

Damaged Emotions

Dr. David A. Seamands

This booklet is an edited version of an insightful, encouraging, and biblically based discussion of the steps Christians can take to heal damaged areas of their personalities and emotional lives. The message, first preached by Dr. David Seamands, pastor of Wilmore Methodist Church in Wilmore, Kentucky, still retains the same freshness and helpful applications as it did when it was given more than 50 years ago.

Dr. Bruce Narramore

Is emotional stability synonymous with spiritual conversion or being born again? Are emotional complexes, defense mechanisms, and all personality problems resolved when a person becomes a Christian? Is the emotional infant, that is, the psychologically immature adult, suddenly made stable through conversion or a spiritual experience?

These and other questions plague many Christians facing frustrations and conflicts. How confused many have become because they have been given the impression that the infilling of God's Spirit will automatically ensure perfect personality functioning. After discovering that problems still exist, Christians usually face them in one of two ways.

First, they may severely repress those inner problems by pushing them down the moment they show up, whether inwardly or outwardly. People who use repression may deny that inner problems exist. Far from facing their problems and trying to resolve them, these Christians drive their problems deep within. However, those problems do not lie dormant; rather, they reappear in disguised form. The stress of repression can lead to countless health problems. Terribly unhappy marriages may develop. Feeling defeated, some Christians may even break under the strain as their problems multiply as the years go by.

Second, many Christians struggle with impulse control and emotional maladjustments. Despite trying to give themselves completely to God and honestly facing their problems, they become disillusioned with their Christian experience. They begin to doubt. Spirit-filled living seems a non-reality – something they long for, but never seem to attain in everyday living.

Let's turn to the Bible for help in understanding how to face emotional and psychological problems and gain a clearer understanding of a real solution. We read in Luke 13:11, "There was a woman who had a *spirit of infirmity* eighteen years, and was bent over and could in no way raise herself up" (New King James Version, italics added). The woman not only had an infirmity, but "a spirit of infirmity." This is not a case of demon possession, for Jesus laid his hands on her to heal her, something he never did in healing any demoniac. However, he did say to the synagogue ruler critical of him for healing on the Sabbath, "Ought not this woman...whom Satan has bound [think of it!] for eighteen years, be loosed from this bond" (v. 16)?

How true! Satan uses all kinds of emotional problems to bind and defeat us. To Jesus, any kind of illness or problem was a part of the Kingdom of Evil that he had come to overthrow. This woman did not have a

mere physical infirmity or an evil spirit, but a “spirit of infirmity.” It appears as though some appalling sense of inferiority had deeply affected her body too. Yes, this woman was a “daughter of Abraham.” But she was bent over, always looking down; she tried, but she could not straighten herself.

I believe this is an accurate description of what I call a “damaged emotion,” that is, a marred area in the personality that may often be found in children of God. Satan takes a damaged spirit and uses it to frustrate and defeat the Christian. The very structure of the human mind makes this possible. Like an iceberg that lies largely below the surface of the water with only a small part showing above, the conscious mind is only a tiny segment of the whole person. With the conscious mind we accept forgiveness from our sins and we ask the Holy Spirit to take control of our life. But what happens to that greater part of us, our subconscious mind? Here are stored the long-forgotten memories and experiences of childhood. Add to this our genetic inheritance of temperament, and matters become even more complicated.

Because we live in a sinful, irrational, and imperfect world, every one of us comes to adult life with damaged areas in our personality. We all bear emotional scars. True, some carry many more scars or deeper scars than others, but all of us have these damaged areas in our personalities.

In today’s world emotional disturbances have increased greatly. The rise in the number of divorces and broken homes, our tragic overemphasis on sex to the point of nearly becoming a national obsession, the increase of births out of wedlock, the abuse of alcohol and drugs, the breakdown of discipline and personal responsibility, and parents who are too busy or preoccupied to parent are some results of, and factors contributing to, the development of damaged personalities. Today’s society is mass-producing a whole generation of psychologically unstable youth who are soon to become parents.

Effects of Damaged Emotions

It would be impossible to note every type of emotional damage, but many common scars can bring Christians to feelings of spiritual defeat and failure.

1. Inferiority Feelings

An inner, nagging sense that you are no good, that you’ll never amount to anything, that no one could ever love you, or that everything you do is wrong will likely cause you to experience a continual sense of anxiety and fear.

When people with deep inferiority feelings become Christians, they may believe in God’s love and forgiveness with only the conscious part of their minds. Very soon, however, everything within the person’s deep inner mind rises up to say that the newly found forgiveness is false. The unconscious mind cries out, *Don’t trust it! It’s a lie! Don’t cry out! Don’t pray! There’s really no one there to relieve your anxiety!*

What has happened? The Good News has not penetrated into that inner damaged self. The deep feelings of inferiority have yet to be challenged by the experience of God’s grace. Those deep feelings must also be evangelized and healed; those deep scars of the subconscious mind must be rehabilitated by the love of Christ.

2. Pervasive Perfectionism

An inner feeling that no matter what you do, you can never achieve adequately, do enough, or please anybody, especially yourself, will leave you always striving, always feeling guilty, and always feeling driven by the terrible “tyranny of the ought.” You will be perpetually climbing, but never arriving.

What happens to compulsive perfectionists when they become Christians? Tragically enough, they usually transfer their impossible achievement goals to their relationship with God, who then becomes to them an

increasingly demanding tyrant. God is enthroned near the top of the ladder and they are forever climbing. But when Christians with perfectionistic complexes approach the top, they are convinced that God's expectations are then another rung or two higher. How difficult it is for such people to place their complete trust in Jesus Christ and to rest in his love! How challenging it is for them to enjoy victory in the Holy Spirit!

3. Supersensitivity

People who are supersensitive have usually been deeply hurt. They have reached out for love, approval, and affection, but life has given them the opposite. Scars have developed deep inside. They see things to which others are blind and feel things to which others are insensitive. They are shattered by perfectly normal or accidental happenings. They feel people are against them and tend to interpret even casual incidents in this light. They need constant reassurance but can never get enough.

Some supersensitive people, however, may react in just the opposite way. Life has been cruel to them, so they get tough and want to hurt others just as they have been hurt. They go through life pushing people around, dominating, and hurting others, or using money, authority, position, or sex to prove themselves. Does this affect their Christian lives? Of course it does – profoundly.

4. Fear

Those who are extremely fearful represent another type of the emotionally crippled. They are filled with an overwhelming fear of failure. They are so afraid of losing the game that they take a simple way out – they never play the game! Some may choose to sit on the sidelines, refuse to play, and complain that they don't like the rules.

Recently, I was at a used car lot and a salesman drew my attention to a man who was walking among the cars, kicking the tires. The salesman explained, "See him? He's a wheel-kicker. That kind comes here every day. They never buy a car; they never intend to. They just go around kicking the wheels, telling you they're out of alignment. They lift the hood and report the engine is too noisy. We learn to spot wheel-kickers."

Like the wheel-kickers, fearful people simply cannot make a decision; they are paralyzed by the fear of making a wrong choice. Do these damaged people face difficulty in living the Christian life? Indeed they do. Decisions tear them apart; faith comes hard; sharing their faith is difficult. To launch out with the Holy Spirit is nearly a traumatic experience. Self-discipline is not easy for them. They tell themselves that they would act or change if circumstances were right, but since the right circumstances never come, they seldom do anything. They live in a nebulous world of "if onlys."

5. Sexual Damage

Finally, we must consider the whole area of sex in relation to damaged personalities. Of course, sex may be a part of each problem we have already dealt with, but it merits a specific mention. Paul, in writing to the Christians in Corinth, said that he was determined not to preach anything to them except Jesus Christ and him crucified (1 Cor. 2). The apostle then deals with every kind of problem imaginable, including quarrels, party splits, property disputes, and court cases, and every kind of relational issue, many related to sexuality – incest, prostitution, premarital relations, extramarital relations, divorce, and widowhood. Then follow words on dieting, vegetarianism, getting drunk at love feasts, communion, speaking in tongues, death, funerals, and collection of the offerings.

Because of the appalling moral cesspool of the society in which we live today, where many are weaned on impulsiveness, sensuality, and license, there are great ranges of emotional damage in the sexual area of our personalities. I remember a lady who drove 1,200 miles to talk to me about her sexual problem. Then there was the man who said he drove around the church eleven times before he finally got up enough courage to come in and talk with me. Each was a genuine Christian struggling with the issue of homosexuality.

I recall a minister who was defeated by his long standing and seemingly unconquerable, compulsive habit of masturbation. One young lady came to me with a veil over her face because she was so ashamed. Sadly, her father had treated her not as a daughter, but as a wife. I know of a young college man, raised on a farm, who participated in sex acts with animals, a sin as ancient as time. Then there is the host of men and women who have been fed false, foolish, and harmful ideas by well-meaning but ignorant parents and preachers, and as a result are now unfit for marriage, unable to be husbands or wives without terrible fear, guilt, and shame.

Healing Damaged Emotions

What message does God have for those who have damaged areas in their personalities and emotions? Does the church have a message for those we have mentioned and many others? If not, let's close up shop, shut down the church, and go home.

A somewhat amusing incident offers truth in this respect. An old farmer was in an automobile wreck. Along came an amateur lawyer. He inspected the bashed fenders and battered doors, then said to the farmer, "Man, you ought to collect some damages for this." The puzzled farmer wisely replied, "Damages? I've collected enough damages already. What I need are some repairs!"

What repairs do we need for the emotional damages we have collected during our lives? What can God do for us who bear "spirits of infirmity" that plague and defeat us and keep us from being his effective instruments?

Can we expect the Holy Spirit to help us bear our infirmities? Does he only give us a cane or a crutch to support our limping for the rest of our lives? No! He gives comfort, but his help does not stop there. "Likewise the Spirit also helps us in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought...Now He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He makes intercession for the saints according to the will of God" (Rom. 8:26-27). This is what we need!

The Divine Counselor who knows the depths of our minds can deeply impact them at the subconscious and unconscious levels. He does this by showing us how to pray, teaching us what to pray for, and interceding for us when "we do not know what to pray for as we ought." Remember, though, the Holy Spirit works *with* us. So you may be asking, *What is my part in this great healing process?*

First, you need to face your problem squarely and with ruthless honesty. However deep that terrible feeling is within you and whatever it is – a dreadful hidden childhood memory, a violent or violating experience, or something else – acknowledge it to yourself and to God. If necessary (and it usually is), also talk about it with at least one other trustworthy person.

I say *at least one other person* because we are usually so enmeshed in our problems that we cannot see our way clearly. Many of the causes for our damaged emotions have long ago been pushed totally out of awareness and sealed off from all conscious recognition. A mature, trusted friend or a sensitive, professionally trained person can gradually help us face our hidden selves and our repressed wounds, fears, and pain. To relive and remember the old wounds and emotional scars may be the most difficult part of the entire healing process.

Opening up our wounds to another person also allows them to become instruments of God's grace. Just as the damage may have grown out of anxious, hostile, guilt-producing, or rejecting experiences, so new attitudes of self-acceptance, confidence, and forgiveness can begin to take root in the soil of love and acceptance received from mature, caring, and insightful friends and professional counselors.

Second, you need to face your own responsibility in the matter. True, you may have been sinned against; you may be a victim, or someone may have hurt you. Indeed, you may never have been given love, only rejection.

But what has been your response to all of these things? What about your part? What about the fact that you learned to resent and to hate? Granted, your parents may have never told you anything about sex, and in your innocence, you were easily led into sin. Maybe that was the way it happened the first time, but what about the voluntary, consensual second time? Now who must take responsibility? Every life is a complicated tapestry woven with variegated threads. All of us have at times been victims, but we have also helped in weaving the design. Face this fact.

Third, ask yourself Jesus' great question: "Do you want to be made well?" (John 5:6). The lame man in the story had lain by the pool of Bethesda for thirty-eight years, and Jesus asks if he wants to be healed. What a foolish question! But Jesus really meant it. Do you want healing or want to just continue talking about it? Do you want to keep on using your handicap to get sympathy from others? Do you want to use it as a built-in crutch for the rest of your life so that you can keep walking with a limp?

The Leaning Tower of Pisa has slowly, progressively continued tilting for over 800 years. If the tower leans one or two inches farther, it could come crashing down. All who would save the tower agree intervention is necessary. I remember reading of a statement made by Dr. Lucian Chiti, who at the time was the Pisan Secretary for Tourists in the local Chamber of Commerce. Chiti claimed that the goal was to halt the leaning, not to straighten the tower completely, for to straighten the tower would be terrible—there would be no more tourists and "we'd be ruined!"

Is this your attitude? Do you really want to be healed, or just feel better? Do you want to straighten up, or only adjust your leaning a bit?

Jesus laid hands on the infirmed woman and straightened her back, but only after he had healed her true problem. First, he freed her from her spirit of infirmity; then he straightened her back. First he provided emotional healing, then came the physical healing.

We often pray to the Lord to relieve pain or depression or inner agony. But such problems may be blessings in disguise that will lead us to seek help in finding the real source of our problem. Do we truly want this help?

Finally, ask the Holy Spirit to show you what your real problem is. Be open to the fact that he may guide you through someone else; some problems cannot be discovered directly on our own.

The early church put great emphasis on sharing with one another. John Wesley emphasized the help found in being part of a small group. There is certainly very powerful catharsis and healing to be gained. James encouraged believers to "confess your faults one to another" (James 5:16, King James Version). Sadly, we have largely lost this practice.

You see, a real cure for damaged emotions is to be found in surrender and prayer. But first the hidden hurt and the root cause of the matter must be brought up from the unconscious level. Only then can it be surrendered and prayed for; only then can the Holy Spirit heal the wound as only he can do. Getting to the real problem is one of the great contributions a caring friend or professional counselor can make.

At a retreat, I once counseled a lady in her late thirties who was praying that the Holy Spirit would reveal her true need to her. During a time of sharing, she opened her heart to her small therapy group. "What's wrong with me? All week I've run from all of you. Each message has made me more miserable, but you have all been so kind and wonderful. You have tried to love me, but I wouldn't let you. God has given me

such a wonderful husband and two wonderful children. I've watched love overflow from my husband all these years. He's been so kind and patient and loving, but it has only made me angrier. My little girl has tried to love me too. What I've really wanted all my life is to love and be loved, but I've never been able to do it because I've never been able to accept God's love. I've resented God! I haven't been grateful. This week I've seen love through all of you and especially through my little girl. I've seen all of you love her and seen her respond to your love, and it has been amazing. But it has made me feel so empty."

By this time her voice had risen until she was almost screaming. She was half talking to us, half talking to God. Then she turned her face upward. "God forgive me. I've been so proud and sophisticated and unloving." Now she was weeping and shouting her prayer. All of a sudden she let out a great shout of joy, "I'm free! I'm free! It's gone. I feel free for the first time in my life. Praise God! Oh, thank you, God!" Meanwhile, her little girl, who had been in the nursery nearby, heard her mother's screams and came running. "Oh, Momma, Momma," she said, "What's wrong?" She jumped up and hugged her mother around the neck. The woman's husband, who was in the group, was weeping. His wife grabbed him and started hugging him. All three were hugging each other and praising God!

Does this mean all of this woman's emotional problems and her damaged emotions were forever removed? Certainly not! But the next years confirmed this was a great breakthrough that enabled her to grow in love and maturity. Without such healing, growth would not have been possible. She found the root cause and as that was effectively dealt with, healing became a matter of time and continued growth.

What is the damaged emotion in your life that is a hindrance to "faith working through love" (Gal. 5:6, NKJV)? What emotional wound erupts in a recurring behavior pattern that brings defeat and shame to you? Let us together come to the great Counselor, the Holy Spirit, and with his help find that wholeness which our Heavenly Father wants to give every one of us.

Dr. David A. Seamands (1922 – 2006) was a well-known minister, speaker and author. He was born in India to Methodist missionaries. He and his wife, Helen, served as United Methodist Missionaries in India from 1946 to 1962. After returning to the U.S., he served as senior pastor of the United Methodist Church in Wilmore, Kentucky for twenty two years. Dr. Seamands was a pioneer in the field of Christian counseling, developing the Marriage Enrichment and Engaged Discovery movement where he and his wife led over 2,200 couples through this experience. His book, *Healing for Damaged Emotions*, on which the message of this booklet is based, sold over a million copies and has been translated into thirty languages.

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