



Protecting Our Life Together from the Poison of Self-Pity Life Together: Cultivating Covenant Community Series #1

1 Kings 4:1-18

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A few years ago, in the country of Bangladesh, wells were poisoned in rural areas. There were trace amounts of anthrax in the water that had gone undetected. For eight years—and even as many as 14 years—people were drinking this water, but there were no physical symptoms. It was colorless, tasteless and impossible to detect without sophisticated instruments. By the time they found out what was going on, it was too late for many people.

What we want to do in these next seven weeks before Advent approaches is to look at some of the contaminants that can poison our life together as believers. In our church covenant, we address the reality of these contaminants when we say, “We will eagerly maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace by walking together in love and in the Spirit and by putting away all bitterness, anger and injurious speech.”

There are other things like that in our church covenant that we say we need to put away—things we need to get rid of. We are going to be focusing on some of those things over these next seven weeks. Today we are going to be looking at the sin behind many sins—self-pity. Self-pity is defined in the dictionary as “a self-indulgent dwelling on one’s sorrows and misfortunes.” It has been recognized by Christians and non-Christians alike as a particularly virulent disease.

- Helen Keller said, “Self-pity is our worst enemy. If we yield to it, we can never do any good in the world.”
- A man named John Gardner said, “Self-pity is easily the most destructive of the non-pharmaceutical narcotics. It is addictive, gives momentary pleasure and separates the victim from reality.”
- Another woman named Millicent Fenwick said, “Never feel self-pity, the most destructive emotion there is. How awful to be caught up in the terrible squirrel cage of self.” We do not want to be caught up in that terrible squirrel cage!

Case Studies of Self-Pity

We are going to look at the diagnosis of this disease, the prognosis, the treatment and cure. First, before we get to the diagnosis, let's look at some case studies from Scripture—some illustrations in the lives of people in the Bible that help us see how ugly self-pity is. The first is Cain. Turn there in your Bible to Genesis 4.

You know that Cain and Abel were sons of Adam and Eve, so this is very early on human history. Self-pity is already rearing its ugly head. Beginning in Genesis 4:3, we read:

In the course of time Cain brought to the LORD an offering of the fruit of the ground, and Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions. And the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard.

This is where self-pity shows up. The end of verse five says, “*So Cain was very angry, and his face fell.*” In that sullen, downcast moment, the Lord pointed out to Cain, “You are in a dangerous position here.” Beginning in verse six, the Lord said to Cain, “*Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it.*”

So self-pity—sullenness—is a signal that sin is crouching at the door, wanting to take control of your life. It's an alert. You need to do something to rid yourself of this poison and danger.

Another illustration of self-pity occurred in the life of a righteous and good prophet, Elijah, in 1 Kings 19. It appears in the best of men. This story takes place right after Elijah had a great confrontation with the prophets of Baal—the idol gods—and God showed His supremacy and demonstrated His power on behalf of the glory of His name through Elijah. Elijah saw a great outpouring of God's holiness, glory and judgment. But in the next chapter, as Jezebel, the wicked queen, pursued his life, Elijah fled, became fatigued, and was filled with self-pity.

First Kings 19:4 says, “*But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness and came and sat down under a broom tree. And he asked that he might die, saying, 'It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my fathers.'*” Self-pity often multiplies in the laboratory of comparisons, where we look at ourselves in comparison to other people. We either feel inferior to them and sorry for ourselves or feel that we are superior in some way and are sorry we are not getting the attention we deserve.

The text continues in verses nine and ten:

There he came to a cave and lodged in it. And behold, the word of the LORD came to him, and he said to him, “What are you doing

here, Elijah?” He said, “I have been very jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away.”

Self-pity often isolates itself, assuming, “I am in a category all alone.” Elijah said the same thing in verses 14 and following. In verse 15, the Lord said to Elijah:

“Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus. And when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael to be king over Syria. And Jehu the son of Nimshi you shall anoint to be king over Israel, and Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah you shall anoint to be prophet in your place. And the one who escapes from the sword of Hazael shall Jehu put to death, and the one who escapes from the sword of Jehu shall Elisha put to death. Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him.”

In other words, God said to Elijah, “You are not the only one. There are many who serve Me. You are not a special case.” Because of Elijah’s self-pity, it appeared that his ministry would soon come to an end and another prophet, Elisha, would take his place.

Let’s turn over to 1 Kings 21. Here we see a wicked king, Ahab. He lived by a man named Naboth the Jezreelite, who *“had a vineyard in Jezreel, beside the palace of Ahab king of Samaria.”* Ahab looked at that vineyard next to his palace and lusted after it. First Kings 21:2 says:

And after this Ahab said to Naboth, “Give me your vineyard, that I may have it for a vegetable garden, because it is near my house, and I will give you a better vineyard for it; or, if it seems good to you, I will give you its value in money.” But Naboth said to Ahab [and this galls him], “The LORD forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my fathers.”

In other words, Naboth said, “This is precious land to me, not just for its monetary worth but because my father gave it to me. This goes back generations in my family. I’m not going to give it away, even though you are king.”

Verse four continues, *“And Ahab went into his house vexed and sullen because of what Naboth the Jezreelite had said to him, for he had said, ‘I will not give you the inheritance of my fathers.’ And he lay down on his bed and turned away his face and would eat no food.”*

William Farley, senior pastor of Grace Christian Fellowship in Spokane, Washington, wrote an excellent article in the Journal of Biblical Counseling called “The Poison of Self-Pity.” He calls this account in 1 Kings 21:4 “The textbook description of self-pity: vexed, sullen, face-to-the-wall, not eating [withdrawing from company]. Ahab lusted for what Naboth had. He felt entitled to it, but could not have it so he withdrew into self-pity.” If you read the rest of the story, you will see that Jezebel manipulated Ahab’s sin which resulted in Ahab’s death. There is something very dangerous about self-pity.

We see this in the New Testament as well. I won’t have you turn there, but the classic example is Judas. In the Passion narrative, he realized, “I have sinned by betraying innocent blood.” But instead of repenting from his sin and finding mercy from God, he went off in his sullenness, in his selfish remorse, and hung himself.

Francis De Sales said, “Fits of anger, vexation and bitterness against ourselves tend to pride and they spring from no other source than self-love, which is disturbed and upset at seeing that it is imperfect” (from Meekness toward Ourselves). In other words, I had such a higher opinion of myself! I cannot believe that I am so low. Instead of humbling myself, I become vexed, sullen and bitter because I’m not perfect. Self-pity—it’s pretty ugly.

How to Diagnose Self-Pity

Self-pity is hard to diagnose. When you have a disease, or you think you have a disease, the process of diagnosis can take some time. There is a battery of tests you must go through. You must talk about symptoms which may or may not mean what we think they mean. It is often hard for us to see self-pity happening within ourselves. It is difficult to know when we’ve crossed the line.

First, let’s think about what self-pity is not. It is not the same as sadness or grief. The Bible talks about sorrow, lamentation, and pouring out your griefs and sorrows to the Lord. Honestly, if we live in a fallen world, we are going to have sorrow. We will have grief which can become a means of worship if we bring our grief before God in faith. We must pour it out to Him to see His redemptive power in the midst of it. We have seen that lesson repeatedly as we have gone through the book of Job these past few months.

However, sorrow and grief can become inordinate or excessive. We can become inconsolable in our sorrow and grief which can then morph into self-pity. We will talk about that in a minute. But self-pity is not the same as sadness or grief.

Nor is self-pity the same as depression, a real condition. Depression must be treated with care, counsel from others who can compassionately speak the truth to us and sometimes with

medicine. We don't need to be ashamed of that reality. In a fallen world, our minds and our bodies are affected. God in His grace has given means of healing through care, counsel, compassion and medical intervention.

When we talk about self-pity, we are not saying every case of depression is a case of self-pity, but self-pity left unchecked or untreated can evolve or grow into depression. Sometimes, we are depressed because we have been feeding on self-pity and won't let go of it.

Pastor Irwin Lutzer says, "Satan exploits pain by making it the central focus of a person's thoughts and attitudes. When that happens, it becomes all-consuming." So self-pity is not the same as sadness or grief, but sadness or grief may lead to self-pity. It is also not the same as depression, though self-pity may lead to depression.

What, then, is self-pity? I love how William Farley defines it. He says it is "pride-in-action." In other words, "It is the propensity to feel sorry for yourself because you are not getting what you think you deserve... Self-pity is a flashing neon light that says, 'Pride resides here.'" It's pride-in-action: "I deserve better than this. I'm not getting what I think I deserve."

John Piper talks about this in a variety of forms. He basically says that boasting in pride's response to our strength and to our success. When we're doing well, when we're powerful, we boast. That's pride. But self-pity is pride's response to weakness and suffering. Piper says that self-pity and suffering is the taste left after your sacrifice goes un-admired. It is thinking, "I've been suffering. I've been giving of myself, but no one notices. No one admires me." That taste in your mouth is self-pity, saying, "Look at me! Look at me!"

What are some of the symptoms of self-pity? When you find yourself saying or thinking, "I deserve better than this. It's not fair for me to feel so bad. I feel justified in feeling bad." Sometimes when we're moody or grumpy (maybe not just sometimes!), it is a sign that we are feeling self-pity.

Paul Miller says, "Moodiness or grumpiness is a way of exacting emotional payment from a disappointing life." This is like saying, "My life stinks. I'm going to be moody or grumpy to get some emotional payment." Or, "I cannot believe this is happening to me. I don't deserve this. How could a good God do this to me?" These are flashing lights indicating self-pity is operating in our hearts.

When we keep a record of wrongs and search for people who will sympathize and commiserate with us and when we love to tell the story over and over and over again of how we have been wounded and the attention that brings, we become what counselors sometimes call "injustice collectors." This is a sign of self-pity.

Another symptom is when we are inconsolable, even when we look at a Bible that is full of promises of comfort and joy. The Bible is teeming with gospel truth and brimming over with hope. Promises like Psalm 135:14 say, “*For the Lord will vindicate his people and have compassion on his servants.*” Self-pity is when we look at the Bible and say, “No, God will not do good to me; God will not show up with compassion for me. I will not be comforted. God, You cannot tell me good news. I will not hear it. It will not permeate through the crusty surface of my misery.” Self-pity forgets all of God’s benefits and focuses on our misery.

David Sommer and I were interacting about this and he said, “We have to come to terms with the question, ‘Is it fair for God to call His children to any form of suffering?’” Does God have the right to call us to suffer in this world? Think about that as we come to this communion table. Was it fair for God to call His Son to suffer for our sins? David Sommer said, “I would say that living with unfulfilled desires is not the exception of the human experience but the rule. As we have learned from Job, who are we to question God?”

Caveat: I am not suggesting that every bit of suffering we go through in this life is deserved. We have “an ancient foe who seeks to work us woe” and he hates us. We have seen this in Job where evil done all the time against people who don’t deserve it. If you are suffering abuse at the hands of a sinful person right now, I am not suggesting that you deserve that abuse or that you are just supposed to put up with that. That is not the truth.

However, even the undeserved suffering we all experience (and some of us experience it to a greater degree than others) does not give us a right to wallow in self-pity. So how do you know the difference between appropriate grief, appropriate sorrow, righteous anger and self-pity? How do you know when you are crossing the line from something that can be a means of worship into something that is ugly, self-absorbed, and dangerous?

The chief indicator—the key presenting symptom—that reveals self-pity is taking root is where you turn for comfort in the midst of grief and sorrow. Do you turn to God or away from God? Self-pity turns away from God and looks elsewhere for comfort.

I read a great article a couple weeks ago by Andrew Haslem called “The Sin behind the Sin.” He said,

There is one evidence that always shows when you’re settling into self-pity and that’s to look at the fruit. Are you beginning to look for comforts outside of Jesus? Are you beginning to consider sin as a way of getting your joy? Are you doubting that God has your best interests at heart, that His will is “good and acceptable and perfect” (Romans 12.2)?

When we start turning to sin for comfort and joy instead of turning to Jesus, it is because self-pity is having its way in our hearts. Self-pity is a sin for two reasons:

- First, it is fueled by believing lies about God. Psalm 84:11 says, *“For the LORD God is a sun and shield; the LORD bestows favor and honor. No good thing does he withhold from those who walk uprightly.”* Self-pity says, “The Lord God is darkness. The Lord God is not protection for me. The Lord God bestows trouble and misery, and He withholds all kinds of good things from me. I do not trust Him so I’m going to look elsewhere for relief, comfort and joy.” Self-pity is fueled by believing lies about God.
- Second, it’s a sin because it is fanned into flame by self-worship—by exaggerated thoughts of our greatness and what I deserve. It demands to be at center stage. Self-pity is a particularly virulent and fertile type of sin. It gives birth to a number of other sins.

The Prognosis of Self-Pity

Prognosis is the outlook on the disease. If left untreated, to what will self-pity lead us? There are two deadly affects of self-pity.

The first is that self-pity sabotages sanctification, our growth in grace and holiness. It is the spring to so many sins, including self-indulgence. Haslem says, “Self-pity lays down the conditions of the heart, in which all kinds of illegitimate comforts become more appealing. Think of the man who commits adultery against his wife. How often does that start with a sense of “She’s not giving me what I need and not treating me the way I want”? You find someone else who seems to feed that. Self-pity eventually gives birth to adultery.

Think about the pornography epidemic in our culture and in the church. How much of that is fueled by self-pity, thinking, “I deserve this illicit pleasure”? Think of how many things we have bought—things we cannot afford—because we were feeling sorry for ourselves. Think of how many times we overeat or overdrink, because we are full of self-pity. There are relationships we know that are not healthy, but we continue to engage in them because we feel sorry for ourselves in our loneliness. Self-pity sabotages sanctification. Haslem says it is “a concoction that always produces a reaction. It always gives birth to more sin.”

Second, self-pity suffocates fellowship and this is one of the reasons I wanted to begin this series on life together with this sin. The novelist George Eliot, in his book, Adam Bede, talks about a character. He says, “Her own misery filled her heart. There was no room in it for other people’s sorrows.” She was so filled with her own misery, she could not feel the sorrow of someone else. She could not empathetically listen to another person. She could not rejoice in the good things of another.

Many times, self-pity will not allow us to rejoice in gifts and graces of another person because we immediately start comparing them to us and say, “I can’t rejoice in him because it makes me feel worse about myself.” But it’s not about you. It is about what God is doing through all kinds of people through His goodness and generosity. Self-pity just fills our hearts so that we cannot care for others. We cannot engage with them. We put our face to the wall. We isolate ourselves and elevate ourselves, like Ahab did. Sullen and vexed, we go into our own little world.

William Farley says, “Self-pity’s calling cards are things like constant complaining, negative speech, critical speech, malicious gossip.” Self-pity gives rise to those types of community-destroying, fellowship-suffocating sins. This is why, in order to cultivate healthy life together—covenant community—we must constantly bring our hearts before the Lord and say, “Search me, oh God, and know my heart. See if there’s any self-pitying way in me. Lead me in the way everlasting” (Psalm 139:23).

The Treatment & Cure of Self-Pity

This is a bad disease. Aren’t you glad there is a cure for self-pity? Part of the good news is that God exposes sin in me with clarity because it is then that I see the path of repentance and the freedom that comes from leaving this behind. Dying to self-pity is liberating and joy-giving. Praise God it is possible to become more than a conqueror of self-pity through Him Who loves us (Romans 8:37).

I hold in my hands a living example of this from someone who is suffering greatly right now. He is a brother in Christ—Pastor Saeed Abedini of Iran. He is currently in prison with people from ISIS. Our brother in Christ is suffering in prison and he has been for three of his daughter’s birthdays.

Listen to what he wrote a couple weeks ago for his dear, little girl on her eighth birthday:

My Dearest Rebekka Grace,

Happy eighth birthday! You are growing so fast and becoming more beautiful every day. I praise God for His faithfulness to me every day as I watch from a distance through the prison walls, see pictures and hear stories of how you are growing both spiritually and physically. Oh how I long to see you.

There is real sorrow here. There is real grief. But he is not consumed with it.

He continues:

I know that you question why you have prayed so many times for my return and yet I am not home yet. Now there is a big “why” In your mind you are asking—why Jesus isn’t answering your prayers

and the prayers of all of the people around the world praying for my release and for me to be home with you and our family.

The answer to the “why” is “Who.” Who is in control? Our Lord Jesus Christ is in control.

I desire for you to learn important lessons during these trying times; lessons that you carry now and for the rest of your life. The answer to the “why” is “Who.” The confusion of “Why has all of this happened?” and “Why your prayers are not answered yet” is resolved with understanding Who is in control...

God is in control of the whole world and everything that is happening in it is for His good purpose, for His glory, and will be worked out for our good (Romans 8:28).

He refuses the lie that says, “God is withholding good from me right now.”

He goes on:

Jesus allows me to be kept here for His glory. He is doing something inside each of us and also outside in the world. People die and suffer for their Christian faith all over the world and some may wonder why? But you should know the answer of “Why?” is “Who.” It is for Jesus. He is worth the price. And He has a plan to be glorified through our lives.

He says, “Learn and declare as Habakkuk did that even if we do not get the result that we are looking for, God is still good and we will praise His holy name.” He then quotes from Habakkuk 3:17-19, saying:

Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will take joy in the God of my salvation. GOD, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the deer's; he makes me tread on my high places.

Pastor Saeed concludes his letter, writing:

Then my dear beloved daughter, Rebekka Grace, I pray God will bring me back home soon. But if not, we will still sing together as Habakkuk did, “Hallelujah!” either separated by prison walls or together at home. So let Daddy hear you sing a loud hallelujah that I can hear all the way here in the prison! I am so proud of you my sweet, courageous daughter. Glory to God forever. Amen.

Kisses and Blessings,
Daddy

That's really happening. In an atmosphere that would be rife with self-pity, there is a man, who—like Paul and Silas in a Philippian jail—sings praise to his God and directs his eight-year-old daughter to do the same thing. He knows that God is good. He knows that Jesus is worthy.

What is the treatment for self-pity? What is the cure? It starts by gazing upon the cross. Christ died for our sins. What are we saying? We are saying, “He is my Substitute. This—the blood poured out, the body broken and the wrath of God—this is what I deserve. I deserve crucifixion. He died for me.”

I read about a Vietnam vet who lost both legs and was feeling very sorry for himself in the ward. The nurse rolled him to an adjoining ward where he saw people whose faces were burned, people who had lost all four of their limbs, people who could not hear, people who were blind for life. He went back into his ward filled with thankfulness, thinking, “I can see. I can hear. I have full use of my upper body and I have artificial limbs on which I can learn to walk.”

William Farley says, “The cross of Jesus rolls us into an adjoining ward. It shows us what our sins deserve and it shows us that we have life, freedom, joy, liberty, peace with God and fellowship with one another because of that cross.”

When we gaze on that cross, it leads us to the second cure for self-pity which is to abound in thanksgiving. Can any of us gaze upon that cross and not experience in our hearts the reality that Paul said should be characteristic of a Christian's life? In Colossians 2:6-7, he said, “*Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.*”

Can we gaze upon this cross and not abound in thanksgiving? J.I. Packer says, “No religion ever in all of history has ever emphasized so insistently and incessantly the duty of thanksgiving as the Christian faith.” As emphasized, it's insistent and incessant in the gospel and in the Christian Scriptures. Abound in thanksgiving. The reason that insistence and incessant demand is only in Christianity is because we are the only faith that can say, “Amazing love, how can it be that You, my God, would die for me?” Abound in thanksgiving. That is the antidote to self-pity.

Finally, cultivate a renewed mind. I was reading an interview in the New York Times by Marilyn Robinson this week. She said the best advice she was given as a child from her parents was this: “You have to live with your mind your whole life long. How will you build your mind

into something you want to live with?” She said, “That has served me well. I have to build this mind into something I want to live with because I have to live with it all the time. Forever! For my whole life!”

How will you build your mind into something with which you want to live? Paul tells us in Philippians 4:8, *“Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.”*

Think on these things, not on the things that fuel self-pity. Think on these things.

Lord, help us apply this to our hearts. Be gone, unbelief that focuses on misery and tells us what we lack. Come faith, rise up in our hearts and grow in us. May we believe that our God is a Son and Shield Who bestows favor and honor; no good thing does He withhold from those who walk uprightly (Psalm 84:11). Lord, we believe; help our unbelief we pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

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