PART 3: GOING BACK IN ORDER TO GO FORWARD

This second pathway in this journey into Emotionally Healthy Spirituality flows naturally from the first. A foundational issue in getting to know ourselves has to do with going back, understanding how our families and cultures that have shaped us into who we are today. That is why this 2\textsuperscript{nd} pathway is called “GOING BACK TO GO FORWARD”

It is like one of the many paradoxes of the Christian life. A paradox is a statement that apparently contradicts itself. We see this throughout Scripture. For example, if you want to be strong, embrace weakness. If you want to be first in God’s kingdom be last. If you want to be great, be a humble servant of all. In the same way, to go forward, you also need, at times, to go backwards.

This principle of Going Back to Go Forward is based on 2 Biblical Truths

1. **The blessings and sins of our families going back three to four generations profoundly impact who we are today.**

When the Bible uses the word FAMILY, it refers to our entire extended family over three to four generations – that means your family, in the biblical sense, includes all your family going back to the mid-late 1800’s. We are affected by many events and circumstances during our earthly lives, yet our families are the most powerful group to which we will ever belong.
What happens 1 generation often repeats itself in next. The consequences of actions and decisions from one generation affect those that follow.

Consider the following for example about God’s nature

**Exodus 34:6-8** Moses asks to see God’s glory “And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, “The Lord, The Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation.

Ex. 20:4-6 -- 10 commandments – You shall not make for yourself an idol... for I am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.

As one scholar noted to me, the Hebrew word “punish” is best translated “consequences.” In other words, the children tend to experience the consequences of the sins of the fathers to 3-4 generations.

Think about it. It is common to see certain patterns repeating from one generation to the next – addictive behavior, alcoholism, sexual abuse, poor marriages, pregnancy out of wedlock, divorces, affairs, one child running off.
We see this powerfully in the family of Abraham, Issac and Jacob-in Gen. 12-50. There is a powerful blessing passed on from generation to generation. At the same time, we see negative legacies passed on.

We see a pattern of lying in each generation,
favoritism in each generation,
brothers fighting in each generation and
poor intimacy in marriages in each generation.

The second principle takes us to the heart of the gospel: Discipleship requires putting off the sinful patterns of our family of origin and relearning how to do life God’s way in Jesus’ new family. The great news of Christianity is that your biological family of origin does not determine your future. God does! What has gone before you is not your destiny!

The most significant language in the New Testament for becoming a Christian is “adoption into the family of God.” It is a radical new beginning. When we place our faith in Christ, we are spiritually reborn by the Holy Spirit into the family of Jesus. God becomes our Father. Our debts (sins) are cancelled. We are given a new name (Christian), a new inheritance (freedom, hope, glory, the resources of heaven), and new brothers and sisters (other Christians).
For example in Mk 3, Jesus’ mother and brothers arrive at a house where he is teaching. They look for him to come outside. Jesus replies to the crowd inside the house sitting at his feet: “Who are my mother and my brothers?” … Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother”.

Jesus declares that the church for the believer is now the “first family.”

In the ancient world of Jesus, it was extremely important to honor one’s mother and father. Yet Jesus was direct and clear in calling people to a first loyalty to himself over their biological families, saying, “Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me” (Matthew 10:37a).

Discipleship, then, is the putting off of the sinful patterns and habits of our biological families and being transformed to live as members of Christ’s family. This is the Christian life. We honor our parents, culture, and histories but obey God.

I used to say to Geri in the early years of our marriage when she would ask questions about my family. “Why talk about it? I am a new creation in X.” She would reply, “No you’re not. I live with you.”
Every one of us, then, has to look at the brokenness and sin of his or her family and culture. The problem is that few of us have reflected honestly on the impact of our family of origin and other major “earthquake” events in our histories. And we can’t change what we are unaware of.

That was sure the case with me.

In many ways, the longer we walk with God, more levels of how our past has impacted us become clearer. The following are a few unhealthy things “baggage” I unconsciously carried into my Christian life for years prior to this EHS journey.

**I Overfunctioned**

Along with my brothers, our role was to “make Mama happy” since my dad was absent for her. Even though we were the children, it was expected we would take care of her.

When I became a Christian I naturally began to take care of others. Within one year of coming to Christ, I was leading our college Christian group, taking care of the sheep. I simply transferred being overly responsible in my family of origin to being overly responsible for others’ salvation and growth in the church. Is it any wonder I became a pastor to care for others? Is it any wonder delight, fun, taking care of myself, playing were difficult for me?
My Identity was in my Doing – (preached grace but lived law)
My family was a hard working family. It was expected that you would work. My family were Italian-American immigrants struggling to make it in the United States left an expectation on us: “You will make your parents proud; they have suffered so much for you to be able to succeed.” The performance-based approval that ran strongly in the veins of our family now drove me to “work hard for Jesus.” “Prove yourself,” was the message.

I preached grace but lived work!! Resting was very difficult for me.

I Had Cultural, Not Biblical, Expectations for Marriage and Family
Third, my beliefs regarding marriage and gender roles were shaped much more strongly by my family than Scripture. Of course Geri complained. But all the women in our extended family complained about their husbands. Wasn’t that normal? Our marriage sure seemed better than most. I was “helping” with the kids, wasn’t I?

I never observed a joyful, intimate couple investing in the quality of their relationship before their children. I preached Ephesians 5 on marriage and family but lived Scazor. 

I Resolved Conflict Poorly
Fourth, even though I taught workshops on conflict resolution and communication, the basic way I handled conflict and anger resembled
my family of origin, not Christ’s family. My mother raged and attacked. My dad was an appeaser who gave in to whatever my mom wanted to avoid conflict. I took on my father’s basic style, taking the blame whenever something was wrong in order to end the tension. I justified it as being like Christ, a sheep going to the slaughter.

**Perfectionism**

It is not okay to make mistakes. You drop a dish- get a beating or a scream. In my bones. Christians make mistakes, sin. Again- grace. I could go on, but I think you get the point.

**Success**

Our family, like many families, defined success by making a certain amount of money, getting a certain level of education, becoming a professional, having people look up to you, getting married and having children. In God’s family, however, success is becoming the person God has called you to become and doing what God has called you to do. That is a very different definition!

But when I look back now and think about how I lived the first seventeen years of my Christian life, I am stunned . . . shocked . . . embarrassed . . . There was so much needless pain!

Philosopher George Santanya said it well: “Those who cannot learn from the past are doomed to repeat it.”
Sadly, when we look deeply beneath the surface of our lives, many of us are not fundamentally doing that many things differently from how our families did them.

We have a saying we like to use: “Jesus may be in your heart, but grandpa is in your bones.”

Remember, all families are broken – some more so than others. This may be very painful as some of us who have buried much of our past. I was one of them. Others of us are very reluctant to look seriously at our families of origin because it feels like we are betraying them. Remember in 99% of families parents did the best they could. In fact, they brought the ball down the soccer or football field further than their parents. One benefit of going back and doing this kind of work is we end up more compassionate and understanding of our parents/caregivers as we consider where they come from.

In this session, we want to invite you to embrace God’s choice to birth us into a particular family, in a particular place, at a particular moment in history.

That reality gave each of us certain opportunities and gifts. It also gave us each a certain amount of what I will call “emotional baggage” in our journey through life. For some of us this load is minimal; for others, it is a heavy burden to carry.
True spirituality frees us to live joyfully in the present. **Living joyfully, however, requires going back in order to go forward.** This process takes us to the very heart of spirituality and discipleship in the family of God—breaking free from the destructive sinful patterns of our pasts so that we live the life God intends -- so we can be free to become a gift from Jesus Christ to the world.

This is the session that helps many people begin to open up and look deeply beneath the iceberg of their lives. Remember “a broken and contrite heart I will not despise,” says the Lord (Ps. 51). Paul boasted in his weaknesses that Christ’s power might rest on him.

I made a decision, almost twenty years ago, as I entered into this journey we call emotionally healthy spirituality today that I would no longer put on a face and pretend. I would live and lead first out of my own brokenness and vulnerability. For this reason, I included my family genogram in the book. I want to assure you it is okay to be open and honest, that it is safe in the arms of the grace and love of God.

And as we shall see, in the story of Joseph in Gen. 37-50, he beautifully embraced his past by grieving and forgiving. He also allowed God to work in him thru it. He recognized the invisible hands of God moving in and through all the events in his life- even the tragic ones – to provide a means for him to be a gift to the world. And his willingness to go back enabled him to go forward and become a blessing to nations!

And that is my prayer for you as you enter into this study.