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Presentation Transcript
Spiritual Renewal – Remembering Your Story
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Today we're continuing our series on *Spiritual Renewal*. We call it *Remembering Your Story*. We used an example some time ago from the Bible to engage the topic of *Spiritual Renewal*. It was that of the Ephesian church mentioned in Revelation 2. Let's take a look at it again – beginning in Revelation 2:2. God tells these people:

Revelation 2:2 – *“I know your works, your toil, and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. I know you're enduring patiently, bearing up for My name's sake, and that you have not grown weary. But I have this against you: that you have abandoned the love that you had at first.”*

So these people started out loving God, but they, somehow, had detoured from that. It was not that they hated God. They just didn't love Him like they did in the beginning. They lost their love. How does that happen? And what causes a loss of love? Once we lose our love for God, how do we get it back – probably the most important question of all?

We don't have much detail about these people – the Ephesians. We know they were under terrific pressure because they were surrounded by evil doers. I was reading Jim O'Brien's weekly letter last night. He quoted another minister who said, “More Christians are killed by busyness than bullets.” The Ephesians were busy. There were busy fighting the onslaught of evil in their environment. And God tells us they were doing a good job of it, but the fight itself may have consumed all their attention. Somewhere along the line, they forgot *why* they were fighting evil. They had lost perspective. They could no longer see the forest for the trees.

There's an instructive event recorded for us in Matthew 14. It's about Peter. Let's start in verse 26.

Matthew 14:26 – *But when the disciples saw Him – that's Jesus – walking on the sea, they were terrified and said, "It's a ghost!" – or a spirit. The word there is *pneuma*. It just means a wind. And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, "Take heart. It is I. Do not be afraid." And Peter answered Him and said, "Lord, if it's You, command me to come to you on the water." And He said, "Come on." So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and began to sink and cried out, "Lord, save me!" And Jesus immediately reached out His hand and took hold of him, saying, "Oh you of little faith. Why did you doubt?"*

Peter's experience punctuates that situation. There's no reason he's out there walking on the water, except that he trusts Christ. But the ferocity of the wind *distracted* him – took his attention away from that reason – his love of God. The second he lost focus on Jesus, he began to sink. So we can imagine that the good fight may have distracted the Ephesians from the reason they were fighting, which was their love for God. They were too busy doing the work to let their relationship with God grow or maintain. It was waning on them. They were too busy fighting evil to do what it takes to keep their love for God alive.

There's a famous sermon about a life-saving station. I'm going to have to give a presentation about that sometime soon. It's an allegory, actually. There was a town along a rocky seacoast that had a great harbor, but there was a narrow rocky point at the mouth of the harbor. And in storms, many ships had wrecked attempting to get to the safe harbor so that they could weather out the storms. But the townspeople built a life-saving station out on the point to rescue hapless victims. They built a fairly large building with a pot-bellied stove the center of a very large room. It was not fancy, but it serviceable. They had cots, and chairs, and tables, and a kitchen to fix hot food for those who were hurt, in shock and freezing from the cold. There were life vests hanging on the wall. The station was manned during bad weather by volunteers. There was a beacon light on top of the building that burned bright during bad weather. Sometimes, when a ship would ground on the rocks during a storm, the life-saving crew would go out in their little boats to rescue those on the ship. Sometimes they put their own lives in danger to save other people – very laudable. After a few years, the volunteer life-savers began to notice that they really enjoyed being at the station. They would go out there, even when off-duty, and drink coffee and talk about life-saving and keep those on-duty company. They all had something in common – a common goal and mission. But as time passed, more people joined. They liked to be out there. They liked to feel useful and helpful. Some of them actually liked the fellowship more than they did the life-saving efforts. At some point, they had more members than they needed. So they held a number of work parties to enlarge the station and involve new people. And they held fundraisers and they added some cushy chairs. They got a fancier motor for the boat that was more powerful. They put some wall hangings up and they added a small bar. It began to look more like a country club than a life-saving station.

Some years later, they took a vote and opted to stop life-saving operations, because bringing people who were wet and dirty and vomiting into the station inconvenienced the members and made them feel uncomfortable.

The allegory demonstrates how easy it is to become distracted away from mission and lose sight of core values. It also shows us how many congregations today have become social clubs instead of churches. So, one thing Christians must be aware of is this tendency to become distracted – to branch off and focus on other things – other than the core mission. And that's true now, more than at any other time in history. In Western culture, we are way busier than ever before and quite frequently doing things that take us away from our mission. And there are also so many possibilities now – so many choices to make – that we've never had before.

You know, in LifeResource Ministries, we struggle with this all the time. There are so many ways to reach people – TV, radio, blogging, Websites, tweeting, we could be on Facebook, we can visit congregations. It's easy to get around and go places and talk to people. But which ones will be the most effective. And which ones are within the limitations that God has set on us. His limitations are actually signs pointing us in the right direction, I believe. You know, we don't have the money to expand our operations right now and that means we're not supposed to expand operations, at least, for the short term. So we happily keep doing what we're doing while we keep our eyes open, alert to any new possibilities that God has for us. Our goal is to help children develop a relationship with Jesus Christ. Which options will help us do that most effectively? All the others are potential distractions. They'll just take us away from the mission God has given us. They'll deplete us – wear us out – take our minds off Christ and send us off on wild goose chases.

Okay, that's one reason people can lose their love for God. They can become distracted. Let's look at another reason people lose sight of God in their lives. I'm going to call it *distortion*. What is distortion? Well, distortion is anything that causes us to believe we can't do what God wants us to do. They tend to discourage us – these distortions. They cause us to think God has left us and doesn't love us. Sometimes it sounds like, "I can't do it," or "That's impossible," or "I'm not strong enough, or talented enough, or gifted enough, or smart enough, or good enough to do it." Or distortions can take us away from the mission that God has for us. And that sounds like, "I can't find out what I should do," or "God called me to do X," when it's obvious to everybody else that we're not talented at X and would do better at Y.

Let's see some biblical examples of distortion. In Exodus 3 and 4 we find the story of Moses' calling. God spoke to him out of a burning bush and told him that he would become His representative for Israel to Pharaoh. And Moses said, "Who am I to speak for You?" God told him He would give him power to do miracles. He even showed him a miracle. He said, "What's that in your hand?" He said, "It's a staff." He said, "Lay it down." And when he did, it turned into a poisonous snake that he had to run from. And

then God told him to pick by the tail, and the minute he picked it up, it became a staff again. And still Moses protested. So God talked to him more, and encouraged him, but Moses finally said, “You know, I’m not good with words. I’m slow of speech.” God said, “Okay, even though I promised to help you, you still don’t believe Me, so I’ll send your brother, Aaron, with you.” Apparently, Aaron was better with words than Moses.

What do you think is the distortion there? Why couldn’t Moses hear God say, “I’ll be with you and so it will be all right?” Well, he may have thought, “I’m alone. I have to do this on my own.” That distortion affected Moses much of his life and got him in a lot of trouble, too. What was it he said when the children of Israel wanted water? He got really angry with them, and he said, “Do *we*” – and he was referring to him and Aaron – “Do we have to strike this rock to bring forth water for you?” In the stress of the situation, Moses went into fallback mode. It wasn’t what God was going to do, it was what he, on his own, was going to have to do. So he went back to his distorted earlier belief that he was on his own and he didn’t give credit to God for the miracle that could happen.

When do you think that *alone* thing became a part of his life? Some people have suggested it might have come from his time in the reed boat as an infant. But, if we read the account, it doesn’t seem like he was there very long. And we know that his own mother nursed him after Pharaoh’s daughter took him out of the river. So I really doubt that was the reason. But what I really think might be a possible answer to that question is that he, as a child, was the only Israelite in the court of Egypt. He was surrounded by people who weren’t like him. And I think he may have picked up that idea that he was on his own, or that he was alone that way. But we don’t really know that for sure. But the point there is, it’s not necessary to understand the source of the distortion as much as it is to know that there *is* a distortion in operation that’s affecting us. Because, unless we know about it, we can’t fight it. We counteract it. You know, if he knows he’s got that problem, he can just say, “Well, you know, I tend to feel on my own all the time, so I need to remember God is with me.”

Now, we all bring distortions with us when we’re called. We all have specific, deep-seated, unspoken, untrue beliefs about ourselves that distort our perceptions of God, and ourselves, and the world. And those things are in our lives at work and they can separate us from God.

What other examples could we cite? Well, Isaiah said, as his reason for not doing what God told *him* to do, that he was a man of unclean lips. Was that a distortion? Yeah. He was saying, “I’m not doing good enough to do what you want. Everybody knows that I have a filthy mouth, so people are not going to have respect. I’m not good enough.” Of course, we know how God solved that problem. He put a burning coal on his lips. That might not have really solved the distortion, but it did stop him from complaining about it.

So then there’s a story in the book of Acts – in Acts 19:13. It says:

Acts 19:13 – *Then some itinerant Jewish exorcists undertook to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying, “I adjure by Jesus, whom Paul proclaims.” Seven sons of the Jewish high priest, named Sceva, were doing this. But the evil spirit answered them, “Jesus I know, and Paul I recognized, but who are you?” And the man, in whom was the evil spirit, leapt on them, and mastered all of them and overpowered them, so that they fled out of the house naked and wounded.* Not a happy picture.

What do you think was the distortion there? They, obviously, were in the wrong line of work, right? Maybe they were thinking, “God has called us to cast out demons.” But it probably goes deeper than that. Seven brothers – people all from the same family – raised the same way. Maybe they were insecure and were drawn to power and fame to assuage their insecurity. Being able to tell a demon to leave somebody and have it go is a pretty powerful thing. People don’t usually do that. It takes God to do that, actually. If that were the case, then, the distortion might be along the lines of, “I’m not a worthwhile person and I have to do something to prove to others that I am.” We don’t know for sure. But that’s how it can work.

Most of this series will be how to spot and correct distortions, but for now, we’re going to look at the solutions to both distraction and distortion. Both of them take us away from our original love for God. They cause us to lose sight of God’s love for us and our love for Him, and to forget that we once loved God.

The solution to forgetting is to remember. Make sense, doesn’t it? If we forget, we need to remember. So this remembering is all through the Bible. Let’s just take an example. Notice the apostle Paul remembering. In Acts 26, we see Paul has been arrested by the Romans, because the Jews accused him of disloyalty to Rome. Now that wasn’t the *reason* they accused him. They accused him of disloyalty to Rome because they thought he was disloyal to them. But they knew the Romans didn’t care about that, so they trumped up the charges against him. He went before King Agrippa to be judged, and Agrippa told him that he could speak for himself. And Paul does an amazing thing when he gets his chance to talk. He goes all the way back to his childhood to remember that he was a Pharisee – the strictest sect of Judaism in his day – sort of a Jew’s Jew. And he tells about his hope and the hope of every Jew, which is the promise of God’s salvation. And he recounts that, when he was younger, he was a vicious enemy of Christianity – that he hated Christians. And then he tells about traveling to Damascus to persecute Christians and how, on the way, he was confronted by Jesus Christ Himself, and, in an instant, turned from a persecutor to a believer on a mission to spread the word about salvation through Jesus Christ – not only to Jews, but to all men. And then he tells us, in Acts 26:19:

Acts 26:19 – *Therefore, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, but declared first to those in Damascus, and then to Jerusalem, and throughout all the region of Judea, and also to the Gentiles – that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds in keeping with their repentance.* You know, a lot of people today think that you

don't have to do anything once you have received the grace of God. That's not what Paul said! He said that they had to perform deeds in keeping with their repentance congruent with their new belief system. *For this reason, the Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill me* – not because he was a rebel against Rome, but because they didn't like what he was saying. *To this day, I have the help that comes from God and so I stand here alive, safe and well, testifying both to small and great, saying nothing but what the prophet and Moses said would come to pass – that the Christ must suffer and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, He would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles.*

Notice in this amazing passage that he is *not* disobedient to the vision of his calling. He has not lost his love for God. He's still on it. He's all over it – undeterred and undistracted. Notice, too, that he doesn't do this by his own strength. He *knows* that he does it by God's power.

When Agrippa heard Paul's speech, he told him that his account was so convincing that he himself was almost tempted to believe. At this point in Acts, we're nearing the end of Paul's life. He's soon to be on his way to Rome and to death. So Paul is speaking from the heart about his experience from his youth over decades with Jesus Christ. And that recollection – when he recounted it – *moved* people. Let's notice that, in the intervening years, Paul had not lost sight of his calling nor God's closeness and involvement in his life. His memory of his calling helped him keep his perspective. Even with all the intense trials, even with the temptations that came, he had not neglected so great salvation. He remembered that God loved him and he loved God. His fresh recollection *renewed* him and kept him on track through the years.

And you might say, “Well, that's all well and good. It gives us some direction, but how do we do that in *our* lives? It was easy for Paul to recall his calling, but he was blind for three days and heard God talking to him. But God doesn't call people that way right now, so what does remembering look like for us today? How do we get back to and enrich the recollection of our calling from God?” Well, I'm going to present some questions to you that you can ask yourself that can help recall and understand more deeply about your own calling. I'm going to make them available on our Website at liferesource.org. And they'll be on the same page where you can watch the video, order the CD or read the transcript. We're going to start at the beginning in childhood when we cover these questions.

So let's begin. Number one: What can you remember from your early childhood? What was your life like? Your parents? Your family life? How did things work in your family? What was the tone of it? What things do you remember?

You know, I have this memory in my mind of sitting in a car, looking up at a big building, and my dad's finger pointing out the car window, showing me the window where my mother was when she was getting ready to have my little brother. And I remember that, after I went there, we went and we got fudge ripple ice cream, and we had that at home as a

special treat. My dad told me all about how I was going to be a big brother and all of that. Do you have memories like that?

Number two: What is the story of your birth? How did your parents feel about your birth? Were you an accident? A surprise? Were you planned? Were they ready for you? Was it a joyous event or did it stress everybody? What is the birth story? Was it an easy birth? A hard birth? Were you well? Were you ill? What was going on when you were born? Do you know?

Number 3: What's the meaning of your gender in your family? To you and also to your parents? Were you a boy when they wanted a boy? Or a girl when they wanted a boy? Or were they just happy that you were healthy? How do boys act in your family? And how do girls act in your family? What roles do they play? Think about those things.

Number 4: What was the meaning of your name – to you and to your parents? Did your parents ever tell you *why* they named you the name that you have? What meaning did you take from that? What about nicknames? Did you have any nicknames? Were those nicknames given to you out of love, or were they put-downs, or were they teasing names, or what were they? How did you get the names that you have and what is the meaning of it to you?

Number 5: Where did you fit in your family? Where did you fit in the birth order? What role did you play in your family? How did playing that role affect you then and now?

I have a picture of my brother and me standing side by side, even though he's three years younger than I am. We were partners. I was older than he was, so I was the big brother. That was the role I was given to play in my family to my brother. And, you know, we had our fights, like everybody else, but when he got in trouble, I was always there to try to take care of business for him.

Number 6: How were you disciplined – at home and at school? And how did that discipline affect your relationship with your parents? How does it affect your relationship with God? How did it seem to you? What importance do you place on it in your development? How has it affected you to this day?

Number 7: What was your parents' relationship like? How did it affect you? Was there parental conflict? When there was – because there always is – what role were you expected to play in it? Were you the rescuer? Were you the neutral one? Were you the referee? What role did you play?

Number 8: Looking at your answers to these questions, how do you think your childhood experience in each of these areas affects your relationship with God and your calling today?

Number 9: How did your childhood impact your present day values and beliefs? Why are you the way you are? What things caused you to believe the way you believe today? How has that all affected what is important to you?

Number 10: Where was God working in your life as a child? How do you think these memories and your early experience helped or hindered your calling?

Okay, quite a list – takes a lot of time to go through that – to prove to yourself and God that you're not distracted and to clear away some of the distortions in your life. You can go to a quiet place and let God talk to you as you think about your life with God from the perspective of these questions from your earliest memories and forward. Write the answers down on paper. Meditate and rediscover your life with God from your earliest memories. It will help you draw closer to God, as in the early days of your calling, because you'll remember how it all started.

Well, that's it for today. Check back in two weeks to learn more about spiritual renewal through remembering. We will explore more questions and look at more potential distortions. So, until then, think about your life with God as a child and learn what that means for you today.