

Judgment for Past Mistakes

When I was in college, I read the book *Born Again* by Charles Colson (former Special Counsel to President Richard Nixon). The book tells the story of how Colson was sentenced to prison during the Nixon Watergate scandal, and while in prison he became a “Born Again” Christian. As a result of his prison experience, Colson founded the Prison Fellowship ministry when he was a free man. After reading this book, I was so inspired by his story that I volunteered through Prison Fellowship to be a pen pal with a prisoner. I also organized an Angel Tree project for my college ministry group, through which gifts were bought for local children of inmates. To me, the ability to move on from past mistakes and to make a difference in this world was inspiring. Getting involved with such a ministry was something I felt called to do.

For the pen pal program, I was paired with a female inmate. This was 20-plus years ago and I don’t remember a lot about the correspondence. However, the one thing I do remember is the sadness my pen pal felt at seeing young women exit prison worse off than they had entered. She told me that they would be sent to prison for something like forging checks, and by the time they left, they had become “full-fledged junkies” who were now hooked on drugs. Thus they were more prone to commit future crimes. I don’t know why that line in her letter stuck with me but it has.

My pen pal was a Christian. She didn’t write a lot about why she was in prison but did express regret and sadness for the pain she caused her family. I don’t know if my being her pen pal had any effect on her life or if she was able to turn things around once she got out. I hope so. I’m hopeful that she was able to start over and put her

past mistakes behind her. The question is can others look at her past mistakes and still give her a chance to prove she has changed? Or will her past mistakes follow her for the rest of her life?

Has this ever happened to you? There's someone you know, and you think of them as a good person – based on your interaction. Then later you hear or read something about their past that makes you feel differently about him or her? I have a lawyer friend who says, "We are all just one bad decision away from finding ourselves with a record." Using bad judgment on just one day of your life can have consequences that follow you for the rest of your life. One consequence can be the constant judgment that may follow you when others lacking understanding or compassion see nothing but your past mistake.

In today's society of mass information, it's so easy for anyone to look up the past of anyone they meet. It's hard to read a news story about someone who has been arrested for a crime without assuming they're guilty (even if they're innocent). This makes it harder and harder for individuals to truly start over with a fresh clean slate. Hopefully those who find God can have peace knowing they aren't judged by Him, even when they are still judged by society. Prison Fellowship is a blessing to those who find it and take away the message of love and forgiveness. They can get a fresh start by knowing Jesus as their personal savior and all that He can offer.

The past mistakes people make don't always end up with jail time or give them a criminal record. Some mistakes are things people have done to hurt friends, family members, or loved ones. A spouse who cheats, a parent who says hurtful things, a teenager who posts something negative about another person on social media, an accident that causes injury to someone else, etc. – they're all examples of things that can be hard for others to forgive and leave in the past.

The question is can you look at someone who has made mistakes and see the person they are now? Or will you always judge that person and see them in a negative light based on what you know?

1. How would you feel if you found out that a friend of yours had been to jail or prison in the past? Would you view them differently?

2. Have you ever been hurt by someone close to you and found it hard to look at them without being reminded of the incident that hurt you? Is it different if they have asked for forgiveness?

3. Do you think it's possible for those who have a past where they made costly mistakes to find redemption by knowing God?

4. If someone finds God while in prison (or after living a life where they hurt others), do you think it's possible for society to ever see them as clean of their past mistakes?

Paul (also known as Saul) is an extraordinary man in the Bible who went from condemning innocent Christians to being cast into prison himself for his own faith. Read *Acts 7:54-8:3* and *Acts 9:1-31* to learn about his story of conversion.

5. What was Paul doing when we are first introduced to him in the Bible?

6. What was his plan as he was heading to Damascus?

7. How did God stop his plan?

8. God used Ananias to open Saul's eyes. Why did Ananias have fear?

9. Saul went on to become one of God's most important instruments in establishing the Christian church. How did his conversion from being a persecutor to being persecuted help him with his ministry?

In *Acts 13:9*, we learn that Saul is also referred to as Paul.

10. It seems that from this point on Saul is referred to in the Bible as Paul. Do you think there is a reason for the change?
11. Do you ever wish you could change your name and identity so others wouldn't associate you with the person you used to be? If so, at what point in your life would you like to have a clean slate?

Read *1 Corinthians 15:3-10* to find out what Paul says about his own past.

12. Have you ever met someone who had an amazing life-changing story of hitting rock bottom and then finding God?

13. How did you view this person and their past? Was their past something that helped them become a stronger Christian or did it make them a weaker Christian?

14. If you grew up as a Christian and you don't have an amazing conversion story like Paul did, do you feel you can have the same relationship with God? Or do you feel jealous of those who have had an amazing conversion story?

15. Do you think those people who met Paul and knew about his past judged him for who he used to be or for who he was when they met him?

16. What do you think your opinion of Paul would have been if you would have met him in person?

17. Can you support a friend or family member who made mistakes in their past?

