy repressing and defending ourselves from feeling those things. To start, I’m going to teach you a little bit about human memory and how it works, because, if we’re trying to find past losses, that’s in our memory bank. Right? So we need to know how our memory works.

There are two kinds of memory, basically. One we will call *explicit* memory. Those are the things that you can remember easily about your past. There's a sense of recalling them. Oh, I remember when my brother and I were laughing about the incident where he got upset with me when I was about fifteen and he was about, probably, twelve years old. I was out in our front yard, playing whiffle ball, or something like that, during the summer. I had just built a little model car – my masterpiece. So he gets mad and he goes in, locks all the doors, he opens the curtains from my room, has my car and he raps on the glass. And then when I look, he drops it. I don't even remember the incident. He said that he had to stay in the house until our parents came home, because I would have killed him! But I don't remember that incident. But that's an explicit memory on my part. I can remember the sense of recall. There's usually a story that goes along with it – and explicit memory. I told you a story about it. Right? It had a beginning, middle and end. There's language that goes with it. There are images. There are thoughts that I can remember. There are emotions – rage, in that case, on both our parts, probably. There are sensations. That's the kind of memory we all think about, right?

Well, there's another kind of memory called *implicit* memory. That memory is usually not recognized as memory, because there is no sense of recall to it. There is no logic – no beginning, middle and end. Sometimes there are images. There is no language and no sense of time. There is no sense of recall, because implicit memory is the kind of memory that we have before our explicit memory comes online. I can remember back to when I was three, four, five, whatever. Well, that's when our explicit memory started coming online. But there was memory from before that, but we don't recognize it as memory.

I had a client who had a lot of invasive surgeries when he was an infant up to about two years of age. They were all done at the same hospital in Mexico. He hates the color green – a certain shade of green. His mother told me that was what was on the walls in that hospital. So he's remembering the image of the color from that experience. But it's not like he recalls it. He just knows that there is a dread and a hatred associated with that color. You think about what babies have from memory. They don't have language. They don't have time. They don't have logic. What you're left with is images that they can see, body sensations and emotions. That is the content of implicit memory. So those feelings we get are sometimes baby memories, and not recognized as such. We just think it's an emotion and body sensation about what's going on now, when, really, it might be something else from before.

That's the first thing I wanted to talk to you about – the two kinds of memory. The second thing is to talk about the effects of stress on memory and coding. When something is happening to us, if we're under stress, there's a chance that that memory will not be encoded like memory that's just in a normal, everyday kind of thing. And that would be with a sense of time, with a sense of logic – beginning, middle and end – having an opinion about what's going on, all of that kind of thing. When it's encoded maladaptively – because of the stress – it gets left in the limbic system, where it was created, instead of putting it out in the outer cortex, where we think about it. It's usually because something stressful is happening. It's hurtful to us, so it is encoded in that stressful, hurtful form. We can still feel it when we think about it, but it's hard to change how we think about it.

I'll give you some examples of how that works. A lady came into my office awhile back, in November, and she'd been in an auto accident in April. She had quit her job. She had not been able to do anything but cry ever since the accident. She did suffer a pretty good concussion. She didn't know who she was for half an hour. She never was knocked unconscious, I don't think, but it really rang her bell. She had some severe spinal sprain in her back and one in her neck, bruising on internal organs, sprained ankle. She was terrified to drive – *terrified* of it – and spent a lot of time crying – to where she couldn't work anymore. No amount of reassurance from her family, no amount of telling her, "Get over it," was helping. She had several frozen memories of the accident, which are flashbacks – a strong fear of dying – and not just when she was in a car, but anytime. So those are typical post-traumatic stress symptoms. So that is maladaptively-encoded memory. And there's no way to get at that – well, there is, but it takes a long, long time to talk your way out of something like that.

Another example: I had a man in my office awhile back, who, when he was five years old, woke up and his mother had gone to the store. She thought he was sleeping, and she needed something to fix for breakfast, and she thought, "It will only take me a couple of minutes, because it's just right there," and so she went across the street to the store and came back, and he was awake and all freaked out. He said that he gets an anxious feeling in his chest every time he gets in a situation where he doesn't know what's going to happen next – in a really important kind of situation. So, I'm thinking that early memory is probably coming into the present.

Another example of something past: I was talking to a thirteen-year-old girl, whose parents divorced when she was four, and about that time, or a couple years later, her sister was put in a mental institution – in-patient – because of rages that she was having. This thirteen-year-old always felt like both of those things were her fault. And, you know, that's what four-year-olds do. They always think everything is their fault. It's part of their development. So she still thinks everything is her fault. She's kind of arrested at that point – around that issue, anyway. Her father drinks and her mother has rages. And she thinks those things are her fault. She said, "I kind of know that it really isn't, but I still *feel* like that." She should be past that at thirteen years old, but she's stuck.

So those are some examples of maladaptively-encoded memories. Now, how do people process stressful events and get past that? Well, actually, we all have stuff happen to us everyday that we wish weren't like that, right? And quite often, we go to bed upset about things, or irritated, or whatever, and we wake up in the morning – nothing's changed – but we don't feel as bad about it. That's because there is a capability built into your mind to re-encode some of that stuff overnight. And it happens during what's called *rem sleep*, where your eyes move back and forth under your closed lids – we think the channels open up between the left and the right sides of the brain – so when it's in that right side *amygdala*, it can move over to the left side *cortex*. We know, too, that it's not just that simple. Both sides of the brain do everything, but certain sides predominate in certain situations.

We have the ability to do that and it isn't just by unconscious work at night. Quite often, we can just talk our way through things. Let's say – this is the example I give to my clients – let's say that I say something to you and I hurt your feelings. And I notice, by the look on your face, that I've offended you. And I think, "What an idiot I am. I shouldn't be doing that. I'm supposed to know what to do here. I'm the therapist. This person has come to me for help, and now I'm trashing them??" I get all upset with myself. I go home. I tell my wife what an idiot I am. I kick the refrigerator, maybe have a bad dream about it, or get indigestion, and then the next day I write him a letter of apology. But sooner or later, over time, that gets filed away in the "Stupid Things Never To Say" category. It's been digested and metabolized and now it's something helpful. It's in my store of wisdom of things not to do, right? So we've all had that experience. And most of us are capable of doing that. So it's not just that we have to go to a therapist to get these things taken care of. Okay?

But there are some things that are kind of beyond our reach. Maybe they've been there too long, or they went too deep, or whatever. I went to Big Sandy, Texas, a few years ago, and I talked to a man who was completely embittered about perceived wrongs that were done to him by the church twenty-five years ago. And he was so toxic, nobody could be around him. Nobody liked to see him coming. Nobody wanted him at their church group, because all he could do was talk about that. He turned off all the new people. That is a case of maladaptively-encoded information that he has never been able to work his way past.

And the girl I was telling you about, who thought everything was her fault, she was cutting herself, because of all the stress in her life. She told me one time about this girl in her class, who was mocking her when she found out that she was cutting herself. She would say mean and hateful things. So we did some EMDR about that and first she said things like, "Well, she's just so mean and so terrible. She needs someone to knock some sense into her." And this girl is a fairly large girl. She's taller than I am at thirteen years old and, I think, fairly athletic, too, so she could probably pack a wallop if she wanted to. I don't think she's the kind that would hit somebody, but, I suppose, she could if she wanted to. Then, the next thing that she said was, "She doesn't know that her words hurt," and, "I would never say anything like that to anybody," and, "Now that I think about it, she really can't hurt me. I'm giving her the power to hurt me, but I can take it back. I can just ignore her. And everybody thinks she's terrible anyway. Nobody likes her. So why should I care what she says? I think I know what to do with her." And the answer to that, after we finished the session, was to just blow it off. So that's an example of adaptive-processing on steroids – in just a few minutes to resolve an issue like that. She went from feeling really bad and hurt to feeling in control and knowing what to do.

Okay, the final thing that I want to talk to you about regarding memory is what's called the *triggering effect*. Our brain is always trying to predict what's going to happen next. And that's so we can avoid losses. Right? We want to know who is coming through the intersection – at least, some of us do. We want to know, when we go in the 7-Eleven, if the customer over at the end, down by the freezer, has a handgun. We want to know if somebody has a sarcastic intent toward us in a social situation, so we can defend

ourselves. We're always trying to figure out what's going to happen next so we can be safe. And that's a good thing. That's a very good thing.

Now, the way the brain does this – the way it tries to answer that question, “What’s going to happen next?” – one of the things it does is, it searches our memory banks for past experiences that might give us a clue. And when it finds something similar, with similar emotions or events, it brings those emotions into the present.

I had a young lady come to see me one time who told me she was going off on everybody in her life. We tracked it back to when she was little, she was in a situation where she was mistreated by her mother’s drug-addict boyfriend. In fact, there was a whole string of them, from what I gathered. And anytime in the present, when she felt like somebody was trying to control her or make her do something she didn’t want to do, she’d get violently angry. She’d rage at people. And it was coming from that. It was a whole string of incidents back then. So the maladaptive memories were getting triggered by these things that were going on in the present. As her brain tried to figure out what’s going to happen, it starts with earliest memory first and works its way up. That’s why early memory and what happens to us in the first couple of years in our life is *so* influential, because that memory search usually stops right there when it gets a hit on those negative early memories. That’s kind of how that works.

Now, there’s another situation.... I mean, I always use a negative example, but I was talking to this lady that had the automobile accident I was telling you about and she mentioned to me that she liked to work in her kitchen – that it gave her a sense of feeling useful and comfortable. I started asking her questions about her past and one of the favorite things for her to do, as a little girl, was go to Grandma’s and make cookies. And I said, “How did it make you feel?” And she said, “See...useful, loved, included.” I said, “Just like you feel when you’re in your own kitchen?” She said, “Yah!” So it isn’t always just negative memories that are triggered. But we can look back and see why we like the stuff we like now. A lot of times it has to do with things we liked early on.

So unresolved past losses – the pain of those things – we’re not able to process them – is what causes, what the Bible calls, the fruits of the flesh – anger, jealousy, all kinds of things. The Bible says, “Don’t let the sun go down on your wrath.” Process it. Resolve it. Use your logic, and your thinking abilities, and your biblical knowledge, and your conscience, and the Holy Spirit to put that where it belongs. Use rational thinking to resolve the issue. Like the guy that was wronged twenty-five years ago.... He let the sun go down on his wrath for twenty-five years. He never really learned how to handle that or where to put it. I mean, why would you stay around if you thought you were getting treated that badly.

Okay, so that’s what I wanted to teach you about memory. You have enough knowledge about how memory works now to know what to do. The other thing that I wanted to tell you is that the mind *defends* itself against past losses. That’s a good thing when we’re little, because, as a child – that little girl who was being mistreated by her mother’s drug-addict boyfriend – there wasn’t a single thing she could do about it. She truly *was*

powerless. But when she processed that, she made the statement, “I’d never let anybody do anything like that to me now!” She’s now able to think about that event like a fifteen-year-old instead of a two-year-old. It’s been moved into another place in her brain where she can think about it differently. So she doesn’t have to push that out of memory any longer. She has a plan. She knows what she can do. She has capabilities for dealing with things. As adults, we know that, if the boss is mean to us, we can get him fired or we can quit. We have options about the things that happen to us. We don’t have to put up with things. But little kids are just stuck with whatever comes their way. So the brain uses defense mechanisms to protect them psychologically from terrible things that can happen.

But as we grow older, those defenses learned in childhood become difficult for us, because we get in the habit of repressing feelings, and so we start repressing everything, and pretty soon, we’re depressed. It’s a disconnect from one’s feelings. And repression is a disconnect from the memories. So, as we grow older, things get harder and harder.

I had a man come to my office one time. He came in; he sat down. He was probably 45, maybe. He lived in Albuquerque all his life. His parents still live in town. He had a sister that lived in town. He saw her, maybe, once a year. He saw his parents a couple times a year – you know, Christmas and Easter. He was kind of on his own – hated his boss. He didn’t mind his job too much, but his boss was a problem for him. I said, “So what brings you here?” And he said, “Well, I just can hardly get out of bed in the mornings. I got married a month ago and I thought that was going to make everything better, but now I’m sinking back into that thing again – that funk.” I said, “So, you’re depressed.” He said, “Well, I’ve never called it that, but yeah – losing the joy of living.” So I explained to him what that was – that he was just not used to expressing himself and really getting in touch with his own emotions. He said, “So what do we do about that?” I said, “Well, next week, come in here and just start talking – just help me understand you.” So he comes in. He sits there. He’s twiddling his thumbs. And he can’t think of anything to say, because his mind is blank because all the defenses are in full high alert now to keep any of that stuff from coming into consciousness. He said, “Is that a real Persian rug or a copy?” I said, “I believe that’s a copy.” Then he said, “Oh, okay.” He points to a painting on the wall. He says, “Is that a print or the real deal?” I said, “I think that’s a print.” (I was sharing an office with somebody else who supplied all the stuff, so I never bothered to look at that.) He could not talk about himself – just couldn’t do it! Never came back after that.

When you’re in that state – if you’re a Christian – it makes it very hard to be a Christian. It’s hard to pray. It’s hard to be real with people. If he’s ever going to get over that, he’s going to have to go *inside* and do the inner work. That’s the only place where that can get done. No amount of praying, studying, fasting and Bible study is going to solve that problem. The Bible study and the praying might help him get to the point where he’s *willing* to do that, but until he does that, it’s not going to happen.

The issue becomes how to get past the defenses and find the events that we block out – the losses we’ve suffered that have really wounded us. That brings us to the title of today’s material, *Finding Past Losses* or *Identifying Past Losses*. You’re equipped to do that today because you know what a maladaptively-encoded memory is.

So I'm going to ask you a question. I'd like you all to think of a past memory that makes you feel good when you think about it from your childhood – something fun, good. Everybody have one yet? Maybe a place that was really a nice place, where you liked to be. Got one? Who would share? I don't know if we picked that up on the mike, but Thory was about living on a hill and sliding into leaves and having a great time as a kid. So that story has a sense of recall, right? And there's a sense of when it happened. And there are emotions – it was fun – and then the sensation you got. That memory is a positively, healthily-encoded memory that is stored in your cortex, where you can pull it up and talk about it. It's a conscience memory. You can search your memory banks and find it easily. It hasn't been repressed. And it's not out of reach. Okay?

So I'd like you think now about a past negative event that doesn't hurt anymore to think about it. Anybody have one of those? So the story about being followed and stalked onto the train – it doesn't hurt anymore to talk that. So there are all the same things there, in that memory, that are present with the positive memory – the sense of recall, it's conscious, beginning, middle and end – we heard what happened. That, probably was very upsetting at the time, but somehow, you worked your way through that and it got put in the right place. “Always look over your shoulder when going to the train.” So it got metabolized and digested and turned into something that is helpful. “Be careful.” Right? Lesson learned – added to your store of wisdom. Okay? So now it's having a positive benefit in your life.

Okay now, a negative past event that still hurts to think about. We don't want to get too graphic here. We don't want to embarrass ourselves or anything. Can anybody think of one of those? Embarrassing moment – it still feels embarrassing – or something that makes us angry? Well, I'll just tell you what that is going to look like. That's going to be fragmented – bits and pieces. It takes you right back. It feels just as bad now as it did then, usually. It hasn't been processed, because it is still hurtful – still painful to talk about it or to think about it. It's easy to let it go away – not keep it conscious. Those memories are maladaptively encoded and they get triggered when we are in present-day situations that are like that. The feelings and the negative emotions are mainly what comes up for us. And they lead to all kinds of problems. They lead to bad choices, like screaming at our kids, or damaging our relationships, or fleeing relationships when really they could be worked through. They lead to all the fruits of the flesh – all kinds of jealousies, and dissensions, and all that stuff. They're also bad for our health, because they create anxiety in us, which is very corrosive to the human body.

So that's a little bit about how the mind works and how to identify past losses. Usually, when we think about these things, if we'll sit with it, it will take us deeper into those things. And we're going to talk more about that next time, because now that we know how to identify the negative things, we need to learn how to process maladaptively encoded information, so that we can process it and it won't be maladaptively encoded anymore.

So that's something for all of us to be thinking about – how to re-encode it so it won't hurt – so it won't trigger us any longer, so we can get over the traumas of the past and let go of them, and forgive people who have wronged us, let go of our anger, like the Bible tells us, forgive ourselves, like God has forgiven us, and come to peace, instead of anxiety and depression.

So be looking for that on the Website as well. That's going to be published in April. And we'll shoot for two weeks for the next iteration of this series.