

BIBLICAL COUNSELING AND MEMORY

Dr. Matthew Rehrer²

INTRODUCTION

Biblical counseling utilizes God's gift of human memory on a regular basis with recollection of events, responses, counsel from God's Word and homework. With the frequent dependence on memory in counseling, this overview will seek to shed light on the fundamental importance of memory and fallibility with a specific application to trauma sufferers.

What is Memory?

When asked, most would define memory by its capability. Some examples of extreme capability include recalling 70,000 digits of pi or playing 30,000 notes of a Rachmaninoff piece, but memory goes beyond just capability to include the emotions and will. In truth, memory remains a mystery to science but is an integral part of the ontology of God's image-bearers.

Why is Memory Important?

To understand the importance of memory, consider a life without it. In "The Lost Mariner," Dr. Oliver Sacks, a British neurologist, described his patient Jimmie who suffered from an inability to form new memories³. Dr. Sacks described Jimmie's life devoid of relationship and filled with loneliness and fear. Jimmie lacked the ability to recognize himself in the mirror. Everyone

² Dr. Matthew Rehrer is an emergency medicine physician in the Bay Area and serves on staff and as an elder at his church, North Creek Church in Walnut Creek, CA. Please contact jbsc@biblicalcounseling.com with questions for the author.

³ Oliver Sacks, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat and Other Clinical Tales*. Harper and Row, 1987, 23-42.

was a stranger, and everything was unfamiliar. Jimmie missed the moorings of memory that form identity, relationship, place, and purpose.

The origins of memory transport back to the Garden where God made Adam and Eve in His image (Genesis 1:26). Human memory reflects God and His attributes such as His omniscience. God gave man the gift of memory for one primary reason: to glorify and worship Him. Worship “is inconceivable without knowing (remembering) who God is and what He has done on behalf of His people.”⁴ Secondly, memory also reflects God in work, planning, obedience, imagination, creativity, and organization.

How Does Memory Work?

In many regards, memory remains a mystery because of the limitations in human observation of the inner workings of the material brain but also the spiritual nature of the immaterial mind that God has created. As can best be determined then through observation of the physical world, science discusses memory in relationship to observable functions. Memory involves multiple processes that include encoding, consolidating, storing as well as retrieval. Neurons in the brain connect and communicate by releasing chemicals called neurotransmitters across synapses. These neurotransmitters signal to the brain to encode and store vast amounts of information in ways that are still poorly understood. The hippocampus is the part of the brain that plays an integral role in weaving new memories together. A patient named Henry Molaison had his hippocampus removed in 1953 to relieve him from seizures.⁵ The seizures almost completely stopped, but it came at a cost. Henry was no longer able to form memories for new events in his life (episodic memory) despite the preservation of his intelligence, language, sensory and motor functions. New episodic memory formation requires the hippocampus to function properly; but once a memory is consolidated, storage occurs outside the hippocampus throughout the brain in complex patterns across multiple areas where neural activity occurred when the event took place.

⁴ Eugene Merrill, “Remembering: A central theme in Biblical worship,” *JETS* vol. 43 1 (March 2000), 30.

⁵ Suzanne Corkin, “What’s New with Amnesic Patient HM?” *Nature Reviews Neuroscience* 3 (2002), 153-160.

How Does Memory Prioritize Meaning?

To form a memory, meaning matters. A study showed that chess grandmasters who looked at a board with twenty-six to thirty-two pieces for only five seconds placed on average sixteen pieces on an empty board if the pieces were arranged in realistic game positions.⁶ Novices only placed on average three pieces. When the test was repeated with the chess pieces arranged randomly and unplayable, the grandmasters only could place three pieces on average. Grandmasters remembered meaningful chess positions. Meaning captures attention and signals importance. Intentionality helps direct your attention by taking special notice of things. Meaning and intentionality is reflected in Deuteronomy 6 when God commands the Israelites to teach their children the important commandments “when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up” (Deuteronomy 6:7). Be intentional to remember what is meaningful to God.

How Does Memory Prioritize Emotion?

Closely tied to meaning, emotion also signals prioritization. The amygdala, an almond-shaped area of your brain, sits right in front of the hippocampus and appears to play a role in the episodic memory. People with a rare disease called Urbach-Wiethe syndrome, which selectively damages the amygdala with progressive calcifications, remember the past but show impairment of episodic memory attached to intense emotional responses. In a study of ten Urbach-Wiethe patients, memorization of emotionally arousing material was highly impaired compared to controls.⁷ When functioning, the amygdala and hippocampus seem to closely communicate with neuromodulating signals that indicate prioritization in memory. The surprise factor of an event enhances memory formation with an intense emotional response.⁸ These surprise factors are postulated to also improve recall with the likelihood of retelling to self and others.

⁶ Simon HA, et al. “Skill in chess.” *American Scientist* 61 (1973), 394–403.

⁷ Siebert, M., et al. “Amydala, affect and cognition: evidence from 10 patients with Urbach-Wiethe disease.” *Brain*, Vol. 126 (2003), 2627-2637.

⁸ Antony, JW, et al. “Long-term, multi-event surprise correlates with enhanced autobiographical memory.” *Nature Human Behavior* Vol. 7 (2023), 2152-2168.

These episodic memories are formed under emotional stress with complex relationships postulated to involve certain neurotransmitters such as epinephrine (adrenaline), norepinephrine, and cortisol. To test one of these, cortisol, researchers injected test subjects with cortisol or saline and showed emotionally evocative photos.⁹ Subjects injected with cortisol performed better one week later in recall of these photos. However, it is unclear if these conditions match true trauma. In Cushing disease, where cortisol levels are abnormally high, one of the effects beyond high blood pressure, obesity, and stretch marks is memory impairment. Of note, when Cushing's disease is treated, the memory deficits improve.¹⁰

Scientists have proposed an inverted U-shaped curve to explain the relationship between stress and memory, called the Yerkes-Dodson Curve. Too little stress with minimal arousal correlates with poor memory performance. Too much stress with overwhelming arousal also correlates with poor memory performance. Peak memory performance occurs with an intermediate level of stress. In addition to these complex relationships between stress and memory, not everyone responds to stress in the same way. Observational studies do not capture the wide array of unique ways human memory performs under stress.

Noetic Effects of Sin on Memory

Memory is fallible. No matter how intelligent you are, you forget things like what you ate last week for breakfast, where you placed your car keys or the name of your second-grade art teacher. Memory is fallible not just in omissions (things you forget) but also in distortions, additions and exaggerations. Why is this the case? The original sin of Adam in the garden of Eden impacts memory today both in “natural weakness which arises from the constitution of the body and a moral forgetfulness.”¹¹

⁹ Buchanan, Tony, et al. “Enhanced memory for emotional material following stress-level cortisol treatment in humans,” *Psychoneuroendocrinology* Vol. 26, no. 3. 2001, pp. 307-317.

¹⁰ Bourdeau, Isabelle, et al., “Loss of Brain Volume in Endogenous Cushing's Syndrome and Its Reversibility after Correction of Hypercortisolism,” *The Journal of Clinical Endocrinology & Metabolism* 87, 5 (May 2002), pp. 1949–54.

¹¹ Anthony Burgess, *The Extent of Original Sin in Every Faculty of the Soul*, Web. 27 March, 2024, monergism.com, 82.

Natural Decay of Memory

Memory erodes from a natural decay witnessed over time in aging called transience. The Father of Memory, Herman Ebbinghaus, developed a forgetting curve to quantify the rate of information lost. He memorized a list of sixty-four trigrams (three letter groupings) like DAX, REN, and VAB in forty-five minutes and recorded his rate of forgetfulness: half in twenty minutes and about two-thirds by the next day.¹² Time erodes memory. The human mind also has limits to the amount it can hold at any one time in working memory, somewhere between three and seven pieces of information.¹³ The brain chunks digital information into consumable pieces, which is how you remember important data like your social security number. Different diseases also manifest with memory decay. Many suffer the damaging effects of dementia that ravages memory or certain strokes that impact recall. As part of a fallen world, sickness invades every region of the body including the mind.

Moral Decay of Memory Formation: Self-assessment

Memory also suffers from not just physical decay but also moral distortion. Memory's original created purpose, to bring glory to God and enjoy Him, has been distorted to replace God with self at the center. The Bible makes it clear that the heart is deceptive (Jeremiah 17:9), and scientific observation unsurprisingly follows these ancient Biblical truths. For example, researchers asked participants to pick an original photo of themselves or one of the digitally enhanced versions that most closely resembled them.¹⁴ The participants selected the digitally altered photo that made them younger and more attractive. This study shows a fundamental flaw in self-assessment, a biased perception of self. Man walks away from the mirror, and "he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was" (James 1:24). As James indicates, this poor self-assessment does not just include the outer appearance but the inner heart.

¹² Hermann Ebbinghaus, 1964. *Memory: A Contribution to Experimental Psychology*. Translate by H. A. Ruger and C. E. Bussenius. New York: Dover. Original work published in 1885.

¹³ Luck, Steve, et al. "Visual Working Capacity Memory Capacity from Psychophysics and Neurobiology to Individual Differences." *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 17 (8), pp. 391-400

¹⁴ National Portrait Gallery (2014). *The Curated Ego: What Makes a Good Selfie?* 3, March 2014, Web 27, March 2024.

Moral Decay of Memory Formation: Misappropriation

With this corruption of memory, dysfunction influences what is valued and thus remembered. “You forget what you should remember and remember what you should forget while doubting God will forget what He promised and will remember what He promised to forget.”¹⁵ Pervasive fallenness of a sin nature misappropriates importance such that memory “treasures up the refuse of the past and permits priceless treasures to lie neglected.”^{8 16} The compass of the mind has turned from an orientation of true North toward God to South toward self, and the results are deceptive and damaging. Forgetfulness can spring up in areas of spiritual concern like forgetting who God is (Jeremiah 2:32) and what He has done (Psalm 106:13-14). In essence, sin traces back to a forgetfulness of God’s commands (Jeremiah 23:36). A corrupt memory directly corresponds with disobedience.

In juxtaposition to forgetfulness of the important things, useless memories persistently clutter in the mind and reduce the retention of the useful. The mind returns to the “worthless and elemental things” (Galatians 4:9) and bogs down with thoughts that compete and crowd out memories of the important things of the Lord. This persistence feeds anxiety and spinning as the mind ruminates on the trivial and not the eternal.

Moral Decay of Memory Formation: Distraction

As noted earlier, meaning matters in memory as meaning grabs your attention. “If you have no attention, you have no retention.”¹⁷ Even with constant and repeated exposure, you will not remember something without giving it true attention. For example, the Apple logo is one of the most recognized global images seen by many every day. In a study of eighty-five participants, only one accurately drew the Apple logo and less than half identified it from a group of choices.¹⁸ For memory formation, you need to

¹⁵ Matthew Rehrer, *Redeeming Memory*. Shepherd Press, 2022, p. 40.

¹⁶ Charles Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David*, vol 2, “Psalm 103.” Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1984, p. 276.

¹⁷ Kevin Horsley, *Unlimited Memory*, TCK Publishing, 2013, p.98

¹⁸ Blake, A. B. et al., “The Apple of the Mind’s Eye: Everyday Attention, Metamemory, and Reconstructive Memory of the Apple Logo.” *Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology*, 2015, p. 858-865

purposefully give attention to what is important. The Apple logo is not a high priority, but attention to your spiritual condition is.

Distraction then is one of the greatest foes of memory as it inhibits consolidation and formation of new memories. Distraction glows in every corner and in every hand in the form of technology. The design of the Internet is to bounce you from one site to the next with maximal information and minimal retention. Competing flows of information that include the webpage content, advertising, and notifications from other applications create an overload of one distraction that begets another. On top of the distraction, technology can also quickly plunge the mind away from the important into the trivial. This external instrument appeals to the internal sin nature on many levels.

Decay of Memory Reconstruction: Mutability

With episodic memory, no one remembers every detail of an event, only parts of what happened. The memory of an event is then reconstructed over time in its subsequent retrieval with contributions from imagination, opinion, and suggestion. Every time a memory is retrieved, it has the potential to be trimmed or expanded and then stored again for future retrieval. This new version is now the memory that is stored and available for future recall, not the original version. Memory is not like an old VHS tape that you can pull out and play at any time. It is mutable and dynamic.

In one study, researchers asked Emory college students a series of five questions twenty-four hours after the Challenger shuttle exploded in 1986 and recorded the results about where they were, who was with them, how they felt, what time of day it was, and what they were doing.¹⁹ Over two years later, they asked these students the same set of questions. Not one student had answers that completely matched their original. Fifty percent only matched one answer while twenty-five percent were incorrect on every answer. When shown their original answers, the students were confounded and stuck by their most recent answers. Confidence in memory does not equate to accuracy.

¹⁹ Winograd, E., et. al. *Affect and Accuracy in Recall: Studies of "Flashbulb" Memories*. Emory Symposia in Cognition. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

Decay of Memory Reconstruction: Suggestion

Studies show the power of suggestion in the reconstruction of episodic memories. Words matter in the forming of future recollection. In one study, researchers showed participants a video of a car accident.²⁰ The participants were asked either, “How fast were the cars going when they *smashed* into one another?” or “How fast were the cars going when they *hit* one another?” or not asked either question. One week later, these groups were asked if they saw any broken glass in the video. The group who was asked if the cars had smashed into one another reported 32% while the group asked if the cars hit one another only reported broken glass 14% similar the group not asked any question. There was not any broken glass in the video.

Decay of Memory Reconstruction: Misinformation

The power of suggestion extends to the power of misinformation that can get incorporated into memory. This concerning flaw was first demonstrated in an experiment where participants read four stories about events from their childhood from either a sibling or parent.²¹ One of the four stories was false that described a time when the participant was lost in a shopping mall. Participants returned one to two weeks later and wrote down what they recalled from all four events. At the end, they were told one of the four stories was false. Five out of twenty-four picked a real event as the fabricated story. Misinformation, especially from a trusted source, has been shown to influence recall in other studies in about one in three people on average.²²

Decay of Memory Reconstruction: Confirmation Bias

Confirmation bias also contributes to the construction and reconstruction of memories. Since a memory is incomplete, there is a predilection to fill

²⁰ Loftus, E. L., et al. “Reconstruction of Automobile Destruction: An Example of the Interaction Between Language and Memory.” *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior*, Vol 13. 1974, pp. 585-589.

²¹ Loftus, E. L., et al. “Planting Misinformation in the Human Mind: A 30-Year Investigation of the Malleability of Memory.” *Learning and Memory* Vol 12 (4), 2005, pp. 361-366.

²² Arce, M. M., et al. “Implanting Rich Autobiographical False Memories: Meta-analysis for Forensic Practice and Judicial Judgment Making.” *International Journal of Clinical and Health Psychology*, Vol 23 (4): 100386.

gaps with information that bolsters the viewpoint of the event. Gap filling can occur to try to explain something that happened. For example, a study at Harvard surveyed around one hundred women who had children with birth defects and one hundred who had children without birth defects.²³ The survey asked the participants to recall whether they had been exposed to different things during their pregnancy including hormonal birth control. These results were compared to the medical record and known medications taken. Despite a similar rate of birth control use between the two groups, the women who had babies with birth defects were much more likely to believe they had taken birth control when they indeed had not. Memory acts like a detective trying to piece together a story of what might have happened, not necessarily what did happen. When searching for answers, memory's reliability is questionable.

Memory is Fallen

The noetic effects extend from memory formation to memory reconstruction. The purpose here is not to invalidate and undermine all memories but simply recognize the need for humble consideration of memory's fallibility. Only until memory is understood in this light will redemption be seen as necessary and vital.

THE REDEMPTION OF MEMORY

Only one has ever walked on this earth with a perfect memory unstained by sin, Jesus Christ. He lived a perfect life of obedience and did not "forget" one of His Father's commands (Hebrews 5:8-9). The Son of God willingly offered up His life on the cross to satisfy God's justice. Jesus was "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief" (Isaiah 53:3b). Every Christian's sin had to be remembered and nailed to the cross to be pardoned and satisfy the wrath of God (Colossians 2:13-14). Otherwise, Satan would have grounds to bring an accusation of unpaid sin (Romans 8:31-34). But "God not only remembers every single sin in his perfect justice, but also forgets every sin

²³ Werler, Martha, et al. "Reporting Accuracy Among Mothers of Malformed and Non-malformed Infants," *American Journal of Epidemiology* 129 no. 2. 1989, pp. 415-421

in His perfect mercy.”²⁴ Because of the Son’s work on the cross, the Father will “remember their sins no more” (Jeremiah 31:34). The cross sits at the center of a transaction of memory where justice and mercy kiss (Psalm 85:10-11). Christ was forsaken (forgotten) at the cross, but He was remembered in resurrection. God’s redemptive plan redeemed man from sin and death. Victory has been accomplished through Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 15:55-57). This glorious redemption will be revisited over and over as the center point for memory. Why? Because God loves and remembers His people. “The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit” (Psalm 34:18).

THE APPLICATION OF REDEPTIVE MEMORY IN TRAUMA

The Definition of Trauma

Memory plays a significant role for those who experience trauma. The definition of trauma has greatly expanded in recent years. For purposes of this application, trauma involves the categories of physical violence, sexual violence, organized violence (kidnapping, refugee, combat, etc.), life-threatening illness or injury, or unexpected death. Trauma is the result of fallen people living in a fallen world and is not new to this generation. It goes back to the beginning of humanity when Cain, in unchecked anger, killed his brother Abel (Genesis 4:8). The pages of the Bible are filled with trauma, and trauma sits at the pinnacle of the gospel where the son of God died a most violent and heinous death on a Roman cross. The Bible will serve as the guide to address trauma sufferers.

The Definition of PTSD

Many people experience life-threatening trauma (including the author) or a potentially traumatic event (around 70%),²⁵ and some trauma-sufferers will develop symptoms that correspond with post-traumatic stress disorder

²⁴ Matthew Rehrer, *Redeeming Memory*. Shepherd Press, 2022, p. 71.

²⁵ Benjet C., et al. The epidemiology of traumatic event exposure worldwide: Results from the World Mental Health Survey Consortium. *Psychol. Med.* 2016;46:327-343.

(PTSD). The diagnosis of PTSD unfortunately includes the term “disorder.” “Disorder” falsely communicates to a trauma-sufferer that they are disordered in some way and falsely implies this is a medical disease without a known cure.²⁶ These are false implications from a misleading label. PTSD symptoms are grouped into four categories: intrusive (nightmares or flashbacks), avoidance, cognition/mood alterations (irritability, difficulty concentrating, etc), and altered arousal reactivity (exaggerated startle response, hypervigilance). PTSD lifetime prevalence in the US is around 6%²⁷, which is much higher than other countries of 1-2%.²⁸ Regardless, PTSD is not inevitable or insignificant, but it is complicated. No two people experience or respond to trauma in the same way.

The Role of Stress: Inner and Outer Man

How does stress from trauma influence the body (outer man) and soul (inner man)? Stress impacts the inner man with visible effects seen in the outer man. However, Bessel van der Kolk would propose, “The body keeps the score: If the memory of trauma is encoded in the viscera, in heartbreaking and gut-wrenching emotions, in autoimmune disorders and skeletal/muscular problems, and if mind/brain/visceral communication is the royal road to emotion regulation, this demands a radical shift in our therapeutic assumptions.”²⁹ This theory of neurobiological damage from trauma creates not only an environment of hopeless inevitability but a misguided search for the solutions in the outer man. The Bible clearly points to the inner man as the focus for recovery and resilience in the face of suffering. “Though our outer man is decaying, our inner man is being renewed day by day” (2 Corinthians 4:16). This emphasis on the inner man is not a denial of the physiologic manifestations of trauma sufferers as “a crushed spirit dries up the bones” (Proverbs 17:22b). Rather, it is an acknowledgement that every person is

²⁶ Curtis Solomon, *I Have PTSD*. New Growth Press, 2023, p. 22.

²⁷ Goldstein, R. B., et al. “The epidemiology of DSM-5 post-traumatic stress disorder in the United States: results from the National Epidemiological Survey on Alcohol and Related Conditions” *Social psychiatry and psychiatric epidemiology*, 51(8), pp. 1137-1148.

²⁸ Koenen, K. C., et al. “Post-traumatic stress disorder in the World Mental Health Surveys.” *Psychol Medicine*. 2017, 47 (13), pp. 2260-2274

²⁹ Van der Kolk, Bessel A. *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*. New York: Viking, 2014, pp. 12-1

more than just a body but a unique embodied soul. Instead of then looking to external techniques to suppress somatic symptoms of the body, the road to redemption is through a reorientation of the soul.

PTSD: Over-remembrance

Trauma sufferers are not frustrated by an inability to remember, but an ability to remember too well through things like flashbacks and nightmares. One PTSD sufferer exclaimed, “I don’t want to remember, but I can’t seem to forget.”³⁰ Memory can be troublesome in its distortion of events, but this does not mean events did not happen. For example, many survivors of verified childhood sexual abuse remember the traumatic events. They do not need to recover “lost (or repressed)” memories but rather recover from the “true” memories.³¹ Where help is needed is in the processing and response to these traumatic events and subsequent recollections.

Reorientation of Memory: The Holy Spirit and Prayer

In understanding the distortion of memory, reorientation requires the help of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit’s work is “to bring the promises of Christ to our minds and hearts, to give us comfort of them, the joy and sweetness of them.”³² In concert with the Holy Spirit, prayer is also an essential tool as a first step to reorient memory as “the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groaning too deep for words” (Romans 8:26).

Reorientation of Memory: Listening

In this place of prayerful dependence, a Biblical counselor walks side by side with the sufferer. When someone has suffered from trauma, trust needs to be established by listening compassionately. By listening to someone hurting, the counselor is imitating God who actively listens to the cries of His people.

³⁰ Glenn Schiraldi. *The Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder Sourcebook: A Guide to Healing, Recovery and Growth*. New York, McGraw-Hill, 2000, p. 147

³¹ Charan Ranganath. *Why We Remember*. Doubleday, 2024, p. 152

³² John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Gould, vol. 2 (Johnstone & Hunter, 1850-1855; reprint, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1965-1991), p. 237.

The psalms provide numerous examples of a cry to be heard (Psalm 3, 4, 5, 13, 22, 42, 55, 61, 64, 71, 77, 86, 130, 141, 142, etc.). Lament voices the tension between our pain and God's goodness.³³ Listening is remembering; it is giving the counselee undivided attention to then mourn with those who mourn.

Reorientation of Memory: Upward toward God

Reorientation of memory progresses around God and His Word. The goal is not to erase a memory but rather to reframe the memory from a redemptive perspective, move from an inward focus to an upward and outward focus. The renewal of the mind starts with remembering God. "When I remember You on my bed, I meditate on You in the night watches, for You have been my help, and in the shadow of Your wings I sing for joy. My soul clings to you; Your right hand upholds me" (Psalm 63:6-8). David remembers God and worships. Together with the counselee, remember what God has done forgetting none of His benefits "who redeems your life from the pit" (Psalm 103:4). Here is where memory truly reorients, at the cross. "Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead" (2 Timothy 2:8a) which spurred Paul on to "suffer hardship even to imprisonment" (2 Timothy 2:9a) and to "endure all things for the sake of those who are chosen" (2 Timothy 2:10a). The cross serves as the hinge to turn from an inward orientation on self to an upward mindset toward God (Isaiah 26:3).

Reorientation of Memory: Into God's Grand Narrative

Personal suffering benefits from placement into the grand narrative of God's history. As an example, Joseph endured significant trauma in his life when he was sold into slavery by his brothers. He is later wrongfully accused by Potiphar's wife and forgotten in jail by the cupbearer. God raised him up to the second highest position in Egypt, and Joseph named his son Manasseh which means "God has made me forget all my trouble and all my father's household" (Genesis 41:51). But Joseph's brothers sought food in Egypt. Joseph recognized them and spoke harshly (Genesis 42:7), wept (Genesis 42:24), tested them, wept over Benjamin (Genesis 43:30), and tested them again. Joseph provided insight into how to reorient his suffering when he told

³³ Mark Vroegop, *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy*. Crossway, 2019, p. 44.

his brothers, “As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive” (Genesis 50:20). Joseph reoriented his memory into the larger redemptive narrative of God and His plan. The Christian does not only reflect on the triumph of the resurrection but on the suffering of the cross.³⁴

Reorientation into the grand narrative relies on the understanding that God sees and accounts for suffering. “For the needy will not always be forgotten, nor the hope of the afflicted perish forever” (Psalm 9:18). Tears do not fall unnoticed to the ground but are collected by God in His bottle (Psalm 56:8). The sufferer confidently then states, “God is for me” (Psalm 56:9b). The proof is that the Father did not spare His Son (Romans 8:31-32). Nothing then can separate us from the love of Christ including tribulation, distress, persecution or any other trauma (Romans 8:35).

Reorientation of Memory: Forward

Reorientation of memory transforms the sufferer from one who looks back over the shoulder to the past to one who gazes forward to the future. Future orientation helps balance the momentary misery of the past with the eternal mercy of the future. The future “eternal weight of glory” that is unseen far outweighs the temporal afflictions (2 Corinthians 4:17-18). Misery is bound up by time with a limit while mercy extends into eternity without limits. These scales do not minimize misery as “we groan longing” for heaven (2 Corinthians 5:2). Rather, the groaning for the future emboldens a courageous walk by faith in the present with an ambition to please Him (2 Corinthians 5:6-9).

Reorientation of Memory: Slowly

To reorient the mind requires patient practice. When panic assails, first sit or lie down for physical safety. Hyperventilation and fast heart rate can lead to the sensation of syncope. Slow down breathing by filling the mind with simple truths. Do not just listen but talk to yourself³⁵ exemplified by King David

³⁴ Matthew Rehner, *Redeeming Memory*. Shepherd Press, 2022, p. 125.

³⁵ Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Cures*. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995, p. 20.

when he asks, “Why are you in despair, O my soul? And why have you become disturbed within me? Hope in God, for I shall again praise Him for the help of His presence” (Psalm 42:5). David actively speaks truth to himself to quiet his soul. The apostle Paul also points to the spiritual battle that is waging in the mind. He implores the believer to pick up the weapons of warfare and “take every thought captive to obey Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5). Take a deep breath and slow down the spinning thoughts with these truths.

Reorientation of Memory: Methodically and Meditatively

How do you practice these things so that the God of peace will be with you (Philippians 4:9)? First, memorize Scripture. With a PTSD-sufferer, memorization might prove challenging, but treasured truths renew the mind and soul (Psalm 119:11). Use visual aids in key spaces around the home like the bathroom, kitchen sink, or car dash to engage memory. Keep notecards with verses physically in pockets.

Utilize the spacing effect to improve retention of these truths. Research demonstrates that memory benefits from gaps in between times of learning.³⁶ Also, repetition is not as helpful as consistent testing to pull back up different verses. By testing, the brain will struggle to pull up the verse but expose weaknesses that eventually strengthen the memory.³⁷ Testing produces perseverance in character and in memory (James 1:2-4).

Beyond testing, meditation moves Scripture from intellect into the affections. “Meditation cements divine truths not the mind. It brings God and soul together. Meditation is the bellows of the affections. It gives sight and taste to invisible glory.”³⁸ Meditation indicates meaning and prioritization.

³⁶ Carpetner, S. K., et al. “Using Spacing to Enhance Diverse Forms of Learning: Review of Recent Research and Implications for Instruction.” *Educational Psychology Review*, 24, pp. 369-378.

³⁷ Liu, X. L., et al. “Effects of Retrieval Practice on Tested and Untested Information: Cortico-hippocampal Interactions and Error-Driven Learning.” *Psychology of Learning and Motivation*, 75, pp. 125-155.

³⁸ Thomas Watson, “Time’s Shortness,” accessed 22 April 2024, [gracegems.org](https://www.gracegems.org).

Reorientation of Memory: Through Creation

God not only uses His Word but also His creation to reorient memory. Creation declares God's glory. The stars highlight His greatness (Psalm 8:3) while the sparrows remind of His care (Matthew 10:31). These cues from creation get blocked by technology, buildings, and bright lights. And yet, the roofless cathedral of creation makes visible the attributes of the Creator (Romans 1:20). Soaking in the glories of a sunrise or the glow of fireflies refreshes the mind in engagement on God and His majestic work.

Reorientation of Memory: Through Music

Music is another tool to facilitate the reorientation of memory. Music is a unique gift from God that reflects Him (Zephaniah 3:17). It is intimately tied to memory with the storage of musical memory outside the hippocampus.³⁹ In Alzheimer's patients, many will lose the ability to remember faces but can still remember favorite tunes from decades ago. God used songs throughout history to remind His people of truth from Moses at the Red Sea (Exodus 15:1-18) to the future throne room in heaven (Revelation 15:3-4). Biblical music reminds of truth and lifts the countenance. Music not only is a private form of worship but also can be communal. Singing truths unify the church, "Speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord" (Ephesians 5:19).

Reorientation of Memory: With Others

Congregational singing points to the significant role that community plays for trauma sufferers. For many reasons, trauma appeals to isolation and barricades from community. The desire to minimize triggers, hide from thoughts of shame or avoid potential harm draws the sufferer away from others. Spatial memory though can be an assistance. Spatial memory draws from the location and relation of space with objects. In Psalm 73, Asaph wrestles with the past memories of the violent evildoers until he "came into the sanctuary of God" (Psalm 73:17). As the psalmist struggled with the prosperity of the wicked, the place of worship grabbed onto the future orientation of their

³⁹ Esfahani-Bayerl, N., et al. "Musical Memory and Hippocampus Revisited: Evidence from a Musical Layperson with Highly Selective Hippocampal Damage." 119, pp. 519-527.

future destruction. In the place of worship, Biblical preaching is an act of reminding.⁴⁰ Not only does the spatial context assist but also the preached words. The church though goes beyond the place and the preacher to the family of believers. It is here that the family encourages, teaches, admonishes, and sings with one another (Colossians 3:16). Counseling and support happen in the church formally but many times informally. Do not forsake assembling but find encouragement and hope in the body of Christ (Hebrews 10:23-25). Support networks may grow inside the church but also may be accessed outside the church through a variety of Christian programs.

Reorientation of Memory: To Others

Reorientation toward others also involves the complexities of guilt and shame. Steve Viars provides a helpful tool to help identify innocence or guilt in what occurred and how the person responded.⁴¹ Guilt and shame need to be addressed as trauma sufferers may falsely bear these memory burdens that weigh down with whispers of worthlessness and punishment. These malignant memory cycles disrupt relationships with God and others.

Intertwined with shame and guilt sits forgiveness. Forgiveness is closely connected to memory. It is not achieved by forgetfulness; but rather when you recall the past offense without a response of bitterness. Forgiveness does not condone the past offense or give future permissiveness to repeat or continue in the offense. This heart attitude is only made possible through the remembrance of Christ's forgiveness (Ephesians 4:32). The one who is forgiven much is then able to forgive much through the power of the Spirit (Luke 7:47). Forgiveness provides freedom. Within these parameters, forgiveness does not require repentance of the offender. As an example, while being stoned to death, Stephen cried out, "Do not hold this sin against them" (Acts 7:60). This attitude to forgive those who persecute you arises from the one who trusts that God will remember and repay the unrepentant (Romans 12:14-21). In contrast, reconciliation with restoration of relationship does require repentance of the offender and is a complex journey that requires wisdom, especially in trauma and abuse.

⁴⁰ Jeffrey Arthurs, *Preaching as Reminding*, Intervarsity Press, 2017, pp. 48.

⁴¹ Steve Viars, *Putting Your Past in Its Place*, Harvest House Publishers, 2011.

Redemption of Memory: Comfort and Hope

As God reorients the sufferer from the painful past, the sorrow of yesterday becomes the comfort for others today. “The God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God” (2 Corinthians 1:4). The reorientation of memory moves from self and onto others. Suffering transforms from a burden to a blessing to others.

Biblical counseling utilizes God’s Word to reorient memory off self and upward to God and outward to others. This reorientation removes the disorder from PTSD and replaces it with a hopeful reordering. Memory is the handmaiden of hope as “that same recollection, which may in its left hand, bring so many dark and gloomy omens, may be trained to bear in its right hand a wealth of hopeful signs.”⁴² The prophet Jeremiah wept in the ashes of Israel’s affliction with his head bowed down. Then, he recalled to mind the lovingkindness and unfailing compassion of God that is new every morning (Lamentations 3:21-24). Therefore, Jeremiah had hope in God. Hope, a fruit of redeemed memory, is only found through a healing of the soul.

CONCLUSION

Memory is an integral part of Biblical counseling and applies to trauma sufferers. Trauma and its subsequent recollections impact the inner man with manifestations in the outer man. A compassionate counselor will compassionately address the painful past and reorient the sufferer to a hope-filled future with Christ, the sympathetic high priest.

⁴² Charles Spurgeon, “Memory: The Handmaiden of Hope,” 15 October, 1865, Web 22 April, 2024, spurgeon.org.