

Exploring Taking Back Ground: A Six-Part Series by Phil Hobizal

Section One—Understanding Homosexuality

Taking Back Ground: Section One

- A Call to Leave: The Journey Begins
- The Roots of Homosexuality: Part 1
- The Roots of Homosexuality: Part 2
- Our Relational Nature
- Defensiveness and Detachment
- The Scriptures and Homosexuality
- Transformation: From the Inside Out

Many of our supporters have expressed curiosity as to what we actually process in our two-year Taking Back Ground discipleship program. As the creator of the TBG curriculum, our founding director Phil Hobizal shares the heart behind the lessons for each section of our program. We begin with the first section of TBG: Understanding Homosexuality.

Portland Fellowship was established to provide a safe environment for women and men struggling with same-sex attractions who found those desires in conflict with their faith in God. It was never our intent to try and persuade persons to become straight. Instead, we've had an open-handed approach of

allowing individuals to be led by their biblical convictions: "If you need us, we're here for you."

The Taking Back Ground series was developed to provide a vehicle for God to bring change in the lives of like-minded Christ followers who want to be free of unwanted sexual desires and behaviors. And with some thought, we laid out a two-year curriculum that seeks to address topics related to sexual and relational issues. It's not perfect, but over the years, TBG has allowed many men and women the opportunity to walk in a newness of life not defined by sexual identity or desire. We affirm that God has created each of us for a purpose, and TBG's goal is to have each individual become that true authentic person which God intended them to be.

Section I of TBG covers the subject of "Understanding Homosexuality". We begin with a parallel comparison to God's work through Moses to free the children of Israel from slavery. At the heart of the story is God's desire for His people. This is vital to understanding the journey we are embarking on. God loves us so much that He is unwilling to share our affection, and wants to bring us to a place of peace, belonging and fulfillment. For all believers, no matter the struggle, it is God who works in us through the Holy Spirit to bring about change.

Over the years, there have been many theories as to the cause of same-sex attraction: Is it biology or psychology? Nurture or nature? We take a look at the most common assertions to get a better understanding of the origins of this desire. To date, no single cause has been found to support a biological reason that fits everyone with same-sex attraction. There is, however, strong evidence of emotional and psychology contributing factors. Identifying these "roots" is helpful, but it's not our aim to find a cause-and-effect that leads to "fixing" the problem. Understanding should only lead us to seek God's help to think and act differently.

At the heart of the matter, for all believers, is understanding and obeying God's Word. Knowing what the Bible says about homosexuality is important. Yet, seeing the bigger picture of what He intended for sexuality as a whole brings into perspective the need for us to walk in purity before God. He made us male and female, and speaks of sexuality within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman. We are called to surrender our desires to fall in line with God's intent.

Same-sex struggles are more a relational problem than a physical one. We identify a relational "same-sex deficit" that seeks "repair" through emotional and physical means. Unhealthy relating can lead us to idolizing others and become enslaved to their approval. Wounds that have occurred through relationships with family and friends may need healing. Rather than detach from the hurt, we position ourselves to allow God to work restoration and healing.

This opening section of TBG lays a foundation for the good things God will do in the lives of our participants. For many, just having the chance to open up about thoughts, feeling and actions in an environment of grace helps lift the shame they may have lived under. And we've experienced over the years God's willingness to be right there with us.

Exploring Taking Back Ground: A Six-Part Series by Phil Hobizal

Section Two—Knowing God in Our Struggle

This is the second installment of a six-part series, where founding director Phil Hobizal shares the heart behind the lessons for each section of our TBG program.

“Apart from me you can do nothing.”—John 15:5. In Section Two of the first year of the Taking Back Ground series, we look at “Knowing God in Our Struggle”. As believers in Christ, we understand the Gospel message, but many of us have not invited Him into the deepest parts of our struggles.

Taking Back Ground: Section Two

- Redemption: God’s Message of Hope
- Imitating Christ
- The Marred Image of the Father
- Idolatry
- Developing an Intimacy with Christ
- Empowering the Will
- New Life in Christ

In the beginning of Portland Fellowship, we were just a drop-in group, sitting around sharing our struggles. We would discuss relevant topics and valued listening to each individual, and many of the lessons in this series come from that time. Unfortunately, at times our dialogue would digress into negative and unhelpful conversation. It became apparent that we needed to focus our attention on God first. Thus, worship time was introduced in our gatherings and has become a rich part of our time together. Intentionally focusing on God has allowed the Holy Spirit to touch places in our hearts no words could reach. Our worship times have been unlike any other I’ve experienced, bringing to light the verse, *“He who is forgiven much, rejoices much”* (Luke 7:47, paraphrased).

Redemption is God’s plan for humanity, and the hope for strugglers of same-sex attraction. At times, it feels impossible to believe we could be forgiven for some of the things we have done. However, God’s love extends beyond our limitations and is able to free us from the guilt and shame that holds us captive. There is nothing hidden from Him. Recognizing His love for us, *“In that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us”* (Romans 5:8), we can know a newness of life brought about by the cross.

Authority figures in our lives can become an obstacle to knowing a truly loving Father God. They have a responsibility, whether they realize it or not, of showing God’s protection and provision for us. For some, our earthly parent or authority figure’s weaknesses can be transferred onto our perception of God. We all must learn that God is not distant, conditionally loving, demanding or abusive. He has known us from conception and has a future planned for us.

God’s love is such that He is unwilling to share our affections. He jealously longs for our devotion. Yet, like Israel, idols have arisen to draw us away from Him. Sexual desires, human relationships and physical beauty, to name a few, can take hold of our hearts and keep us from fully surrendering to God’s purposes for us. We are called to willingly lay down those things that threaten our lives in Christ.

Jesus is the bridge from a religious knowledge of God to a human expression of His love. He was tempted, knew rejection and was betrayed—all this while knowing full well that His life would come to a gruesome end in order for us to be free. His promises of a coming Kingdom and the deposit of His Spirit fill us with an eternal perspective that this life is temporal, and these struggles are nothing compared to the glory He will reveal in us.

Overcoming anything on our own strength requires great determination and will-power. Eventually, though, we come to the end of our abilities. Jesus promised the Holy Spirit would come to reside in us as we surrender to Him. He convicts, comforts and teaches us to walk in righteousness. We are empowered, not by our own strength, but by God’s indwelling presence; and as we grow in our dependence, we live a new life, born of the Spirit.

As we grow in our relationship with God, the old things that held onto us gradually lose their appeal. Nothing can separate us from the love of God. And we understand that God rewards those who diligently seek after Him. God is not leading us to be “just normal”, but to become exceptional new creatures.

Exploring Taking Back Ground: A Six-Part Series by Phil Hobizal

Section Three—Walking Out the Process

This is the third installment of a six-part series, where founding director Phil Hobizal shares the heart behind the lessons for each section of our TBG program.

The final section of Year One in the Taking Back Ground series is “Walking Out the Process”. We’ve taken time to lay out an overview of the same sex struggle, a biblical view of sexuality, God’s love for us and His call for intimate relationship with Him. Now, it’s time to put feet to what we’ve learned. In the Old Testament, it was

common to set up a memorial to commemorate a significant moment in God’s interaction with man. So, it seemed fitting for us to come up with a way to give participants an opportunity to do the same. It began with a weekend retreat and something we call the Surrender Service. You were instructed to ask the Holy Spirit to show you something that symbolized your struggle, and be willing to publically lay it down before the Lord. The response was nothing less than amazing. Jewelry, pictures and personal mementos, to name a few, were laid at the foot of the Cross. And later, people reported new-found freedom as they obediently responded to God. That was thirty years ago, and the results, in response to the Holy Spirit’s prompting, are the same today.

We recognize that the homosexual struggle is more of a relational issue than sexual, but there is also a spiritual dimension that cannot be ignored. We are in a spiritual battle for our lives. Satan can exercise authority over us through wounds and thought patterns, as well as through our sinful behaviors. Confronting the lies of the enemy with the truth of God’s Word enables us to resist the devil’s schemes (*Matthew 4:1-11*). We are liberated through the work of the Cross to no longer be held captive to destructive thoughts and actions. We can stand victorious in the truth that we are sons and daughters of the King.

Wounds left unhealed can define us. Rejection is a common struggle—perceived or actual events can take on a power to direct our actions. Hurtful words, bullying and mocking lay a foundation for defensive responses. Here, the emergence of a false self takes up the shield to ward off further pain. God comes to us, behind the veil of our own making, to call us to a new life in Him. In His love and forgiveness, we find the strength to live out our true self, one made for His purposes. Because we are forgiven, we find the grace to forgive those who have wounded us. It is an act of faith to be able to free an abuser for the pain they have caused. Letting go of past hurts leads to the opportunity for reconciliation. It is God’s desire for us to be at peace with all men and women (and in many cases, boundaries will need to be established—that’s covered in Year Two).

Temptation is something everyone faces. God does not tempt (*James 1:13*), but He allows temptation to shape us. Jesus was tempted, but did not sin. He is able, then, to help us in our struggle against sin (*Hebrews 4:15*). The wounded heart learns to soothe its pain through various forms of medication. Jesus’ love gives us the strength to say “yes” to the good and “no” to the false. Our victory over old life patterns frees us to walk in the truth of who we are—we are more than conquerors in Christ (*Romans 8:37*).

Like a child who is learning to walk, we stumble forward in our attempts to live a different life than we have known. With encouragement, we get up and keep going. Yet for many of us, the hardest thing will be the willingness to trust those around us in the process. Confessing our weakness and sharing our needs honestly with others leads to a healthy life. God did not intend for us to walk alone in our journey, and He provides relationships to come alongside and bolster us in our pursuit of good things. Ephesians 5:21 says to, “submit yourselves to one another out of reverence for the Lord.” Same-sex attraction is a relational issue requiring relational solutions, and we praise God that He provides healthy relationships for our healing!

Taking Back Ground: Section Three

- The Battle for Our Souls
- The Root of Rejection
- Forgiveness
- Reconciliation
- Temptation
- Walking in Victory
- Accountability

Exploring Taking Back Ground: A Six-Part Series by Phil Hobizal

Section Four—Developing a Healthy Identity

This is the fourth installment of a six-part series, where founding director Phil Hobizal shares the heart behind the lessons for each section of our TBG program.

There is a saying that “time heals all wounds”. While I agree with the time part, healing is something that cannot be assumed to take place apart from God. Isaiah 53:5 says, “...by his wounds we are healed.” God’s timing in our restoration takes patient obedience. With that in mind, we felt it important at PF to provide two years of material to allow the Holy Spirit time to access our hearts. Also, providing a safe place to be known and accepted paves the way for future healthy relating. Part of that safety requires guidelines for behavior. We weren’t creating an ex-gay social group. Early on, church leaders would challenge us: “You can’t bring together a bunch of people who have the same struggles. What if it only facilitates their problems?” Still, where were they going to go? The church didn’t know what to do. They mainly reinforced the sense of shame related to SSA. We believed the benefit outweighed the risks. And so we set out, stumbling and bumbling, to put in necessary guidelines to provide a safe place for those seeking God’s help. For most, this would be the first time to share, without fear, the reality of their deepest struggles and desires in a safe and accepting environment. We are so grateful to those who supported and encouraged us in those days, and still do today.

Year Two, part one, begins tackling some difficult questions, mostly about relating and relationships. In defining our goals as a ministry, one aspect is to look at what is meant by healing. It would be easier to have God just take away unwanted desires. However, God tends to use our weaknesses to bring about His purposes. He may act quickly in some areas of our lives, but His primary goal is to make us like Jesus. Diminished same sex attractions, healthy same-sex relating, desire for the opposite sex, or contentment in our circumstances all speak of change, but ultimately, true healing is a pure heart devoted to the Lord.

Gender plays a big role in the homosexual struggle. *What does it mean to be a woman or a man? How do I fit into this design God has for me?* The attraction to the same sex has its initial roots in seeking affirmation as a gendered person. Learning the core aspects of our God-given identity and being able to recognize and reject false thinking about gender will lead to a secure sense of self. Reconciling with our gender, as well as forgiving past hurts related to our gender, opens us up to a new self-discovery.

Moving into healthy relating requires self-reflection on our habits. *How do I relate to my gender? And to the opposite sex?* Learning to put healthy relational boundaries into place leads to healthy relationships. If, upon reflection, we notice patterns that produce dependent or codependent relationships, we must seek help in breaking those habits and thoughts that cause relating to be so difficult. God has made us relational, so of course He knows our needs and wants the best for us. And, He is also jealous for our affections and will not support or encourage what amounts to relational idolatry. Many of us have longed for that “one best friend” who we never had in our life. The myth of a “best friend” has left a trail of broken, emotionally dependant experiences. Fortunately, God desires for us a relationship with Him in that capacity. A look at major figures in biblical history will attest to that. We can have an intimacy with God that allows us to call ourselves “the disciple Jesus love[s]” (John 13:23).

It will take a variety of relationship to bring about personal wholeness. As we grow in understanding our obstacles to relating, we face the challenge to be open to friendships that will speak into our lives. The Church is the natural resource for meeting relational needs. We experience mothers, fathers, sister and brothers who God will use to bring healing and companionship.

Taking Back Ground: Section Four

- The Healing Process
- Masculinity
- Femininity
- Boundaries
- Same-Sex Relationships
- Emotional Dependency
- Levels of Relationship

Exploring Taking Back Ground: A Six-Part Series by Phil Hobizal

Section Five—Breaking Free

This is the fifth installment of a six-part series, where founding director Phil Hobizal shares the heart behind the lessons for each section of our TBG program.

In part two of Year Two, we explore subjects that involve personal responsibility—“Breaking Free” from thoughts and behaviors that are in conflict with our faith in Christ. Jesus’ death and resurrection gives us freedom from the consequences of our sin and the hope of new life. In our redemptive state, God calls us to die to our old selves. This involves choice, which also means activating our wills to do what is right. He’s given each of us freewill, seeking a people who choose Him.

Forsaking old patterns of behavior and thought is painful, but that pain only lasts a moment in comparison to the future that God has set before us. Sadly, those who oppose our message—that a person’s sexual preference and behavior can change—use terms like “conversion therapy” and “sexual repression” to imply that seeking change is something foisted upon individuals through guilt and manipulation. The reality is, those seeking change have made a personal choice, aided and encouraged by the Spirit of God, to live a different life. We will need to make hard decisions. However, there is comfort in knowing that God is with us every step of the way.

Many of us have struggled with various forms of addiction, such as drugs, alcohol and sex. The vicious cycle of dependence is devastating to our souls and requires honest assessment and accountability, knowing when to reach out for help. As we have found, things don’t just happen to us; there are triggers that lead to our responses, and the devil is well aware of how to tempt us. God wants to break those patterns and establish healthy choices in our lives. We are not called to manage our sin, but to forsake it.

Pornographic images are a formidable enemy and have become even more powerful through the internet. These images pollute our thinking and rob us of the pure conscience God designed for us. Instead of providing the intimacy it promises, this fantasy world leaves us empty and isolated. Sexual imagery coupled with self pleasure reinforces biological responses to SSA. Choosing instead to be holy in our thoughts and actions paves the way for a fruitful life. Cleansing our minds by confession and prayer strengthens us to “...demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and...take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.” (2 Cor. 10:5).

The battle for our minds began in the Garden, when Satan asked Eve, “Did God really say...?” (Gen. 3:1), bringing into question the character of God and the truthfulness of His Word. Doubt is the enemy of faith. Our journey is one that is solely based on the promises God has made. We hope in what we cannot see (Heb. 11:1), believing that “...he who began a good work in [us] will...carry it on to completion...” (Phil. 1:6).

Another obstacle to overcome is self-centeredness. Disappointments, wounds and insecurities can cause some of us to be overly self-aware. Still others are bound by a sense of self-importance and superiority, seeking praise to feed their egos. Our perspective is distorted by the inability to be objective. We must become a sober people, not thinking of ourselves more highly or lowly than we really are (Rom. 12:3), but coming instead to see a true reflection of ourselves in God’s eyes as we fix our gaze on Jesus.

Comparison easily leads to envying the physical attributes and talents of others. We have been uniquely designed by God, and no amount of desiring what another has or is can change that. Self-acceptance honors God’s creative work in us. As believers in Christ, we must develop a lifestyle of repentance, facing the reality of our broken human state. The Holy Spirit enables us to bear the fruit of self-control, saying “yes” to what is good and right, as Jesus did.

Taking Back Ground: Section Five

- Addiction
- Pornography and Masturbation
- Deception: The Power of Unbelief
- Self-Centeredness
- Our Identity in Christ
- Envy
- Repentance

Exploring Taking Back Ground: A Six-Part Series by Phil Hobizal

Section Six—Growing in Christian Maturity

This is the final installment of a six-part series, where founding director Phil Hobizal shares the heart behind the lessons for each section of our TBG program.

The final Section of the Taking Back Ground series is entitled “Growing in Christian Maturity”. If we are being honest, we must admit that those struggling with SSA deal with a level of immaturity. This would mainly be recognized as it relates to gender: there is a need to grow up. Paul also identifies this need within the early church, regarding their faith. He encourages them (and us) to “forget what lies behind and press on toward the goal to win the prize” (Phil. 3:14), taking back our identities as God’s sons and daughters.

I remember a story I used to share in our groups years ago concerning holidays with my family. It was the habit of my large clan to divide up, with women in the kitchen and men in the living room watching the “game”. Being uncomfortable with sports, I, of course, found refuge in the kitchen. And yet, an odd thing happened to me, when God was working in my life as a new believer: I found myself in the hallway. *Would I continue to hide out in the kitchen, or take the risk of joining the guys in the living room?* I needed to move forward, and, by God’s grace, lay aside old habits that kept me from growing.

How we identify ourselves will affect the outcome of our progress. We are first and foremost followers of Christ; then, we are women or men. To carry any other label, such as “gay Christian”, or just “gay”, would take away from our true identity. Our thoughts and behavior are different from who we are. We must be willing to let go of false labels in order to move beyond being a “struggler” to being an “overcomer”. *“I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”* (Phil. 4:13) We will never know true acceptance within the Body of Christ until we are willing to be known. That’s not to say that everyone needs to know your struggle, but God never intended us to walk out the process of His sanctification alone.

PF has never promoted marriage as a “solution” to same-sex attraction, and we never will. In fact, a good percentage of people we’ve worked with over the years have mistakenly gone down that road in hopes of a “fix”. Still, we must be realistic in facing the truth of the need for relational and sexual fulfillment. Marriage *can* be a good thing, entered into honestly and with the right motives. St. Paul, however, also states it is better to be single like him; you are free to serve God whole-heartedly, as opposed to living to please your spouse. Being married is not a sign of healing, nor is singleness a sign of weakness. We must be willing to go where God leads, keeping in mind that His will is to “give [us] the desires of [our] heart” (Psalm 37:4).

The enemy of progress is procrastination. Often fear can keep us stagnant, supplying us with myriad excuses as to why now is not the right time, or that we’ll get serious once our circumstances change. God says, “*Today is the day of salvation*” (2 Cor. 6:2) and calls us to respond *now* to His voice. We must learn to recognize when we are being distracted from picking up our cross and following Him. Ambivalence is the lukewarm state produced by a double mind. Once we know the truth, we must walk in it. This is where you and I experience the grace of God to overcome.

As we grow in our true identity, pitfalls and failure are bound to happen. In this, our most vulnerable state, the relationships we have made become the life raft to get us through challenges that will come. The ability to confess and repent, in the context of love, reminds us of our humanity and need for Jesus. We do well to put into place daily disciplines to prepare us for this battle and strengthen us for the journey. Each one of us is a child God fashioned in His image for a purpose. The sexually broken have a tremendous insight into the forgiveness and love of God to bring to the Church.

Taking Back Ground: Section Six

- The Healing Plateau
- Disclosure
- Marriage or Singleness
- Ambivalence & Procrastination
- Dealing With Failure
- A Call to Servanthood
- Safeguarding Our Souls