

## SUFFERING AND A BIBLICAL RESPONSE (PART 2)

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I read an interesting article written a few years ago about India.

Many people in India experience the nightmare of slow, undetected poisoning. Water from wells in rural areas contains trace amounts of arsenic that is killing thousands. Since the poison is colorless and tasteless, the villagers have no way of detecting it. And since the arsenic comes in such minute quantities, the negative effects appear gradually over many years.

The symptoms follow a typical pattern. The first outward manifestation is melanosis, or dark spots, occurring on the chest, back, limbs, and gums. In the more advanced stage, wart-like skin eruptions develop on the hands, feet, and torso, which can lead to skin cancers. Continual poisoning by arsenic results in the enlargement of the liver, kidneys, and spleen which often develop into malignant tumors, lung, skin and bladder cancers, and gangrene.

At low concentration levels, it takes between eight and fourteen years for the physical symptoms to emerge. By then it is often too late.<sup>1</sup>

Spiritual poison works the same way. When persistently indulged, it destroys the soul with lethal toxins that, like arsenic, go undetected for years. Such is the deadly sin of self-pity! Self-pity seems so innocuous, so legitimate. It seems like a normal reaction to disappointment or trouble.

But, as Richard Smith points out, “Self-pity can destroy you more quickly than anything else and is to be resisted with every fiber of your being. Yet you will be constantly tempted. We are bombarded with opportunities to feel sorry for ourselves. Every day we are misunderstood, overworked, underappreciated, and even abused, and regularly ‘something unfair’ will happen: we will become ill, miss a train. We may even suspect a conspiracy: “somebody's out to get me.”<sup>2</sup>

In reality, that somebody who is out to get me, is me, when I am consumed with self-pity.

- After twenty years of marriage, Betty’s husband left her for a younger, more beautiful woman. Betty became depressed, morose, and self-obsessed. Most significantly, she became bitter toward God.
- Jack felt dejected. He had been married to Joanne for thirty years. Their children were finally raised, and he retired early to enjoy the “golden years.” But those retirement years did not prove to be golden. His doctor discovered intestinal cancer. He faced chemotherapy, sickness, and no guarantee of recovery. He withdrew from family and

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<sup>1</sup> Liz Mantell, *Millions in Bangladesh Face Slow Poisoning from Arsenic-Contaminated Water*, World Socialist website (wsws.org) December 2, 1998.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Smith, *Self-Pity Will Destroy You*, BMJ.com, June 26, 2004

friends. Brooding over his “bad luck,” he spiraled deeper and deeper into the pit of self-pity.

- A truck ran a red light, crushing Fred’s Honda Civic and breaking his back. The accident put him out of work for three months. He lived in chronic pain. “Why me?” he angrily wondered. He envied healthy people and became more and more depressed.

What is self-pity? How can we define it? What does it look like?

The roots of self-pity are “pride in action”. It is the propensity to feel sorry for yourself because you are not getting what you think you deserve. Self-pity assumes that you deserve good treatment from God and other people. It assumes this because it decrees that you are good, and you are entitled to good.

Self-pity exposes self-centeredness. The magnifying glass turns inward on you and your problems. It has no energy for God, no interest in the needs of others, no capacity for the outward focus that signals spiritual health and true happiness.

Self-pity is angry. “I can’t believe God did this to me!” A garbage truck runs over the neighbor’s cat, and the owner shakes her fist at God.

Self-pity comes with the “I am a victim” worldview.<sup>3</sup>

What is victim mentality? What makes them a victim? Victimism may be best defined from a cultural point of view.

“The perception of injustice that fuels our anger, is the same perception that makes us feel as if we are victims. We believe we deserve certain things out of life (health, wealth, happiness, equity, etc.) and someone has taken them away from us.

‘Victim,’ as used by psychologists, frequently refers to someone who is momentarily upset or generally less satisfied, less happy, less successful or less fulfilled than he believes he should be and who attributes that feeling to an event which was done to him, supposedly done to him, or merely witnessed or worried about.”<sup>4</sup>

“Victimism can be seen as a generalized cultural impulse to deny personal responsibility and to obsess on the grievances of the insatiable self... Ultimately, victimism is concerned not with others, but with the self.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, those with a victim mentality are self-absorbed with a preoccupation of their own needs and desires, while blaming others for their problems.

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<sup>3</sup> William P. Farley, *The Poison of Self-Pity*, Journal of Biblical Counseling, Summer 2007, page 17.

<sup>4</sup> Tana Dineen, *Manufacturing Victims* (Westmount: Robert Davies Multimedia Publishing Co., 1998), page 29.

<sup>5</sup> Charles Sykes, *A Nation of Victims: The Decay of the American Character* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1992), page 22.

Victims are blame shifters, denying and minimizing their own sin and blaming others for their suffering. Those who see themselves as victims tended to be self-righteous and have trouble forgiving and trusting other people, ... this victim status brings with it a strong sense of moral superiority. There is a loss of any sense of personal sin that shapes their passions and desires. They see themselves as being controlled by others who shape their lives in every way.

“We don’t want to hear that we have sinned. We are comforted to find that we are victims. We want to be told that our inner problems are caused by disorders, dysfunctions, addictions, wounded hearts, neuroses, psychoses, repressed memories, painful pasts, oppressive theologies, manias, phobias, and a host of other soul numbing factors. We want others to try to remove our pain without treating the actual “disease.”<sup>6</sup>

While these perceptions are not true, the Bible is clear that, “As a man thinks in his mind, so he is, so he does.” (Proverbs 23:7). The saddest truth is that one who sees himself as a victim is unbelieving in the transforming power of God through his Word. Hope is lost to any faith that God will ever act.

Possibly the greatest problem with self-pity is that it focuses on the circumstance rather than biblical truth. When one focuses on their circumstances, the circumstances are magnified. And since the self-pity is based on the injustice of others, the victim, seeing through the eyes of pride, believes they are suffering more than others. Self-pity then leads to excusing the personal sin of the sufferer, causing the sufferer to become cynical as a result of their self-pity.

We hear this language in Job 21:7-11, “Why do the wicked live, reach old age, and grow mighty in power? Their offspring are established in their presence, and their descendants before their eyes. Their houses are safe from fear, and no rod of God is upon them. Their bull breeds without fail; their cow calves and does not miscarry. They send out their little boys like a flock, and their children dance.”

### **What does the Bible say about self-pity and victimhood?**

Jesus suffered injustice at the hands of others. (John 19:4-8) and God will not exempt the Christian from trouble. (Philippians 1:29 and Isaiah 41:10).

In John 5:1-9 we see an example of how Jesus responded to a man with self-pity. John writes, After this there was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. Now there is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool, in Aramaic called Bethesda which has five roofed colonnades. In these lay a multitude of invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed. One man was there who had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had already been there a long time, he said to him, “Do you want to be healed?” The sick man answered him, “Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up, and while I am going, another steps down before me.” Jesus said to him, “Get up, take up your bed, and walk.” And at once the man was healed, and he took up his bed and walked. Now that day was the Sabbath.

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<sup>6</sup> Ed Bulkley, *Only God Can Heal the Wounded Heart*, (Eugene: Harvest House Publishers, 1995), page 139.

We see here a man who had great pity for himself.

Look at the picture of what is going on here. The man has been crippled for a very long time. Imagine this large pool of polished marble and sparkling water. And lying all around are all sorts of sick people, crippled people, needy people.

It is an uncomfortable picture.

All around this beautiful pool lie people in filth, and stench and desperation. John makes it clear that this man had not been crippled from birth but at one time knew what it was to be healthy and to really get around on his own. To be born crippled would be one thing but this man knew the torment and pain of the deterioration of his body. This man tells Jesus that supernatural miracles take place in the water, but his condition prevents him from entering. But Jesus, our compassionate Savior, deals with his inner problems first. Much like our friends who is suffering, we see their hopelessness.

And we see this man's hopelessness as well as Jesus asks, "Do you want to be healed?" This seems like such a foolish question doesn't it? But Jesus is not asking the man to get information, but to do a heart assessment. This man's hopeless condition is made much more futile by his own sense of helplessness to get into the pool. He is a victim in his own mind. "Others step down before me". It is not his fault at all, but the fault of others. They are unjustly running ahead and taking his spot.

What might an invalid do who did not have this self-pity? He might move right up to the edge of the pool, wait for the water to move and then simply roll right in! He might even make a deal with somebody standing around to pay them to roll him in the water once he gets back on his feet. For most of us, we would do whatever it takes to get in that water.

This itself is a very heart revealing encounter. You see, we do what we want to do and when something is of great value to us we will do whatever it takes to get it.

Our friend who is suffering from this mentality is much like the invalid man by the pool. As they live their lives in self-pity, they carry unbelief, and that unbelief negates the possibility that their situation will ever change. Jesus was not impressed by the bleating and complaining of this man. Yet Jesus does not leave it at that. He deals with the man's spiritual and physical problem with grace and power and healing.

### **So, what does their self-pity reveal about our heart?**

Suffering injustice exposes the heart. It reveals much of what cannot be seen when life and circumstances are good. Circumstance does not place things into our heart, it reveals what is already there. Much like a sponge, when it is squeezed, whatever saturated liquid it contains is released.

Our suffering friend does not see this, they see themselves as merely victims of the pressure and the oppression. The friend who sees themselves as a victim, does not see God at work in their lives for his glory and their good (Romans 8:28). In his book, *How to Handle Trouble*, Jay Adams writes, “That which the believer suffers is not the pain of victimization, but the pain of pruning done by the Father. We are not to view it as the wound of betrayal, but the wound of love.”<sup>7</sup>

Self-pity exhibits itself in bitterness. It is prideful and takes God’s throne. It blinds the victim of their own sin. In our relationships, we expect goodness, kindness, forbearance, and love. We expect to give this to others, and we expect others to return the same behavior to us. This is the characteristic of godly relationships and those relationships thrive when God is glorified in this way. Unfortunately, life is not this simple. Others treat us unfairly and unjustly. While the counselee suffering in this way has “legitimate” expectations, their focus has shifted from anticipation of something good to a demand for it.

### **How do we come alongside those wallowing in self-pity?**

We must help our friend to not lose heart. God offers them redemption, deliverance, and freedom from the paralyzation of prideful self-pity.

We must help our friend understand the truth of Romans 8:28. Suffering is difficult, but all trials come from or flow through the hands of God. Helping the counselee understand not only God’s sovereignty, but God’s providential care for them through this circumstance of suffering is critical.

Charles Spurgeon is credited with saying, “I have learned to kiss the wave that throws me against the Rock of Ages.” Spurgeon understood the precious truth that we must convey to our friend. Through the difficulty of self-pity and victim mentality, our brother or sister must understand that God is conforming them more and more to the image of Christ through this circumstance. “It is well for those who find themselves in this condition to take comfort, to persevere in patience and to be in no wise afflicted. Let them trust in God, who abandons not those that seek him with a simple and right heart and will not fail to give him what is needful for the road, until he bring them into the clear and pure light of love.”<sup>8</sup>

In addition to trusting God’s providential care, our brother or sister must learn godly contentment, “Christian contentment is that sweet, inward, quiet, gracious frame of spirit, which freely submits to and delights in God’s wise and fatherly disposal in every condition.”<sup>9</sup> Christians suffering injustice are dissatisfied with the job or marriage God has given them. God reminds us to “...be content with what you have, for he has said, “I will never leave you nor

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<sup>7</sup> Jay Adams, *How to Handle Trouble* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1982), page 24.

<sup>8</sup> John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*, Dover Thrift Editions (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications, 2003), page 26

<sup>9</sup> Jeremiah Burroughs, *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2013), page 2.

forsake you.” So, we can confidently say, “The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?” (Hebrews 13:5b-6).

### **REFLECT AND RESPOND**

Two things will begin to help your friend understand that God is trustworthy, therefore he can be trusted.

First, help them look at men and women of the Bible who suffered well. Point them to the examples of Noah, Joseph, Moses, Naomi, and David.

Secondly, point them to Job 42:2-6. “I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. ‘Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?’ Therefore, I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. ‘Hear, and I will speak; I will question you, and you make it known to me.’ I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore, I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes.” Through Job’s confession, repentance, and God’s rebuke and restoration, your friend should cling to great hope.