

How the Gospel Transforms PTSD

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In this workshop, we will address events that cause trauma and our response to trauma in light of what Scripture tells us about the world in which we live. We will look at how the truths of the gospel can change our response and help us deal with the post-traumatic stress that often results from terrible events and experiences in our lives. We will discuss the hope that the gospel provides for both the present and the future.

- I. As in all of biblical counseling, we want to help people have a more accurate understanding of theology in several aspects. The more accurately we view the world, the more we can respond to suffering in a way that glorifies God and results in our spiritual growth.
 - a. People respond differently to the same set of circumstances. Those who see the world most accurately from a biblical framework are most equipped to respond well to traumatic circumstances.
 - b. We teach theology as we teach people how to deal biblically with their issues of sin and suffering.
 - c. Our ability to perceive accurately is limited, and being traumatized magnifies those limitations (1 Cor 13:12); (Lelek, p.12).
 - d. The gospel gives us a biblical worldview (1 Cor 2:6-13).

- II. The world.
 - a. We live in a fallen world because of sin but the gospel includes the redemption of creation (Rom 8:18-25).
 - b. Promises of trials:
 - i. John 16:33;
 - ii. 1 Peter 4:12-13;
 - iii. 2 Cor 4:7-18;
 - c. Because of that, we are foolish to think that tragedy will not happen.
 - i. Adam and Eve with respect to Cain and Abel.
 1. What was it like to Adam and Eve see their one son killed – the first human death ever – and know it was their other son who had murdered him?
 - ii. David throughout the Psalms.
 - iii. Joseph.
 - iv. Job.

- III. Myself.
 - a. Because of the gospel, my identity is an adopted child of God.
 - i. It is solid and unchanging (Matt 7:24-27).
 - ii. I am created to glorify God and I do that by trusting Him and submitting to Him; believing His wisdom above mine as I respond to my trauma.
 - b. I am not broken and/or I am not worthless, but I am suffering.

- i. “Trauma has the potential to develop a profoundly myopic outlook for its victim. It is an outlook by which a person’s entire life becomes defined by the traumatic event. Their life is now trauma-centric, in that everything they do and think is centered in the traumatic event. We must remember that trauma is a sentence in the story – it is not *the story*” (Lelek, p.31-32).
 - c. Because of the gospel in my life, I have purpose.
 - i. He created me for good works (Eph 2:10).
 - ii. He created us to be zealous for good works (Titus 2:14).
 - iii. My purpose is no longer a Marine, Soldier, etc.
 - iv. My purpose is to be a wife/husband (if married) and a mother/father (if I have children) or whatever role God has placed me in at the present moment.
 - d. Hebrews 4:14-16; we can find grace and mercy to find help in time of need.
- IV. Others.
- a. Evil people exist.
 - i. God will judge them (Rom 4:12; Rom 12:19; Psalm 37 and 73)
 - b. Godly people exist. We must not allow our experience of abuse cause us to think that everyone is evil and seeking to cause harm.
 - c. We were designed to live in the context of a local church (Rom 12:3-8; 1 Cor 12).
 - i. God designed us to help and to receive help from brothers and sisters in Christ (1 John 4:11).
 - d. Importance of the church and community, small group, etc. (Heb 10:24-25).
 - i. People need to be involved in the lives of others (Phil 2:3-4).
- V. The gospel gives us an accurate view of God.
- a. He is good (Matt 11:29; Rom 8:32).
 - b. He is sovereign (Is 45-46; Job 38ff).
 - c. He deals with each person very personally (Rom 8:28-29).
 - d. He has sympathy for our weaknesses – “Jesus wept” (John 11:35), not because Lazarus was dead, but because of the pain that illness and death causes in the world.
 - e. Jesus is personally interceding for you (Rom 8:34; Heb 7:25).
 - f. Your security is not in experiencing pain, but that you will never be separated from the love of Christ (Rom 8:37-39); (Lelek p. 41).
- VI. Theology of suffering: the gospel redeems our suffering.
- a. James 1
 - b. Rom 5:3-5
 - c. 1 Peter
- VII. Because of the gospel, we have a future hope.
- a. The fallen world is not yet subject to Him, but will be redeemed (Rom 8:18-25).
 - b. Our fallen bodies will be renewed (1 Cor 15:35-58).
 - c. This life is short in light of eternity (1 Pet 1:23-25; James 1:10; Ecclesiastes; 2 Cor 4:7-18).

- d. We will be delivered from all trauma
- e. We will behold Him face to face (2 Cor 5:8).

VIII. Summary

- a. Your life is a narrative that is beautifully woven within the grand and glorious meta-narrative of redemption. (Lelek, p.51).
- b. The gospel gives us an accurate worldview, meaning for life, and hope for the future.

Resources:

- *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder: Recovering Hope* by Jeremy Lelek (P&R Publishing, Phillipsburg, New Jersey, 2013).
- *(Un)ashamed: Christ's Transforming Hope for Rape Victims* by Anne Dryburgh (Pure Water Press,
- All books by Dr. Anne Dryburgh.

Counseling PTSD

- I. Introduction
 - a. Material drawn from Dr. Curtis Solomon, Dr. Greg Gifford, Dr. Charles Hodges.

- II. What is PTSD?
 - a. Three main symptoms.
 - i. Intrusive thoughts for over a month.
 - 1. Unexpected memories, flashbacks.
 - 2. Feeling as though re-living the event.
 - ii. Negative cognitive or mood alterations.
 - 1. Can't remember in whole or in part.
 - 2. Difficulty with memory in general.
 - 3. Negative emotions – anger, depression, isolation, estrangement from friends.
 - iii. Alterations in arousal and reactivity.
 - 1. Hyper-vigilance, trouble sleeping, exaggerated startle response.
 - b. Complex or Compound PTSD.
 - i. Not associated with a single traumatic event.
 - ii. Abusive home or marriage.
 - iii. Same symptoms.
 - c. Definition from Dr. Curtis Solomon: “PTS is a whole-personed response to traumatic events that encompasses the physical, mental, emotional, behavioral, and spiritual being of those affected.”
 - i. Results in a significant disruption in all aspects of life – anger, guilt, fear, shame, sadness, etc.
 - ii. Is often compensated in ways that compound the problem – alcohol, drugs, and broken relationships.

- III. Physiology of PTS.
 - a. Limbic system: fight or flight impulse; passive learning system for your safety and security. The body learns what is a threat and how to respond.
 - i. Stimuli ties in threatening memories to non-threatening situations.
 - ii. The limbic system can get turns on and stay on.
 - iii. Intrusive thoughts that happen frequently tend to happen more frequently, essentially like forming a habit.
 - b. The brain changes physically but does get back to normal through counseling.

- IV. Some Basic Theology.
 - a. 1 Cor 10:13 – Trauma is part of life; you are not unique in this situation.
 - i. Jesus suffered the greatest trauma.
 - ii. Hope is in the faithfulness of God.

- V. PTS vs. PTSD
 - a. Not a disorder. Not an abnormal response to normal circumstances, but a normal response to abnormal circumstances.
 - b. The person isn't "broken" and does not have a disorder.
 - c. PTSD is not your identity (1 Cor 6:9-11).
 - i. PTS is a real thing, but you can deal with it.
 - ii. Trauma is often part of life in a fallen world.
 - 1. John 16:33... "but take heart..."
 - 2. 2 Peter 1:3-4 (all things that pertain to life and godliness).
 - d. Trauma in Scripture.
 - i. Cain and Abel, Jeremiah, Paul.
 - ii. Job, Noah, Joseph, David, Jesus.
 - iii. God didn't create us to watch or experience terrible things.
 - e. This is all a part of what God has come to redeem (Romans 8:18-23).

- VI. How Do You Help? Some General Guidelines.
 - a. Your confidence is in the Lord, not in yourself.
 - i. The Body has many members and the Body is run by the Head.
 - b. Demonstrate 1 Cor 10:13.
 - i. They believe their situation *is* unique and that no one else can understand.
 - ii. Other personal testimonies. We are all fellow sufferers and have all received comfort (2 Cor 1:3-4).
 - 1. Bring in others who have suffered and been redeemed.
 - iii. Mighty Oaks Foundation (in the U.S.), ACBC 2018 Abuse Conference.
 - iv. Connect them to Scripture – the Bible does address trauma: Joseph, Cain and Abel, Absalom and Tamar, Paul, Jesus (2 Cor 11:23-28).
 - v. Psalm 6 – David who had to flee both Saul and Absalom.
 - c. Establish them in genuine relationship and community.
 - i. Include the family; don't need to share the gory details but do need to share the struggle so family can be a support.
 - ii. Pastor should be aware of the struggle.
 - iii. Small groups/community groups.
 - 1. You can and do have something to offer the Body of Christ.
 - 2. They need to experience life with people who enjoy life and who haven't seen dark places.
 - a. Remind them of good gifts from God, enjoy them, and give thanks for them.
 - 3. Two to three friends of the same gender: close friends to help them fight through the struggles.
 - 4. Joni Erickson Tada: "Community brings life, isolation leads to death."

- VII. PTS as an Interpretive Issue.
 - a. *“When people look back at the traumatic event, they do so with interpretation. The way one interprets the trauma determines, or greatly influences, their response to the trauma.”* Dr. Greg Gifford
 - b. Kim, the girl in the infamous photo from Vietnam.
 - i. *“The bombing led me to Christ.”*
 - c. Interpretation involves context, therefore we need to help develop a biblical worldview.

- VIII. Influencers of Interpretation.
 - a. Genetic.
 - i. Some scholars believe there is a genetic predisposition to PTSD.
 - ii. The physical can be influential but is not determinative.
 - b. Social.
 - i. Social influences teach what is traumatic.
 - ii. Your culture informs you of what is trauma because they shape the way you interpret and view the trauma.
 - c. Family.
 - i. Family is a critical part of your culture.
 - d. Religious influences.
 - i. Secular research has shown that religion is the greatest influence on how we interpret trauma.
 - 1. Importance of beliefs and links between views of self and the world.
 - 2. The greater the religious influence, the greater the resiliency.
 - e. Scripture must determine how we interpret and respond to trauma.
 - i. Psalm 36:9 – Seeing things through God’s perspective and interpreting them through a biblical framework.
 - ii. “Suffering passages.”
 - 1. James 1:2-8.
 - 2. Romans 5:3-5.
 - 3. 1 Peter 1:6-7.
 - 4. Isaiah 61:1-4 – From ashes to beauty.
 - iii. Worldview.
 - 1. 2 Corinthians 4:16-18, in light of 2 Cor 11:23-28).

IX. Common Struggles.

a. Guilt, responsibility, shame, desire for revenge, anxiety, fear.

i. *Putting Your Past in Its Place* by Steve Viars, page 228.

| | | In what occurred, you were... | |
|----------------|---|---|--|
| You responded: | | Innocent | Guilty |
| | Well | <p>Bucket 1 (Joseph) The innocent past when you responded well requires: <i>authentic suffering</i>.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Face it honestly (Ps 73:2) • Face it biblically (Ps 73:17) • Face it hopefully (2 Cor 1:3) • Face it missionally (2 Cor 1:4) | <p>Bucket 3 (Peter) The guilty past when you responded well requires: <i>Joyful remembrance</i>.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When you do not feel forgiven, choose to believe God's promise (1 John 1:9) • When you rehearse your failures, learn not to wallow in the sins of your past because of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Lack of genuine repentance (2 Cor 7:9-10) ○ Fear of man (Pr 29:25) ○ Unwillingness to forsake the sin (Pr 28:13) ○ Losing our awe of God's forgiving grace (Jer 33:8-9) |
| Poorly | <p>Bucket 2 (Naomi) The innocent past when you responded poorly requires: <i>Humble analysis</i>. Did you:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Return evil for evil? (Rom 12:17-21) • Develop bitterness toward God? (Naomi) • Develop and unbiblical view of people? (Matt 22:37-40) • Develop and unbiblical view of yourself? (Rom 12:3) • Should you confront the abuser; if so, have you? (Matt 18:15-18) • If the abuser requested forgiveness, have you granted it? (Eph 4:32) | <p>Bucket 4 (David) The guilty past when you responded poorly requires: <i>Honest self-confrontation</i>.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Realize that everyone has sin in their past (1 John 1:8-10) • Understand that the key question is: how did you respond after the event? (2 Sam 11:3-4) • Beware of significant consequences for not dealing with sin quickly (Num 32:23; Prov 13:15) • Rejoice because there is hope for getting out of Bucket 4! (Ps 32:1-7) | |

b. Jesus's blood covers all, but does not eliminate consequences.

i. Romans 12:19; Psalm 37; Psalm 73; 2 Samuel 12.

c. Where was God?

i. We know He is sovereign, but we don't always understand why things happen.

1. Job; Deuteronomy 29:29.

2. I have to trust God because I know Who He is.

3. Psalms of Lamentation. *Dark Clouds Deep Mercy* by Mark Vroegop.

ii. We do see some good things that come out of bad.

1. Joseph, Jesus, Paul, 2 Corinthians 1:3-4.
- iii. We grow through suffering.
 1. Hebrews 2:10.
 2. The “suffering passages.” Romans 8:28-30 – being renewed.
 3. 1 Peter 4:12-13. Every time we seek to glorify God in our suffering, we “share Christ’s sufferings.”
 4. PTS (Stress) → PTS (Sanctification).

X. Reinterpret Their Present

- a. Identity issue: their identity is not victim.
 - i. Rape victim: “I am defiled.”
 - ii. Military: “I am broken. I am of no use.”
 - iii. You are a child of the Living God, adopted, made for His glory (Ephesians 2:10, Titus 2:14).
 - iv. Identity is that they are in union with Christ (Ephesians 1).
- b. Often times the issue is the way they dealt with the suffering.
 - i. Noah got drunk, people often respond in sinful ways which makes things worse.
 - ii. The way they respond is within their control, but they can never have control of life (desire for complete safety) – that can only belong to God.
 - iii. They need to speak truth into their lives and believe what is real now.
 1. They are not in a combat zone. This vision is not real and cannot hurt me.
 2. Whatever God allows in my life is for my good and His glory.
 3. Perfect love casts out fear.
 4. You can ride in a car again.
 5. All men are not evil.
- c. Reassign their refuge.
 - i. We crave comfort and satisfaction.
 - ii. We all go somewhere; we need to go to Christ.
 - iii. Psalm 18 and other Psalms of Lament.

XI. Instill a Sense of Purpose.

- a. “My purpose for living is gone.” Change from “trauma-centric” to God-centric.
- b. 1 Corinthians 10:31 is their real purpose.
 - i. Still true for every relationship – purpose as a husband, wife, mother father, sibling, son, daughter, member of the Body of Christ, etc.
- c. You were created to bring a reflection of God and to point to Christ Who redeems us and brings purpose to our lives.
- d. When people see you, they should think of God more accurately (Matthew 5:16).
- e. You can choose to glorify God or not.
 - i. All spiritual growth must be deliberate and intentional We don’t drift to holiness, we don’t drift towards spiritual growth (Phil 2:12-13; 2 Pet 3:18).
- f. So what is the new thing that you’ve been called to?
 - i. What is God’s purpose for you as a man, woman, mother, father, etc.?

- ii. Faithfulness is what we're called to.
 - g. Give hope in Christ.
 - i. You can have hope for the future.
- XII. Reinterpret the Past, Present, and Future.
 - a. PTSD makes you live in the past.
 - b. Exercise, spiritual disciplines, work, time management, serve people.
 - c. Do the things God calls you to do (stay busy).
 - d. A life transformed from darkness (trauma) to light (meaningfulness and joy) glorifies God the same way that stars shine brightest on a very dark night.
 - i. The greatest example of this is Jesus.

Resources:

- Mighty Oaks Foundation: <https://www.mightyoaksprograms.org/international/>
- Association of Certified Biblical Counselors: <https://biblicalcounseling.com/product/2018-annual-conference-complete-conference-collection/>
- Institute for Biblical Counseling and Discipleship: <https://ibcd.org/topics/ptsd/>
- *Helping Your Family Through PTSD* by Greg E. Gifford (Resource Publications, Eugene, Oregon, 2017).
- *PTSD: Healing for Bad Memories* by Timothy S. Lane (New Growth Press, Greensboro, North Carolina, 2012).
- *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder: Recovering Hope* by Jeremy Lelek (P&R Publishing, Phillipsburg, New Jersey, 2013).
- *Path to Resiliency* by Chad Robichaux and Jeremy Stalnecker (MLB Publishing, 2016).
- *Putting Your Past in Its Place* by Steve Viars (Harvest House Publishers, Eugene, Oregon, 2011).
- *Dark Clouds Deep Mercy* by Mark Vroegop (Crossway, Wheaton, Illinois, 2019).