

1 Full Redemption

The doors we open and close each day
decide the lives we live.

—Flora Whittemore

There were boxes everywhere! The moving truck had arrived. Three brawny men and one scrawny teen were dutifully and, for the most part, carefully unloading all of my life's belongings. Despite the final destination "kitchen" or "girl's bedroom" scrawled on the outside of boxes, I still had to point the men to the appropriate room where each box belonged. At the end of a very long day, I entered my new house to be welcomed by stack upon stack of boxes.

The boxes looked mostly the same from the outside. Deciphering their contents came from the brief descriptor written on the contents line. What lay ahead of me was the hard work of tackling each box and unpacking the contents so that they would be useable in this new house I longed to call home. For the most part, I was looking forward to the process. I had not been in touch with these treasures for several months. They had been in storage while we relocated across the continent and then waited for our house to become our own. These boxes represented my life, the places I'd lived and visited, and the people I had come to love. These boxes were full of me, and I wanted to move from the constraint of suitcase existence to being at home with my stuff.

Unpacking always seems to bring surprises. As I peeled away the manila packing paper, I discovered the candle holder my best friend gave me on the last birthday we celebrated together. The opportunity to hold it seemed to bring our hearts together as I remembered the love and joy in her eyes when she gave it to me six months earlier. I also remembered the love and sadness in her eyes as I drove away for the last time. A few of my tears moistened the packing paper in that box.

The next box produced a picture of my mom—someone I never knew very well. As I looked at her picture, attributes came to mind, but I was assaulted by the fact that what I know about her has in large part come from what others have told me. This secondhand knowledge of the woman who gave birth to me and loved me dearly as a girl has never seemed sufficient. In the deep part of my heart, I wondered what her

thoughts and feelings would have been today if she were unpacking these boxes with me.

At the back of the dining room I found a rather nondescript box that piqued my curiosity. Offhand I couldn't recollect what was in it. As I opened it and lifted the packing paper, a flood of remorse washed over me. I carefully removed each piece of broken pottery. I knew what this was—or at least what it had been. About 15 years earlier it had been a beautiful statue my husband and I purchased on a mission trip to Haiti. I still recall the weathered vender we purchased it from, the stench of the street market, and the poverty of her squalor. My mind quickly flits from the moment of the purchase to the moment I discovered its demise. That was four moves ago. Each time I come across this box I wish I had taken the time at the last unpacking to put the pieces back together so I could enjoy its beauty. Instead, I put aside this desire in favor of the urgent and close up the box again. Maybe in this home I will take the time to work on it. Maybe I'll deal with this bit of history after another move. For now though, the place on my shelf reserved for it remains empty.

The next box held a surprise as well. The inexperienced packer had obviously loaded up this box. As I worked my way down through it, each stratum revealed another shelf from my sewing closet. Unfortunately, no packing paper had been used to separate the items. At the top were books; beneath that were patterns, followed by material samples and sewing supplies, and finally my sewing machine, which was unceremoniously dumped at the bottom of the large cardboard box. Strewn throughout all of this were the pins and needles that

had spilled from the container, leaving extremely sharp objects scattered throughout. My emotions ranged from frustration to anger as I closed the box with an exclamation related to the packer's incompetence. The mess in this box could be blamed on someone else. Unfortunately, I was the one who would have to untangle the mess if I was ever going to use those items again.

Relational Boxes

The process of unpacking has great similarities to the relationships of our lives. If each relationship had its own box, complete with a brief descriptor on the contents line, we would have quite a stack of them in each room in the home of our heart. We would find boxes labeled father, mother, sister, brother, best friend, estranged friend, husband, ex-husband, old boyfriend, children, boss, and so on. We might even have a box labeled *God*. The size of the box would depend on how much history we have with the person and how much of our life story is connected to him or her. If we were to unpack each relational box, we would find some memories that would make us smile, filling us with memories of joy and thankfulness. The contents of some boxes might make us cry as we recall hurtful experiences. We might be repelled or disheartened at the thought of revisiting others. Our response might be to wrap up the mess and place it back in the box to be dealt with later. Some relationships are full of hurts or injustices collected through lack of forgiveness. We should have dealt with them long ago, but over the years we have instead added to and hoarded the collection.

We attempt to compartmentalize our relationships. In so doing, we deny the fluidity of ourselves within our network. We fool ourselves into thinking that life would be easier if we could keep each relationship neatly confined to its own box. But just as the moving boxes must all be unpacked and the contents arranged in the new home to be of use, so we must unpack our relational boxes. We must take an honest look at each relationship to see the effect it has had and continues to have on who we are and how we relate. We are an accumulation of all past events and relationships as well as the present circumstances in which we find ourselves. All of these people contribute to the pages of our life's story.

An Unpacking Partner

Of greatest consequence is whether or not we allow God to flow into our other relationships. Too often we attempt to limit God to a delegated box. We may be willing to give Him a few minutes in the morning and a quick prayer before lunch, but He is then neatly packed away until a need arises and we desire His usefulness. As we are willing to allow God to help us unpack all of our boxes, He is able to help us sort through the memories, joys, and hurts found in these boxes. Christ is with us, carrying us through tough relationships that seem to cause more pain than happiness. He is showering us with His blessings when we engage in healthy relationships that reflect the Trinity. As we allow Him to become our unpacking partner, the Holy Spirit uses every aspect of these relationships to shape us to be more like Christ. In doing this we will come to relate to Him and others in a way that brings Him glory.

In order for this transformation to occur, we must face our story with honesty and authenticity, becoming broken by any sin in our lives. It is only the degree to which I am willing to be broken and allow God to steer this process that life-changing healing and transformation will occur. Due to fear, shame, or independence, we refuse to allow God to join us in the unpacking of these relational boxes. This blocks the flow of God's power in our lives. We must humble ourselves and recognize our desperate need for God to permeate each of our relationships, giving Him the central place in the unpacking. Without Him we are simply reorganizing our stuff, and no true change occurs.

The Box Labeled *Mother*

The wound of losing my mother at a young age continues to heal as I acknowledge to both God and myself the pain that loss represents in this part of my story. The first step has been to admit the range of feelings I encounter in my journey of grief. I recall attempting to buy a Mother's Day card for my mother-in-law only six weeks after the death of my own mother. I had to leave the card shop because of my intense heartache. Every card I read seemed to express the perfect sentiment for the mother I had lost.

I remember holding my baby daughter and crying as I realized that my mother would never hold the granddaughter who bore her name. I had to be willing to acknowledge the pain and be broken by my attempts to fix myself apart from God before I could experience the progressive healing He offered. My understanding of the words in Ps. 147:3, written in present tense,

continues to evolve as the healing progresses. “He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.”

At unexpected times I revisit the box labeled *Mother* to find another layer of memories that have been stuffed away in it. Six years after my mother’s death the Holy Spirit impressed upon my heart that I needed to take seriously the directive in Eph. 5:20, “always giving thanks to God the Father for everything.”

At first I felt horrified that God was asking me to be thankful for my mom’s premature illness and death. Then, His Spirit gently showed me that in His request for me to be thankful, He really desired for me to be grateful to God for His love and comfort in this situation. He wanted me to get my eyes off the pain and to recognize all the incredible ways He has used, and will continue to use, this quagmire of loss and hurt. He was tenderly calling me to trust Him to take care of me. He simply wanted me to become aware of how He was at work in the middle of the ongoing loss.

As I relinquished my need to make sense of the chaos I was feeling and placed my loss in His hands, He was able to take that part of my story and bring glory to himself, turning it around so that it became a benefit to me.

I began to thank God for the strength of character and the competencies that were developed in me because of the need to take care of myself and the family when Mom drifted into the abyss of Alzheimer’s while I was just entering my teens. He showed me the myriad of women He had brought into my life who fed me emotionally and spiritually. These were women who had become a mother to the motherless. God has

brought tremendous good out of a situation that was neither normal nor good.

By being thankful to God the Father for everything, I am able to be a living example of 2 Cor. 4:15 (TM): “Every detail works to your advantage and to God’s glory.” Each time God helps me dig further into a box, unpacking the hurts and joys associated with it, I experience His tenderness, patience, and love in a deeper way. It is to my advantage to allow God to be my unpacking partner. I am benefited by experiencing God in that box. God gets the glory because His faithfulness and grace are greater than my need. The outcome is that my faith in His goodness grows.

Redemption Offered

This process of acknowledging and working through my boxes is not for the end purpose of relieving my pain. God’s greater purpose is not to make me feel better. Jesus Christ did not die on the cross so that my pain could be relieved. So you may be asking, what’s the point of unpacking these boxes if it’s not going to make life easier or happier?

I believe that each box holds the potential of either moving us toward God or turning us away from Him. If we choose to turn away from Him, we turn away from the only relationship that can satisfy the deepest longings of our soul. If we are turning to other people or things to satisfy this God-shaped need, we will be left feeling unsatisfied and deficient.

The quality of our relationships is a direct result of the extent to which we put God at the center. We must first recognize that there is a battle within us to be either self-focused, going it

alone, or to become God-focused. We will choose to do the unpacking alone without God's involvement, or we will choose to relinquish our illusion of control and accept God's invitation and allow Him to take our stories and change their ongoing effect.

When Christ went to the cross, died, and rose again, He became our Redeemer. His sacrifice paid the full price of our sins. (See Rom. 6:23.) This exchange means that once and for all our sins are paid for. Christ has paid the full price.

God is glorified when we, His fully redeemed children, make Him Lord of our lives and not just our Savior. This happens as we allow Him access and lordship over more and more of our hearts and lives.

To continue the box analogy, we allow Him to work through our boxes with us and to take the things that He finds and turn them around so they have the opposite of their intended effect.

An amazing example of this is in the life of Joseph as told in the Book of Genesis. Many bad things happened to Joseph. His heart could have been hardened and his life destroyed. Instead, he chose a close relationship with God that changed the likely negative outcome. His heart was turned toward God and an entire people were saved. Joseph summed it up by saying to his brothers "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" (50:20).

Another example is the apostle Paul. Writing from his prison cell to the church in Philippi, he considers his imprisonment and says, "I want you to know . . . that what has hap-

pened to me has really served to advance the gospel” (Phil. 1:12). *The Message* puts it this way: “My imprisonment here has had the opposite of its intended effect.”

Whether our boxes, either in part or in whole, contain things that have been imposed upon us by others, as in the cases of Joseph and Paul, or are self-imposed by the choices we have made, we experience healing when we allow God to help us sort through these boxes. Giving Him the opportunity to use what was meant for evil and to reclaim it for His glory and our advantage, we realize the ongoing effect of Christ’s one-time redemption. Have you allowed God to take the things that have happened in your past and turn them fully around so that they are now benefiting your life, furthering the gospel, and bringing God glory?

Time to Buy Back

God wants to buy back the time that was lost to the former boyfriend who used us and left us feeling bad about ourselves or the lost innocence caused by sexual abuse. He wants to restore the lost intimacy with our husband caused by the anger and selfishness we coddle. God wants to replace the gifts that we squandered or hoarded by being so full of pride that there was no longer any glory going to God. (See Joel 2:25.) God desires to reclaim every relationship and every area of our lives, both past and present. Redeeming our stories means that God wants to turn them around. He is not going to change the story. The past is what it is. But God does desire to release us from the imprisoning effect of the past so that our stories will have the opposite of their intended effect.

As we respond to God's gentle wooing to bring our boxes to Him and allow Him to unpack them with us, we allow the Holy Spirit access to the deepest places of our hearts. As He carefully and tenderly unwraps the unmentionables, He does not belittle or reject us. Instead, He takes those hurts and says, "I have already used my blood to buy back and recover these wounds. I have purchased your freedom from their painful effect in your life. My desire is not that you will just feel better; I want your pain and wounds to be exchanged for the peace and joy that I offer."

All too often we deal with our wounds only to a certain point. We experience acute pain in a relationship so we confront, we sort of forgive, we practice self-help, and we may even allow God to start the healing, but we often stop the process before we come to the point of fully realizing the abundant life that God has offered us through the ongoing power of His redemption. (See Eph. 1:7-8.) We do just enough to relieve the pressure. When the situation is no longer critical, we move on with life.

Most of us own weed whackers; high-powered machines that chop the tops off of weeds. The garden looks nice for a short period of time, but very soon the weeds start to grow tops again because the roots were left untouched. Just as in the garden, the weeds in our life must be pulled and fully dealt with so that the ground can be reclaimed and the full effect of our redemption can be experienced. If we try to make our story look nice by cutting off the tops, the ugliness still has root in our lives, and the roots grow stronger—though unnoticed. Only the Holy Spirit can do the deep subsurface work where the roots are truly dealt with.

In Ps. 51, David is confronted with the part of his story that includes adultery and murder. For the first time, David sees his behavior from God's viewpoint. By the end of the Psalm, David comes to an understanding of what is needed to allow God to get at the root. "Going through the motions doesn't please you, a flawless performance is nothing to you. I learned God-worship when my pride was shattered. Heart-shattered lives ready for love don't for a moment escape God's notice" (Ps. 51:16-17, TM).

Pride has a selfish focus: self-sufficiency, self-promotion, and self-protection. It is only when we give up the weed whacking and allow our pride to be shattered, shifting our focus off ourselves and onto God, that He takes notice of our cry for His attention and mercy. When we have come to the end of our rope, we acknowledge that God is our only hope. There is nothing we can do to make ourselves feel or be better. All other attempts to secure love from others have been flawed and even our attempts to love ourselves have failed. It is only putting God in first place that brings about the changed life that fully realizes the power of Christ's redemption.

Get Out of Jail . . . Free

We must be willing to be broken and delve into the messes in our boxes with Him. We cannot allow ourselves to put boundaries on how God chooses to bring about full healing and restoration. To fully realize the power of Christ's redemption, we must give God complete control. The result will be a transformation that allows us to become more and more like Him as we move toward "attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:13).

Until we have done this, we are prisoners of our pasts. We end up being shackled to the past, tiptoeing around an issue, a person, or some part of our story. “You are only as sick as your secrets.”¹ If we are honest with ourselves, we will admit that it is one of our deepest longings to get to the point where our past, our hurts, and our attitudes bow down to Christ on the cross, rather than us bowing down to them. God wants to buy back our stories and use them to further His story. The power of Christ’s redemption is that we are no longer slaves but that we “have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life” (Rom. 6:22).

Imagine being in a prison that strips us of our freedoms and robs us of self-worth. We struggle under the daily grind of maintaining life within the walls of this prison. Unexpectedly, someone comes along and offers us an escape, complete with a full pardon and a guarantee that we never return to prison. Would we accept such a gift? (See Eph. 2:8-9.) Would we attempt to bargain with our Pardoner about what life outside should look like? Would we put a stranglehold on freedom and remain in prison because of a need for control or fear of life outside the prison walls? God asks us to trust Him both with the pardon and with life after prison.

We may fear that, after receiving this gift, God could ask us to do or say something that is beyond our abilities or outside our comfort zones. In order to grant God access to the boxes and make Him Lord of our lives, we must trust Him. Faith in God and His character becomes the impetus for turning our stories over to God. As we learn to trust who God is, we will learn to trust what God does.

Abraham became a man of great faith one step at a time. God groomed Abraham and built his faith through the many trials of his life. Waiting for the fulfillment of the promise for a son strengthened and shaped Abraham's faith in God. Each of Abraham's life experiences was used by God to shape and prepare him for the event recorded in Gen. 22. God had enlarged Abraham's faith in His goodness so that when asked to give up his beloved son as a sacrifice, Abraham trusted God enough to be willing to do it. This complete trust of who God is afforded Abraham the strength and faith to give back what he held so dearly. Through this act of obedient surrender, God raised up the nation of Israel. We must trust God to do what He needs to do in order for our stories to have the opposite of their intended effect.

We have become worn-out trying to manipulate our stories. It is a burden to try and make life work while living with unpacked boxes. Let's delve into this unpacking process and look at the significant relationships in our lives. Invite the Holy Spirit to do the subsurface work of getting at the root. Let's stop the weed whacking. Let's see how God desires to unpack each of these relationships so that they can be used by Him for His glory and our benefit. Trust Him with the process.

Study . . . Meditate . . . Journal

- Psalm 130
- Isaiah 57:15
- Psalm 51:17
- Philippians 1:12

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- Isaiah 40:2
- Ephesians 1:7-8
- Hebrews 9:14
- Colossians 1:13-14
- Psalm 25:4-10
- Romans 6:22-23

Reflective Questions

1. What part of your story have you been weed whacking (only dealing with the visible effects, not getting at the roots)?
2. Which relational boxes are you trying to unpack on your own?
3. What is keeping you from allowing God to be your unpacking partner?
4. Open one relational box. Write out the things in that box that make you feel good. Make another list of those things that feel broken, hurtful, or unresolved. Spend time with God, asking Him to show you how He wants to redeem these.
5. Imagine (and journal) what it would feel like to have relief and joy flood into your soul should you allow God to redeem your story.
6. Ask God to build your trust in Him.